



# Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

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Volume 25  
Issue 1 October 1984

Article 12

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10-1-1984

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### Recommended Citation

Saracho, O. N. (1984). Using Observation to Assess Young Children's Reading Attitudes. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 25 (1). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol25/iss1/12](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol25/iss1/12)

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# USING OBSERVATION TO ASSESS YOUNG CHILDREN'S READING ATTITUDES

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Teachers of beginning readers often ask themselves, "Will Lydia read?" "When will Saul begin to read?" or even more elusive questions: "How successful a reader will Janie become?" "Will Michael continue to want to read?" The concern is not just competence — children's attitudes toward reading also determine success. How children feel about reading may be as important as whether or not they develop reading skills.

A review of the literature on children's reading attitudes clearly shows that concern for attitudes has been neglected. There is particularly little literature concerning attitudes of young children. Yet attitudes developed during children's early reading instruction appear to relate to reading ability in their later years (Heilman, 1972). If the children's attitudes toward reading is basic to reading success, then an important goal in beginning reading instruction should be to develop positive attitudes toward reading. This is especially important since the value of reading ability depends on its use instead of its possession (Estes, 1971). The children's behavior can provide noticeable differences in the role they assign to reading in their lives and in society. The purpose of this paper is to describe a checklist assessment strategy for identifying attitudes toward reading of young children. Both the development and practical use of this strategy will be discussed, highlighting the special value for classroom teachers.

The checklist presented was derived from a study based on Rowell's (1972) conclusions: (1) the children's behavior indicates their attitudes; (2) an observer can objectively record this behavior with the appropriate instrument; and (3) the format of the instrument should provide the observer with the opportunity to assess the children's reactions to their reading experiences. Based on these conclusions, the Preschool Reading Attitudes Observation Checklist (PRAOC) was constructed to assess young children's observable behaviors in reading. (PRAOC reliability and validity estimates are available upon request.)

## Observation Methods

Observation methods can be used to systematically observe, record and assess some type of behaviors which occur in a variety of circumstances. Valid and reliable observation techniques have been developed over the years. One method used extensively in education is the checklist, which consists of a predetermined set of items. The observer marks (with a circle, check or cross) each item to indicate its presence or absence. This procedure

easily records the observations to systematically identify typical behaviors (Saracho, 1983). The items which are present may be added up to provide an overall score or items may be examined separately.

Heathington and Alexander (1978) developed an observation checklist to assess reading attitudes of elementary school children (grades first through sixth). This checklist can be used to examine behaviors which reflect the children's attitudes toward reading. Therefore, such a checklist became the basis for the checklist used in the present study.

#### Developing the Checklist

In developing the PRAOC, the children's perceptions of reading were examined using an open-ended interview. The interview indicated which behaviors the children perceived as positive / negative attitudes toward reading. The checklist only includes behaviors indicating positive attitudes.

Eighty children, whose ages ranged from three to six, were individually interviewed. Based on the Heathington and Alexander (1978) observation checklist, the children were asked two open-ended questions and their responses were categorized into four environmental areas. The questions consisted of: (1) What do children your age say and do when they like reading? and (2) What do children your age say and do when they do not like reading? Categories for environmental areas included (1) school reading activities, (2) nonschool reading activities, (3) library reading activities, and (4) general reading activities. Young children with positive attitudes toward reading indicated the following:

##### SCHOOL READING ACTIVITIES (SRA)

- likes to read a book at school
- likes to take care of books at school
- likes to put words together in the classroom
- likes to be first to read at the reading group
- likes to read words from the book
- likes to pay attention to the teacher
- likes to have someone read to them at school
- likes to have someone read to them in their classroom
- likes to have someone ask teacher to read to them
- likes to have the teacher read a story
- likes to have lots of books in the classroom
- likes to go to the library area in the classroom
- likes to pick out a book by oneself in the classroom
- likes to take care of books in the classroom
- likes for the teacher to show them some pictures

##### NONSCHOOL READING ACTIVITIES (NRA)

- likes to have someone read a story before going to sleep
- likes to buy a book
- likes to look at books in the doctor's office
- likes to look at pictures
- likes to listen to a story
- likes to look at books
- likes to have someone read to them at home

- likes to have someone read to them in their bedroom
- likes to read with everybody
- likes to read a book and sit down outside
- likes to take a book on a trip
- likes to have someone read to them in a quiet place

#### LIBRARY READING ACTIVITIES (LRA)

- likes to go to the library for books
- likes to see movies at the library
- likes to check out books from the library
- likes to share books at the library
- likes to look at books at the library
- likes to go to the library
- likes to listen to records at the library
- likes to have the librarian read a story
- likes to share books with friends at the library
- likes it when it is time to go to the library
- likes to pick out a book by oneself at the library

#### GENERAL READING ACTIVITIES (GRA)

- likes to look at books
- likes to listen to stories
- likes to take a book in the car
- likes stories
- likes to look at a lot of books
- likes to read with others
- likes to have someone read books to them
- likes to take care of books
- likes to buy books
- likes to look at pictures
- likes to tell a story to a friend
- likes to talk about books

### Discussion

The children's responses to these individual interviews guided the development of the PRAOC (See Appendix) for teachers to assess young children's reading attitudes. The children's responses provided many observable behaviors. However, the most observable behaviors and the behaviors which children mentioned the most were included in the observation instrument.

Teachers can easily administer the PRAOC to assess young children's reading attitudes. The teacher can observe during a two-week period to record most of the behaviors which indicate the young children's reading attitudes. Reading teachers can use the PRAOC with ease and can obtain important reading information to plan reading experiences because (a) it is brief enough for the classroom teacher to use; (b) it is easy to administer which facilitates its use with different children and several times during the school year; (c) it identifies reading behaviors which children view as positive and negative behaviors; (d) it serves to diagnose several areas of a child's reading environment (Heathington & Alexander, 1978); and (e) it assesses the young children's reading behaviors at different times and circumstances. A recording in the "No" column cautions the teacher of a child's negative reading attitude in a specific area. The teacher can further ex-

plore the child's reading behavior and plan successful reading experiences which will ultimately develop positive attitudes in the area which needs to be improved. It is essential that reading attitudes as well as reading skills be assessed. A prerequisite in modifying or reinforcing positive attitudes toward reading is to assess reading attitudes. The PRAOC can provide helpful information to assist teachers and reading specialists in planning and evaluating a success-based reading program for young children. If the PRAOC is employed to assess the children's reading attitudes early in the year, changes in attitudes can be examined by using the PRAOC later in the year and comparing the results with the earlier assessment. Reading experience can be planned accordingly to develop and maintain positive reading attitudes.

#### References

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#### Appendix

##### PRESCHOOL READING ATTITUDES OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date \_\_\_\_\_ Score: \_\_\_\_\_ "Yes" Items \_\_\_\_\_ "No" Items

Directions: Next to each item place a check mark under the column "Yes" to indicate its presence or under the column "No" to indicate its absence. Add both columns to obtain a total score. A high score under the "Yes" column indicates a positive reading attitude while a high score in the "No" column indicates a negative reading attitude.

<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>	
_____	_____	1. Talks about looking at books (bus, school, home, etc.)
_____	_____	2. Talks about one or more specific books.
_____	_____	3. Reads pictures.
_____	_____	4. Repeats stories which someone has told or read.
_____	_____	5. Reads charts, cards, books, etc.
_____	_____	6. Gets books to look at or to read.
_____	_____	7. Asks to be told or read a story.
_____	_____	8. Takes care of books.
_____	_____	9. Looks at books.
_____	_____	10. Requests to go to the library.
_____	_____	11. Shares books with friends.