

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA
STUDY HABITS AND ATTITUDES OF SEVENTH AND
NINTH GRADERS IN A SEMESTER AND A
CONVENTIONAL SCHOOL YEAR PLAN

by

FRANCES ANN DAGG

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the effects of organizational plan (semester/full-year), grade (seven/nine), and gender (female/male) on study habits and attitudes at the junior high level. The nine dependent measures examined were: the SSHA-Form H (Brown and Holtzman, 1967), and the evaluative and activity components of four school-related concepts using a self-developed Semantic Differential. Socioeconomic status was identified as a control variable, and achievement and age were identified as covariate variables.

In this investigation, 134 students attending a semester plan school and 194 students attending a conventional (full-year) plan school responded to the evaluative measures.

Product-moment correlations showed that achievement was, to some degree, positively related to study habits and attitudes as measured by the SSHA. An analysis of covariance on the scores of all the dependent measures demonstrated that organizational plan had little effect on study habits and attitudes related to scholastic activity. On six of the nine dependent measures the full-year group demonstrated more positive mean scores, although these differences did not reach statistical significance at the .05 level. Across all dependent measures the grade seven students had, statistically significant, more positive study habits and attitudes as

compared to the grade nine students. Also, on three of the dependent measures female students had significantly more positive study habits and attitudes than their male counterparts. On the remaining six measures, although not statistically significant, the female group means were more positive on study habits and attitudes than the male group.

A smaller independent study, using the results of the 67 grade seven students in the semester plan, investigated the effects on study habits and attitudes due to core course program during the first semester (mathematics/science versus history and geography). An analysis of covariance showed that the type of core course taught had little effect on the study habits and attitudes of these students.

This study implies that organizational planning (semester/full-year) is not the key factor affecting the study habits and attitudes at the junior high level and that the implementation of semester plan at this level is questionable as far as promoting better study habits and attitudes. It supports former studies which claim that a relationship exists between study habits and attitudes and academic achievement. The present study also demonstrated that study habits and attitudes differ between grade seven and grade nine, favoring grade seven, and that female students tend to have more positive study habits and attitudes than male students at the junior high level. Therefore,

continuing emphasis in research should be directed toward the middle years to aid in the development of effective programs to enhance study habits and attitudes of the junior high adolescent. Also, the extreme variations in student characteristics during the adolescent stage may tend to obscure the effects of organizational plan and programs. Thus, other variables affecting student behavior must be investigated.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Early Adolescents and Their Education

Educators and psychologists (Coleman, 1961; Kagan and Moss, 1962; Maccoby, 1966) agree that the early adolescent years, ages twelve to sixteen, represent a period of transition. The junior high adolescent is struggling for an independent identity and attempts to discover where he is going in life, what are his strengths and weaknesses, and how he fits into his newly found role. The psychological and social reorientation and the emergence of a more adult mode of intellectual functioning during this developmental period are coupled with rapid physical growth and change.

According to summarized reports of research on the young adolescent such as those by the Manitoba Department of Education (1977) and by Morris and Renihan (1978), these years are noted more than any other period of human development for wide variations within and between the sexes in levels of intellectual, physical, social, and emotional maturity. This stage of life marks a time when many important changes are occurring; the educational system should have an opportunity to contribute significantly to the development of good study habits and attitudes.

Accepting the truth of this statement and in keeping with the present educational concern for the optimum growth and development of the child, a recent shift in educational emphasis in the 1970's has been to consider the subsequent development of the affective as well as the cognitive domain of the learner (Purkey, 1970). The Core Committee of the Manitoba Department of Education (1973) in a report of the reorganization of the secondary school and the Middle Years Program Review Committee (1977) both endorse this approach in education by encouraging educators to pay more attention to students' feelings, attitudes, interests, aspirations, and self-concepts as they are affected by the educational processes and environment. On the basis of this type of thinking and on the hypothesis that changes in our school organizational plan should improve the quality of instruction and learning, the "semester" plan was introduced into many secondary schools and into some junior high schools in Manitoba. The impact of the semester plan on the study habits and attitudes of junior high students is the focus of this study.

Definitions of Terms

Some common terms used in the study have different connotations under varying circumstances. In order to clarify their usage as they pertain to this study a set of definitions follows:

Attitude. An attitude is a predisposition to respond in a certain manner when confronted with certain stimuli (Triandis, 1971).

It is reinforced by beliefs and often attracts strong feeling that will lead to particular forms of behavior according to Oppenheim (1966). An attitude involves what people think about, feel about, and how they tend to behave toward a specific attitude object.

Habit. A habit is a pattern of behavior that through practise has become characteristic and dominant (Good, 1973) for an individual in a given situation. It has become easy and familiar through practise.

Study Habits and Attitudes. Study habits and attitudes indicate the characteristic pattern which an individual follows in academic learning (Good, 1973). Since attitudes cannot be directly observed, they are inferred from overt behavior and/or responses on instruments such as pencil and paper surveys.

Conventional Plan. The conventional school-year plan refers to the traditional mode of teaching all required and optional course material for a class over a full year extending from September to June. The regular day is divided into eight 35-40 minute periods over a six-day cycle. Final evaluation of all courses comes at the end of the school year. A sample schedule of timetabling is included in Appendix A.

Semester Plan. The semester school-year plan refers to dividing the conventional school year into two terms, each of approximately ninety-five days duration. The length of subject instruction time

per day and/or per six-day cycle is doubled; thus, the total number of units of subject matter covered during the conventional term is presented during one semester and the time in school is equivalent. In this way a student has fewer courses during any one term and fewer class changes per day. A student who successfully completes a course of study during the shorter term receives credit for grade completion of the course work as does a student who completes the course during the conventional year. Sample schedules of two class timetables for the first semester are included in Appendix B. These would be reversed in the second semester term.

Six-Day Cycle. A six-day cycle refers to the rotation plan of the timetable. Classes are scheduled and time per subject area is proportioned according to Department of Education requirements on a six-day rotating plan rather than on the five-day Monday to Friday week (Appendices A and B).

Background of the Study

The innovation of dividing the school year by introducing some form of semestering in program scheduling and school organization has received wide acceptance in the United States and Canada. Evaluative research studies conducted by various Departments of Education, school divisions, and universities involved in or acquainted with similar semester plans have demonstrated a positive

and favorable acceptance in general by students, parents, and teachers (Bergen, Friesen, and Ratsoy, 1976; Church, 1968; Horovatin, 1974; Shaw, 1977). However, the specific effects of reorganizing the school-year plan on students' study habits and attitudes related to academic activity have not been fully investigated.

Ellwood (1970) suggests that since the semester plan offers shorter terms and more frequent changes in courses, it should foster improved student-teacher relationships and better work habits, allow for more in-depth study due to longer class periods, and contribute to improved motivation.

Church (1968) states that a more intensive type of instruction such as that permitted by the semester plan results in better achievement, and that the immediacy of the goal increases motivation which is conducive to the formation of good work habits.

Gatewood and Dilg (1975) recommend that learning experiences for the early adolescent be related to immediate rather than remote academic goals and that blocks of seventy or eighty minute periods, such as those made possible by a semester plan, allow for greater flexibility in teaching and learning styles especially in those subjects requiring time for grouping, activity-oriented experiences, and planning of individual tasks or projects.

In response to concerns raised about the effects of school re-organization on academic achievement many research studies have been organized to empirically study the effects of course compression into shorter terms. Bergen et al. (1976) report that in comparative studies by Fehlberg (1968), Girard (1962), and Parks (1974) no cause-effect relationship was found to exist between school-year design regarding compression and student achievement. In studies by Ellwood (1970) and Dupas (1972) improved performance was noted for students under the semester plan. Thus, results of empirical studies on this concern are inconclusive.

A second concern, the effect of increased time lapse between subsequent levels of semestered courses on retention and the loss of learning, encouraged other researchers to design studies and collect empirical data. Results from studies of this nature have demonstrated that the increased time lapse has negligible or minimal effects on retention and recall of previously learned material (Rachar, Rice, and Stennett, 1973; Smythe, Jutras, and Bramwell, 1973; Varner, 1968).

The third area of concern is that of the effects of semestering on the students' affective behavior. Although attitude questionnaires have been used to assess the impact of semestering on study habits and attitudes, many of these have investigated only the senior high level. Also, it seems probable that factors often attributed

to semester planning, such as having fewer courses, more immediate goals, and longer class periods, should affect study habits and attitudes to some degree. Therefore, the present study was designed to compare the study habits and attitudes of junior high adolescents in a semester and a conventional school-year organizational situation.

Need for the Study

According to student opinion surveys, the semester plan is seen as a more favorable learning environment (Bergen et al., 1976; Bramwell and Mann, 1973; Horovatin, 1974; Shaw, 1977), and professional opinion contends that students become more efficient learners under favorable learning conditions.

Under good conditions of learning students put more of their class time into purposive activity (related to the learning activity) while under less favorable classroom conditions students tend to decrease the percent of time in class they are putting into purposive learning activity. (Bloom, 1974, p. 686)

Also, conditions generally resulting from semester planning such as more frequent evaluation and feedback and longer periods of daily pupil-teacher contact suggest that learning conditions are improved by semestering.

...as students are provided with feedback on what they have learned over a particular learning task and they are given additional time to correct their difficulties, they enter the next learning task with a better grasp of the preceding learning tasks in a series. (Bloom, 1974, p. 687)

Purkey (1970) advises educators to encourage students to try to learn and study effectively because success brings about positive changes in the way an individual sees himself. Morris (1973) supports this view and suggests, also, that one's attitude towards future work may well begin in school. If Morris' contention is true and if our society is to continue to progress and prosper, it is important to assess the study habits and attitudes which students have and are developing during their developmental years in our educational system.

Educators have been criticized for letting the junior high become too much a true "junior" to the senior high school by allowing "...contaminating characteristics such as subject-matter departmentalization, interscholastic athletics, sophisticated social activities, and future educational preparation to invade its programs" (Gatewood and Dilg, 1975, p. 3). Is the recent innovation of semestering at the junior high level one of these invading, contaminating characteristics or are there direct benefits to students in cognitive and affective learning?

Much of the literature on semestering reveals results, based on secondary school studies, regarding the relationship of school-year organization to academic achievement, the effect of time lapse on retention, and the subjective opinion of those involved in regard to approval or disapproval of a reorganization of the school year.

There is lack of empirical data to support the contention that the immediacy of goal, the more frequent evaluation, the longer class periods, and other commonly cited advantages of the semester plan are conducive to the formation of good work habits and increased motivation which results in better work habits. It is important, therefore, that studies relating to the affective domain define and empirically assess the affective value or benefit derived from the semester plan organization at the junior high level.

Purpose of the Study

Many educators believe that factors to be considered when estimating students' future academic success and their future comfort and satisfaction are the students' study habits and attitudes. The intent of this study was to investigate the study habits and attitudes of seventh and ninth grade students with respect to semester school-year organization and conventional school-year organization plans. The realization that non-intellectual factors are key variables in achievement suggested that research studies should be directed toward this endeavor. Recent changes adopted in educational planning and organization have attempted to be more aware of the increasing emphasis for present-day schools to take more notice of the psychological factors affecting the learning process. The junior high semester plan provided an increase in the concentration of instruction, an increase in the frequency of evaluation, and more

immediate feedback in the core courses. Therefore, this organizational change is being assessed in view of the effect it has on the development of study habits and attitudes.

Questions to be Investigated

The formation of good work habits and attitudes that are developed during the schooling process, hopefully, will lead to future productivity in our society. This study was designed to search for answers to some of the questions educators have concerning the effects of semestering on the development of study habits and attitudes at the junior high level. The specific questions to be investigated are as follows:

1. Is there a relationship between study habits and attitudes and academic achievement?
2. Is there a difference in the study habits and attitudes of seventh and/or ninth graders due to the organizational (semester/full-year) plan?
3. Are there differences between the study habits and attitudes of seventh grade students and ninth grade students?
4. Are there differences between the study habits and attitudes of seventh and/or ninth grade female students as compared to male students?
5. Within the semester plan is there a difference in study habits and attitudes of the students who receive instruction during the first semester in mathematics and science from those who receive instruction in geography and history?

6. Are there any interaction effects on study habits and attitudes of organizational plan by grade, or organizational plan by gender, or organizational plan by grade and gender?

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Survey of Literature on School Year Organization

Alternative patterns of organizing the school year have been receiving increased attention in professional and research literature. The identification of advantages and concerns attributed to the implementation of the semester plan has been the objective of questionnaire surveys to parents, students, and teachers. Studies have been designed to examine various aspects of dividing the school year and to examine attitudes of these people concerning the effect of the organizational plan on the learning process (Bergen et al., 1976; Bramwell and Mann, 1973; Brown, 1975; Dravland, 1970; Ellwood, 1970; Fehlberg, 1968; Horovatin, 1974; Saskatchewan Department of Education, 1969; Shaw, 1977; Swan and Sloat, 1970). From the published reports of these opinion surveys a compiled list of the most commonly identified benefits of the semester plan follows:

1. Evaluation is more frequent in the sense that testing is taking place in a shorter time span during a semester; therefore, less emphasis is put on final examinations.
2. Semestering more readily facilitates the introduction of a variety of instructional and learning approaches.

These include:

more time for individual attention during a longer class period;

teacher assistance more readily available;

in-depth study of a subject area and more effective use of time;

better preparation and lesson planning by teachers due to fewer courses to teach; and

provision for group activity and multi-media procedures.

3. Poor attendance and drop-out rate are reduced.

4. Improvement in student satisfaction and well-being in the semester plan due to:

the opportunity to concentrate on fewer and/or weaker course areas;

better student-teacher relationships; and

the establishing of a learning environment that is more challenging, positive, and humane.

5. Semestering contributes to the formation of better study habits and attitudes due to:

increased motivation and interest; and

immediacy of the goal.

6. Semestering aids in administration by:

permitting greater flexibility in scheduling;