The Age Factor In Changing Attitudes Through Literature

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ABSTRACT
Experimenting on the changing of attitudes through literature, the research reported in this article took cue from earlier research publications, which showed that children of ages 5 to 11 changed their negative attitudes to positive ones through their exposure to fiction stories. This one attempted to identify age levels higher than 11 years, which might show similar responses. Using Year II undergraduate students of literature in a test-retest quasi experiment, it was discovered that students in the age range 15 to 24 changed their attitudes in favour of the feminist arguments projected in the selected novel; he change also tended to be stable. However, the age range 25 to 34 did not; age 35+ were too few in the three classes used as samples. It was inferred that ages 12 to 14 could also be susceptible to the attitudinal change impact of literature, but ages above 25 would need to be tested further as they were apparently resistant to the feminist argument in the literature text.

1. INTRODUCTION
That literature can cause change of attitudes has been proclaimed – forceful opposition notwithstanding - and has been supported in theoretical and empirical sources. For example, Bensel-Meyers, Linda (2002:12 – 13), explains theoretically that readers of literature often get persuaded to agree, through the sub-conscious channel of the mind, with the views of the writers whose works they read. Senesie, Samuel M. B. (January, 2015) provides evidence from research. Relating this possibility to age, Dr. Byrnes (referred to in the article “How Do Children Learn Prejudice”) points out that children’s negative attitudes, which start to form as early as ages three or four, are fairly easy to remove in the early years. As children grow older however, the attitudes become more difficult to remove. In case there is a critical age at which the attitudes of children or young people become significantly resistant to change, this aspect may not be discovered without research efforts. Such a discovery is the focus of this paper and the following discussion of background issues is based on Sierra Leone.

1.1 Background
Two main issues that come to mind in dealing with the attitudinal-change capability of literature in relation to age for any society are (i) the accessibility of literature for members of the society (ii) why age categories would matter in using literature to change attitudes.

1.1.1 The accessibility of literature
Assuming that literature is an effective instrument for changing the attitudes of people, Sierra Leone has the established advantage of literature being accessible to approximately all sectors of the society. Apart from provisions in the context of formal schooling, the popular culture of the country is richly endowed with literary content in the forms of songs, traditional oral stories, proverbs and riddles, among others. That is, literature is accessible the illiterate majority as well as to the literate, whether these reside in rural communities or urban communities.

In the school system, literature is included in the curricular of all the levels of learning ranging from primary school to university. That is, from childhood to adulthood. At the primary and junior secondary school levels, literature is a compulsory study subject and all the children share its benefits. At the senior secondary school level it is a core subject for pupils of the Arts stream and is often among the optional subjects for pupils of the streams which study Science and Commercial subjects. The widespread access across age categories in school and non-school communities supports the finding out of age levels at which it may/may not be effective for changing people’s attitudes.

1.1.2 Why the age categories matter
In Sierra Leone, as in other countries, there is noticeable concern about the literature-and-attitude relationship: that the attitudes of young people are often influenced by stubbornly held attitudes of the
adult population, especially those of the parents of these young people. While young people can often be seen in rather innocent relationships with one another across common lines of prejudice, adults are often observed stressing these lines of prejudice: ethnicity, regionalism, socio-economic strata, religious differences, gender differences, etc. The common tendency is for the adults to induce the young people into the patterns of prejudice in which these adults live. Therefore, it would be necessary to identify at what age levels young people can be influenced to resist such inducement from their parents and other adults and follow attitudes based on their own personal and objective assessments of individuals and groups in their society.

On the other hand, parents, teachers as well as religious leaders, perpetually offer guidance, teaching that depending upon the novels, drama sessions, films or oral stories young people consume, they can develop either desirable attitudes or undesirable attitudes leading to tendencies to be violent, wicked, lack pity, disrespectful, dishonest or sexually immoral. In whichever direction, it would be necessary to identify age levels at which young people can benefit from efforts to change their attitudes through literature.

Most importantly, the nation is overwhelmed with negative attitudes, including prejudice and discrimination arising from a political system intertwined with ethnicity (Samuel M. B. Senesie January, 2015). If, for example, a strategic age-range is discovered in which children can be best taught to build their resistance against negative attitudes, it could lead to immense advantage for national peace.

2.0 Literature Review

A number of pertinent issues on this subject are discussed in various sources: (i) adults and young people (children and youths) – acquiring and changing attitudes; (ii) the place of literature in the context.

2.1 Adult and young people (children and youths): acquiring and changing attitudes

Contrasting views exist respecting the relationship between the attitudes of children/youths and those of their parents and other adults. One opinion is that the attitudes of children are shaped by the attitudes of the adult population of parents, relatives and friends the children live with. The article, “How do Children Learn Prejudice?” quotes Diane Maluso as stating that, “Not only do parents teach prejudice directly through reinforcement, but children often learn their parents’ prejudiced attitudes by simply observing their parents talking about and interacting with people from other groups.” The same article extends the catchment for children’s attitudes to include the entire community of adults and peers in the children’s social environment. In support, Brothers, Joyce (2008) explains that children learn attitudes from their parents, extended family members, teachers and any other caregivers.

On the contrary, dealing with the issue of race, Aboud, Francis E. and Anna-Beth Doyle discovered that “There is little support for the widespread assumption that children acquire their racial attitudes from parents and friends.” This view implies that any racial prejudices children may have, they acquire from their own experiences and observations of reality in the life of their communities, independent of adult efforts.

On the issue of changing attitudes too, contrasting opinions are identified. Recall the opening mention of Dr. Byrnes (referred to in the article “How Do Children Learn Prejudice”), who points out that negative attitudes, which children start to form as early as ages three or four, are fairly easy to remove in the early years. Adult attitudes, on the other hand, may fossilize, like character, to meet the expression in Matlin, Margaret W. (1999: 370) which presents the firmly held opinion of William James: “For most of us by the age of thirty, the character has set like plaster and will never shift again”. This agrees with a research held in Japan about the important decision of training pupils with intellectual disabilities in the same groups as those who are normal. Youths showed openness to the inclusion technique while across 10 countries “adults held pervasive misunderstandings and misbeliefs about individuals with intellectual disabilities”.

Contrary to these shows of resistance by adults against change of attitude, is the revealing experience of Benjamin Carson, also in Matlin, Margaret W. (1999: 371), who was temperamental in childhood, a bruit in adolescence but who changed as a result of one incident of brutality in which he could have
murdered a young man. He became an academic high-scorer and grew into a mild-tempered and calculated neurosurgeon in his adulthood.

2.2 The place of literature (reading materials) in the context
Witt, Susan D. (2001) explains that the reading materials which children encounter through their schooling form a major part of their socialization inputs. For example, “adherence to traditional gender roles is encouraged and perpetuated by the books used in schools today much as it was 25 years ago”. These reading materials can influence the attitudes of children in much the same way as family members and friends do. Such an inclusion of literature in the argument provides an indication that literature may be particularly effective with children.

3.0 RESEARCH PROCEDURE AND RESULTS
Testing for higher age categories, this research took the cue from two published works which were set to find out whether literature could change the attitudes of young children.

3.1 The investigations in the cue sources
3.1.1 Lindsey Cameron and others experimented with children of ages 5 to 11
Lindsey Cameron’s research team used fictional stories and worked with English children (ages 5 to 11), who were opposed to refugee children, whom they hitherto refused to respect or play with. The research proceeded as follows:

(i) The fictional stories featured characters (children) of the participants’ social group and refugee children.
(ii) The children in the stories were mutually friendly with respect to out-group and in-group members.
(iii) The participant children read the stories in small groups, for about twenty minutes at a time for six weeks.
(iv) A control group of children read no stories at all.
(v) Children who read the stories were compared to children who did not.
(vi) Children in the group that read showed signs of change of attitude in a number of ways. First, they believed that children of the out-group had more positive attributes than negative ones. Secondly, they showed greater likelihood to accept to play with the real-life refugee children of the neighbourhood than those who did not read the stories.
(vii) The stories that had the greatest impact were those which emphasised the groups to which the characters belonged, and the fact that they had some common grouping to which they jointly belonged, such as being school mates.

The results of the study were similar across the age groups from age five to age eleven. The results agree with the idea of Kiu, Leo (2006) - “extended contact hypothesis” - that group members can develop positive attitudes to members of opposing groups by learning that members of those opposing groups were friends of members of their own groups. Reading about such friendships as are given in the stories can have effect without a face-to-face contact with real-life out-group members.

3.1.2 Blasé, John Zucaro (2005) researched with 6th grade children (also age 11)
Blasé John Zucaro (2005) applied novels in an effort to change the attitudes of Sixth Grade (also age 11) pupils towards African Americans – a bibliotherapy exercise. That is, using the contents of the novels to transform the mental state of the participants in favour of the otherwise stigmatised American Negro community.

As a secondary purpose, the researcher tried to find out whether the change of attitude towards African Americans would also translate into change of attitude towards other minority groups – American Indians and Puerto Ricans – as well as discover whether bibliotherapy could make a suitable classroom method. As sample, the researcher used three classes of Sixth Graders in a school in Philadelphia, as Control Group, an Experimental Group One and an Experimental Group Two.
The responses were then measured over a four-time period, leading to the following conclusions: (i) Experimental **Group Two** (which read material that was related to the negro theme as well as discussed it) showed a continual rise in positive attitudes towards Negroes (ii) Experimental **Group One** (which read similar material but did not discuss) showed a continual rise in the same direction, but less than that shown by Group Two. (iii) In **Control Group** (which read materials unrelated to the Negro theme) attitudes in favour of Negroes showed a drop at the end from what it was at the beginning.

In the methodology of the research reported here, a control group and two treated groups of Year II undergraduate students were used – aged 15 to 34 plus. Details of other matters of methodology are recorded in Senesie, Samuel Munda Benya (April, 2015): the selection of the novel (*So Long a Letter*); the validity actions; the use of SPSS, etc.

### 3.1.3 Limitations of the research

The research met with the following limitations: (i) For age range **35+**, all of the three Year II undergraduate literature classes put together had only 3 students at the pre-test and 2 at the delayed post-test: this sample showed to be too small for valid judgment (ii) for age range **25 to 34**, out of the 17 students at pre-test, only 8 attended the delayed post-test: the pre-test was compared to the post-test but the comparisons to delayed post-test might not be valid because of the reduced sample of 8.

### 3.1.4 Assumption

Considering the reports of the cue experiments, it was assumed in the research reported here that if any of the age groups tested showed improvement in attitude on account of the novel, then age group 12 to 14years, which were not tested by the Cameron or Blasé experiments, could also show significant improvement under the same influence.

### 3.1.5 Objectives

The objectives of the research focused age categories above those in the works of Lindsey Cameron and others (5 to 11years) and of Blasé John Zucaro (2005): 6th grade children (also age 11)

A. To find out whether exposing people of the following age groups to the selected novel would lead to change of attitude on their parts on account of that exposure: 15 to 24 yrs.; 25 to 34yrs.; 35+ yrs.

B. To find out whether any change of attitude would differentiate between the following age groups: 15 to 24 yrs.; 25 to 34yrs.; 35+ yrs.

### 3.1.6 Null Hypotheses

**Ho1:**
Exposing people of age groups 15 to 24 yrs.; 25 to 34yrs.; 35+ yrs. to a selected novel will not lead to change of attitude on their parts, on account of the exposure, so that they agree with attitudes projected in the novel.

**Ho2**
In case the exposure to the piece of literature leads to change of attitudes on the parts of the respondents, the change will not differentiating between the following age groups: 15 to 24 yrs.; 25 to 34yrs.; 35+ yrs.

### 3.2 Results

The findings are reported here in descriptive statistics (bar graphs) and inferential statistics (paired t-tests). To draw conclusions, descriptive statistics results are subject to inferential statistics results.
Age group 15 – 24yrs: 1 = pretest; 2 = posttest; 3 = delayed posttest
Age group 25 – 24yrs: 4 = pretest; 5 = posttest; 6 = delayed posttest
Age group 35 + yrs.: 7 = pretest; 8 = posttest; 9 = delayed posttest

Note: Averages were rounded up to the nearest whole number.

Table: paired t-test comparison of pretest, posttest and delayed posttest scores of age groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Test</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S. D.</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Null Hypothesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15 – 24yrs.</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>122.31</td>
<td>11.531</td>
<td>-3.852</td>
<td>.000*</td>
<td>Ho1 and Ho2 rejected</td>
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<td>Posttest</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>128.32</td>
<td>14.571</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>120.20</td>
<td>11.480</td>
<td>-2.297</td>
<td>.027*</td>
<td>Ho1 and Ho2 rejected</td>
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<td>Delayed Posttest</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>124.39</td>
<td>15.425</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>125.34</td>
<td>14.751</td>
<td>.641</td>
<td>.525 ns</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Delayed Posttest</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>124.39</td>
<td>15.425</td>
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<tr>
<td>25 – 34yrs.</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>121.75</td>
<td>7.870</td>
<td>-1.607</td>
<td>.128 ns</td>
<td>Ho1 and Ho2 rejected</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>127.53</td>
<td>12.294</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>119.88</td>
<td>5.055</td>
<td>-2.251</td>
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<tr>
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<td>134.00</td>
<td>14.643</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>131.88</td>
<td>14.643</td>
<td>-.366</td>
<td>.726 ns</td>
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<td>Delayed Posttest</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>134.00</td>
<td>15.520</td>
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<tr>
<td>35 + yrs.</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>111.33</td>
<td>5.132</td>
<td>-.105</td>
<td>.726 ns</td>
<td>Ho1 and Ho2 rejected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>111.67</td>
<td>6.110</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>115.00</td>
<td>7.071</td>
<td>-2.000</td>
<td>.295 ns</td>
<td>Ho1 and Ho2 rejected</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Delayed Posttest</td>
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<td>126.00</td>
<td>2.828</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Posttest</td>
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<td>115.00</td>
<td>2.828</td>
<td>-2.750</td>
<td>.222 ns</td>
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<tr>
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<td>126.00</td>
<td>2.828</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) * = p < .05  (2) ns = not significant

3.2.1 Objective A and Null Hypothesis Ho1

3.2.1.1 Objective A: To find out whether exposing people of the following age groups to the selected novel would lead to change of attitude on their parts on account of that exposure: 15 to 24 yrs.; 25 to 34yrs.; 35+ yrs.

The bar graph results indicate the following: (i) age category 15 to 24 indicated a positive rise in attitude since both the post-test and the delayed post-test scores were higher than the pretest but needed to be subjected to inferential statistics (ii) age category 25 to 34 indicated positive rise in attitude towards the projections of the novel since both bars 5 and 6 (post-test and delayed post-test) showed higher scores than bar 4 (pre-test). (iii) For age group 35+ indicated only bar 9 (delayed post-test)
showed to be visibly higher than bar 7 (pre-test); between pre-test and post-test the difference seems to be imperceptible.

3.2.1.2 Null Hypothesis Ho1: Exposing people of age groups 15 to 24 yrs.; 25 to 34 yrs.; 35+ yrs. to a selected novel will not lead to change of attitude on their parts, on account of the exposure, so that they agree with attitudes projected in the novel (at P < .05). The t-test table indicates the following: (i) in age category 15 to 24 the post-test positive change of attitude (128.32) is higher than the pre-test score (122.31) and the difference is significant with the p value of .000. The delayed post-test score (124.39) is also significantly higher than the pretest score (120.20). Importantly too, the change of attitude showed to be stable since there is no significant difference between the post-test score and the delayed post-test score. That is, Null Hypothesis Ho1 is discarded and its corresponding alternative is retained. That is, one of the age groups has shown significant improvement in attitude on account of the novel.

3.2.2 Objective B and Null hypothesis Ho2

3.2.2.1 Objective B: To find out whether any change of attitude would differentiate between the following age groups: 15 to 24 yrs.; 25 to 34 yrs.; 35+ yrs. From 3.2.1, age group 15 to 24 years showed significant improvement in their attitudes in agreement with the attitudes projected in the novel with respect to both the graph (descriptive statistics) and the t-test table (inferential statistics): 25 to 34 yrs. and yrs. 35+ did not.

3.2.2.2 Null Hypothesis Ho2: In case the exposure to the piece of literature leads to significant change of attitudes on the parts of the respondents, the change will not differentiating between the following age groups: 15 to 24 yrs.; 25 to 34 yrs.; 35+ yrs. (at P < .05). The p-values of .000 and .027 in the Table indicate that on account of the exposure to the novel, the 15–24 years-of-age group showed significant change of attitude at both the posttest and the delayed posttest. That is, Null Hypothesis Ho2 was rejected and the corresponding alternative hypothesis was retained because age group 15 to 24 years got differentiated from the two categories 25 to 34 yrs and year 35+ by the show of significant change in attitude indicated by the 15 to 24 group and not by the others.

3.3 Conclusions

- The effectiveness of literature as an instrument for changing attitudes seems to relates to the age category of the people whose attitudes are to be changed
- Apparently, the younger the person the more effective is the literary instrument at changing their attitudes.
- It seems that the attitudes of persons of ages 12 to 14 years can be changed through literature.
- Changing the attitudes of persons around age 30 and beyond by the use of literature may prove to be difficult. This seems to agree with William James in Matlin, Margaret W. (1999: 370): “For most of us by the age of thirty, the character has set like plaster and will never shift again”

3.3 Recommendation for further research

It is recommended here to conduct the research using age groups from 25 years and above to ascertain whether those age categories are actually less responsive to literature in the change-of-attitude role.

References


Brothers, Joyce (2008). Children Learn Behaviour, Attitude from Parents (retrieved 13 – 12 – 15) from


