

A Classroom Inquiry into Elementary Students' Notions about Reading

**By Sharon H. Ulanoff, Alice Quioco,
John Roche, & Michele Yaegle**

Introduction

The classroom, along with the authentic learning that takes place there, provides student teachers and teachers with the material necessary to conduct inquiries that inform and shape instruction. Leading teacher candidates to understand that inquiry is a means of learning about teaching is a valuable part of preservice teacher education. We hope that their experiences in the teacher education program will create in our teacher candidates a habit of mind that causes them to see that classroom teachers must be researchers if they are to meet the diverse needs of today's students.

*Sharon H. Ulanoff and
Alice Quioco are
professors and John
Roche and Michele
Yaegle are teacher
education students, all in
the College of Education
at California State
University, San Marcos.*

As university instructors, we were inspired by Marilyn Cochran-Smith (1995) to implement an inquiry-based approach to learning at the preservice level and as part of that approach engaged our teacher candidates in an inquiry project. In this project the teacher education students were asked to think about a problem, issue, question, or concern that they wanted to examine in relation to the education of

children in our schools and then set up a means by which to examine and answer their own questions.

Given the current national concern about literacy, our teacher candidates spent some time in classrooms observing students and generating questions for inquiries they might conduct in the area of literacy. These preservice teachers decided to talk to students and ask them how they perceived themselves as readers. The preservice teachers also observed students as they engaged in reading. This paper presents the research undertaken by two teacher candidates enrolled in a language and literacy methods course as they sought to examine a "burning question" in order to engage in reflective practice. The inquiry took turns in a variety of different directions, as the preservice teachers sought to answer their question in relationship to what they were learning about literacy during their course work at the university. We think that the teacher candidates learned from this experience, and as a result, see the process of inquiry as valuable for themselves as well as for their students.

Formulating the Questions

Currently there are various views about the characteristics good readers demonstrate (Adams, 1990; Goodman, 1986). Students across the country are given reading assessments that indicate their strengths and weaknesses and thus label them as either "good" or "poor" readers. These evaluations given throughout a child's school career are formative as well as summative and include formal and informal evaluation tools. Formal measures such as standardized tests are almost always a part of the assessment process. Informal assessments such as teacher-made tests and observations provide valuable information about the reading process and strategies that students engage in as they read.

Given the notion that there may be an important relationship between students' perceptions of personal reading ability and actual reading achievement, our teacher candidates began their inquiry. Their curiosity as novices led them to look at the relationships that might exist between children's perceptions of personal reading ability and a variety of other factors in their lives. In addition to questioning the criteria children use to determine who is a "good reader," the teacher candidates inquired about the relationships between:

- ◆ students' and teachers' perceptions of the students' reading ability;
- ◆ students' self-perception of reading ability and enjoyment of reading;
- ◆ children's self-perception of their reading ability and that of their peers;
- ◆ reading ability/enjoyment and being read to at home;
- ◆ reading ability and future job success; and
- ◆ self-perception of reading ability and gender.

Examining Existing Research

Much has been written about the relationship between student self-assessment,

self-concept, and actual achievement. Ina S. Harrison (1994) found that third grade students seldom read for pleasure, were not motivated to read, and, therefore, read poorly. He noted that this lack of motivation is directly related to overall poor self concept. Thus, students with low self-esteem often perceive themselves as poor readers and therefore may not choose to read.

Poor reading skills and lack of motivation seem to go hand in hand. At school, teachers who spend most of their time focusing instruction on *how* to read rather than *why* to read, often do not increase children's motivation to read (Trelease, 1985). Moreover, Wayne M. Linek, Elizabeth G. Sturtevant, Timothy V. Rasinski, and Nancy D. Padak (1991) suggest that some students who are able to read choose not to read because these students are not motivated to do so. It is possible, then, that students who consider themselves as poor readers will spend less time reading and thus demonstrate less proficiency as readers when called upon to read in class (Krashen, 1996).

It is interesting to note that Merlin Wittrock (1986) found that children in the lower elementary grades not only overestimate personal reading ability but their overall academic levels. In fact, Wittrock (1986) also found that younger students are more likely to exaggerate ability and consistently rate themselves higher than the ratings given to them by their teachers. However, by the time students get to the sixth grade, self evaluations are more closely aligned with teacher evaluations.

There also seems to be a connection between self-perception about reading and the exposure students receive to a variety of reading activities at home. Janet S. Ferlazzo (1994) found that children who were read to in their preschool years were more prepared for formal reading instruction and were more successful in learning to read than were children who were not read to early in life. Studies such as that of Althier M. Lazar and Renee Weisberg (1996) suggest that when parents are involved in their children's academic lives, children are more successful. These studies support the notion that reading to children at an early age can be beneficial and provide children with an advantage when they enter school.

Kenneth Goodman (1996) further points out that when parents read to their children, children learn that books are read from front to back, pages are read from top to bottom, and words and sentences are read from left to right. They also learn that print tells a story. Early readers see their parents read. They live in homes where there are lots of books, magazines, newspapers, and other reading material. The most important thing children learn is that reading is the basis for school and for life. When parents view reading as important, children see reading as an important goal. Reading prepares the mind, nurtures the spirit and educates the soul (Ferlazzo, 1994). Writing is also an important part of the literacy activities of the home.

The issue of self-perception appears to also be related to gender. Joan Swann (1992) found that girls perform better than boys in reading and writing and tend to be thought of as being highly capable readers and writers. Using surveys that focused on reading and writing ability as well as attitudes toward and preferences

Elementary Students' Notions about Reading

for reading and writing, Swann found that girls tend to enjoy reading and writing activities. Girls were more positive about school activities such as studying novels, plays and poetry. In contrast, boys were more likely to agree reluctantly to reading by saying that they became bored when reading by themselves or that they read only when it was necessary.

Research Questions

In order to explore the relationship between student self-perceptions of reading ability and actual reading ability, our teacher candidates posed the following questions:

- ◆ How do students rate themselves as readers?
- ◆ To what degree does a student's self-perception of reading ability coincide with teacher perceptions?
- ◆ What criteria do children use to determine what makes a "good" reader?
- ◆ How do students describe reading enjoyment?
- ◆ How do students view reading ability in relation to future job success?
- ◆ What do students think will improve their reading ability?
- ◆ How is being read to at home related to the enjoyment of reading and reading ability?
- ◆ How do students perceive their reading ability in comparison to that of their classmates?
- ◆ Is gender a factor?

Method

How Our Teacher Candidates Conducted Their Inquiries

Our preservice teachers collected data from 59 students and their teachers in one fourth and one fifth-grade class from two suburban schools in two different unified school districts in North San Diego County. Laguna Elementary School (all names of schools and teachers have been changed to insure anonymity) has approximately 1,000 students. The 30 students in Mrs. Jones' fourth grade class all have English as their primary language. Mira El Mar Elementary School has an enrollment of approximately 780 students. The majority of the students in Mrs. Smith's fifth-grade class have English as their primary language. Students in both classes were asked to rate themselves as *good*, *average*, or *poor* readers. The teachers were then asked to rate students using the same categories. Students were also given a six question survey (see Appendix) to complete. Students were guaranteed anonymity in responding to the survey to encourage honesty and accuracy.

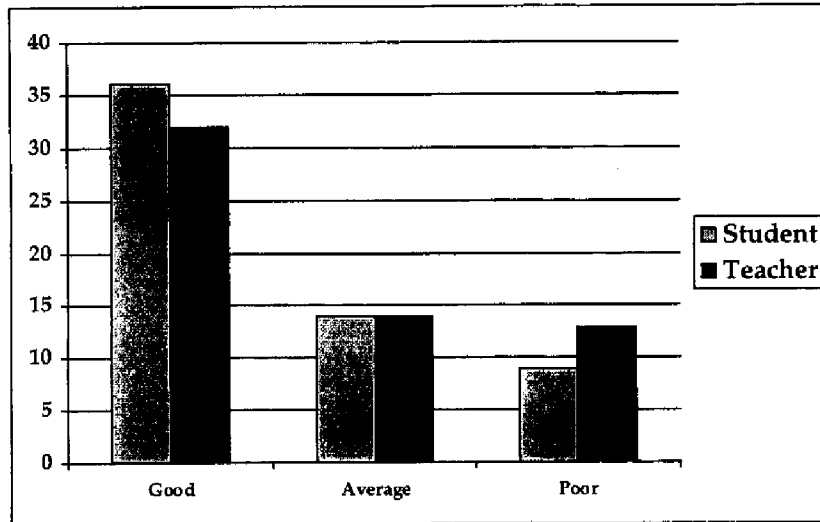
Findings

What Our Teacher Candidates Discovered

Examining student surveys told us that students and teachers were fairly consistent in rating reading ability (see Figure One). Sixty one percent of students (n=36) in both classes rated themselves as good readers, 24 percent (n=14) as average readers, and 15 percent (n=9) as poor readers. These numbers correspond to teachers' evaluating 54 percent (n=32) as good readers, 24 percent (n=14) as average readers, and 22 percent (n=13) as poor readers. It is important to note that despite differences between grade level and school location, the match between student answers and teacher responses shows few discrepancies between sites.

While there were some individual discrepancies in terms of *matching* students' notions of themselves as readers and perceptions of those same students as readers by the classroom teacher, we found that there was an 82 percent match (see Table One). Some differences were related to gender. Of the 59 students involved in the study, girls were more accurate in perceptions than boys (see Table One). Thirteen percent of the boys' perceptions did not coincide with those of the teachers. On the other hand, only .5 percent of the girls' perceptions did not match that of the teacher. It is interesting to note that in one classroom, 100 percent of the girls' perceptions

Figure One:
Student and Teacher Perceptions of Students' Reading Ability
(n=59)



Elementary Students' Notions about Reading

were the same as that of the teacher. In general, the students who participated in this inquiry were more likely to overestimate rather than underestimate their reading ability. We also found that boys were more likely to overestimate their reading ability than girls; 45 percent of the boys overestimated personal reading ability while 2 percent underestimated. In comparison, 18 percent of the girls overestimated their reading ability and 10 percent underestimated it.

In order to find out what *criteria* students use to determine reading ability, students were asked, "How do you know who is a good reader?" Forty-four percent of the students responded that a good reader is a person who reads a lot and 22 percent thought that a good reader is someone who reads fast. Twenty percent described a good reader as someone who is a good oral reader. Fourteen percent cited other reasons including being able to read thick, hard books, loud oral reading,

Table One
Matching Student and Teacher Reading Ratings
 (good [+], average [✓], or poor [-])

Gender	Fourth grade students	Fourth grade teacher	Match	Fifth grade students	Fifth grade teacher	Match or mismatch
Boy	+	+	Yes	-	-	Yes
Boy	+	+	Yes	+	+	Yes
Boy	+	+	Yes	+	+	Yes
Boy	+	+	Yes	+	+	Yes
Boy	+✓	+✓	Yes	+	+	Yes
Boy	✓	✓	Yes	+	+	Yes
Boy	✓	✓	Yes	+	✓-	No
Boy	✓	✓	Yes	✓	✓	Yes
Boy	✓	✓	Yes	✓	-	No
Boy	✓	✓	Yes	-	✓+	No
Boy	-	✓	No	+	+	Yes
Boy	✓	✓-	No	+	+	Yes
Boy	-	✓-	No	✓	-	No
Boy	-	-	Yes	+	+	Yes
Boy	+	-	No	-	✓	No
Boy	+	-	No			
Boy	-	-	Yes			
Boy	-	-	Yes			
Girl	+	+	Yes	+	+	Yes
Girl	+	+	Yes	+	+	Yes
Girl	+	+	Yes	+	+	Yes
Girl	+	+	Yes	✓	✓+	No
Girl	+	+	Yes	+	+	Yes
Girl	+	+	Yes	+	+	Yes
Girl	+	+✓	No	+	+	Yes
Girl	✓	✓	Yes	+	+	Yes
Girl	✓	✓	Yes	+	✓	No
Girl	✓	✓	Yes	+	+	Yes
Girl	✓	✓	Yes	+	+	Yes
Girl	✓	✓	Yes	+	+	Yes
Girl	✓	✓	Yes	✓	-	No

bragging about reading ability, good grades, and high test scores. One student mentioned comprehension skills.

Of the 59 students who participated in this inquiry, 86 percent indicated that they *enjoyed* reading. Their reasons were varied. Responses ranged from indicating that reading was fun and interesting where students could be imaginative and adventurous as well as learn new things to noting that reading was relaxing and a first choice when finding something to do. As many students indicated that reading relieves boredom as those who identified reading as "boring." Of the children who were identified as poor readers, most of them described reading as being "hard." One poor reader preferred to have someone read to him rather than tackle the task on his own. Overall, girls enjoyed reading somewhat more than boys. Ninety-two percent of the girls enjoyed reading and 82 percent of the boys responded likewise.

When asked, "Will you have to become a better reader to do the tasks of your *future jobs*?" only 66 percent responded positively. Sixty percent of the boys and 73 percent of the girls knew they would have to improve their reading for future jobs. Unfortunately, 27 percent of the girls and 40 percent of the boys thought that they could be successful in the work place with their present reading skills.

Most girls and boys knew that reading skills are *improved* by practice. Seventy-one percent said that reading more or harder books would be the way to be a better reader. Among the various responses made by students about ways to become better readers were reading faster, reading aloud, and sounding out the words. One student even mentioned reading slower and getting "hooked on phonics."

When investigating the relationship between reading perception and being *read to at home*, our teacher candidates found that, generally, most students in this sample enjoyed reading and performed well regardless of parental modeling of reading at home. Of the children whose parents did not model reading at home, 33 percent were poor readers (and 75 percent of these were boys), compared to 18 percent of the students whose parents did read to them. All of the girls whose parents did not read to them enjoyed reading, and 88 percent of the boys did too. However, boys whose parents did read at home liked reading the least. Girls with parents who read showed the lowest rate of dislike for reading (5 percent). Forty-one percent of the boys who came from homes where their parents read to them were good readers.

Finally, the relationship between students' notions about reading and *gender* was explored. In addition to the previously mentioned differences in matches between teachers and students according to gender (see Table One) each child was also asked to name two good readers in the classroom. Our student teachers found that girls were chosen as good readers slightly more often by both genders. Girls were chosen 57 percent of the time by 56 percent of the girls and 44 percent by the boys. Boys were selected 43 percent of the time by 28 percent of the girls and 72 percent of the boys. Of the children responding to the survey, five boys and four girls chose themselves as good readers. An interesting note is that boys were twice as likely to choose girls as good readers as girls were to choose boys.

Conclusions

Based on the responses of the 59 students in this classroom based inquiry, our teacher candidates found a high degree of accuracy in self assessment of reading performance. The subjects demonstrated a maturity in answering the questions. However, the teacher candidates were disappointed to see that a group of both boys and girls believe that their present reading ability is sufficient for future jobs. While this answer suggests immaturity, these students have several more years of schooling before they enter the work place. This perception of reading skill may change as students mature and become more familiar with the actual demands of the work place and the role reading plays in accomplishing assigned tasks.

Our teacher candidates were surprised by the lack of relationship between enjoyment of reading, reading performance, and parental modeling in this inquiry. Previous studies they had examined showed a direct relationship between parental reading behavior and children's positive attitudes toward reading and reading performance (Ferlazzo, 1994). The teacher candidate investigators were pleased to find that a large majority of the students in the sample liked to read and performed very well at reading tasks assigned in school.

The preservice teachers were further surprised when the students in this sample told them that they knew how to become better readers through reading practice, and that good readers read often. Only a few students rated good readers by speed or oral reading performance. It would seem that the students in this sample were aware of what their teachers did to improve the reading ability of students in their classes. Students were responding to what they "knew" constituted reading instruction.

Finally, girls were seen to be better readers than boys. Boys chose boys as good readers a lot more often than girls chose boys. However, girls were still chosen more often than boys by both sexes.

This inquiry left our teacher candidates with many more burning questions that we hope they will pursue in the future. These questions may give rise to inquiries about the educational level of parents, their occupations, the genres of literature read at home, and the frequency of reading at home and in the work place. A look at the attitudes of parents about their own personal literacy as well as the values placed on literacy would provide us with an interesting insight into the generational views of reading and how parents influence children's valuing of literacy. Our teacher candidates were also intrigued with the answers given by the students in this sample about the relationship of present reading ability and the reading requirements of the work place. Would the attitudes of the students in this sample change as they advanced in school? Do high school students feel the same way about present reading ability and the reading requirements of the work place? These questions would add to and clarify the lessons our teacher candidates learned from this inquiry.

Looking to the Future

We feel that there is a lot to be learned in classrooms with and from children. As teachers and future teachers, we work at designing lessons and units that we will *do* with children. More than likely, we do these lessons *to* children. Inquiries with children can help us clarify our thinking about teaching and learning. In this inquiry, our preservice teachers learned about how children perceive themselves and their peers as readers. We, in turn, were able to observe our own teacher candidates as they engaged in reflective practice and used their own learning as a lens through which they viewed the classroom. This inquiry might lead to other inquiries and eventually, we hope, to inquiry as a means of revisiting teaching and learning on a regular basis.

References

- Adams, M.J. (1990). *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Cochran-Smith, M. (1995). Color blindness and basket making are not the answer: Confronting the dilemma of race, culture and language diversity in teacher education. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(4), 493-522.
- Ferlazzo, J.S. (1994). *The effect of reading aloud on a child's success in first grade*. ERIC Document No. ED369046. 1-21.
- Goodman, K. (1986). *What's whole in whole language?* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Harrison, I.S. (1994). *Improve the reading motivation of third-grade children with extra time, encouragement and choice*. ERIC Document No. ED369039. 1-64.
- Krashen, S.D. (1996). *Every person a reader*. Culver City, CA: Language Associates.
- Lazar, A.M., & Weisberg, R. (1996). Inviting parents' perspectives: Building home-school partnerships to support children who struggle with literacy. *The Reading Teacher*, 50(3), 228-237.
- Linek, W.M., Sturtevant, E.G., Rasinski, T.V., & Padak, N.D. (1991). Second grade urban students' attitudes toward reading. In T.V. Rasinski, N.D. Padak, & J. Logan (Eds.). *Reading is knowledge*. Pittsburg, KS: College Reading Association.
- Powel, W.D., & Morelli, T., & Nusbaum, N. (1994). Performance and confidence estimates in preschool and young grade-school children. *Child Study Journal*, 24(1), 23-47.
- Rosenthal, R., & Jacobson, L. (1968). *Pygmalion in the classroom*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Swann, J. (1992). *Girls, boys, and language*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers.
- Trelease, J. (1985). *The read-aloud handbook*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Wittrock, M. (1986). *Research in teaching and learning*. New York: MacMillan.

Elementary Students' Notions about Reading

**Appendix
Student Survey**

Name: _____ Age: _____

Grade: _____ Boy or Girl: _____

Teacher's Name: _____

Name two students in your class who are good readers. How do you know that they are good readers?

Are you a good reader? What makes you think you are a good reader or a poor reader?

Do you like to read? Why do you like it or why not?

Will you have to become a better reader to do the tasks of your job like reading instructions, letters and reports?

How could you become a better reader?

Did your parents or do your parents read to you? What kind of things do they read?
