Perceptions of Reading: Kindergarten Children and Their Teachers

by

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B.ED., Queen's University, 1997, B.A., Ryerson Polytechnic University, 1995

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Faculty of Education

We accept this thesis as conforming
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ABSTRACT

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Though researchers have been attempting to solve the mystery of beginning to read, few studies have explored early literacy and reading from the perspective of the child. The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of kindergarten children and kindergarten teachers about reading. It was a partial replication of a study of grade one children by Dr. P. Michels (1988, 1994).

Participant interviews with 20 kindergarten children and five kindergarten teachers were the basis for data collection. Kindergarten teachers were interviewed in order to examine how children's perceptions of learning to read fit together with instructional strategies. The research clearly indicated that children understood the process of learning to read. When asked how they would define reading, they referred to the process by making a direct reference to learning phonics and sounding out words. These insights into reading clearly paralleled the teachers' instructional practices. The teachers defined reading primarily as a decoding process. The study provided evidence that kindergarten children did indeed understand the status of membership in various reading groups. The importance of parental and family involvement in the process of early literacy development surfaced throughout the study.

It is evident from this study that further research on children's attitudes and perceptions of beginning to read is needed. Such investigation may include an examination of the relationship between teachers'

instructional practices and students' perceptions, long term longitudinal studies, and additional exploration of children's perceptions of reading.

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Acknowledgement

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the following people for their advice and encouragement: Dr. Mayfield, Dr. Preece, Dr. Timmons, Dr. Zuk, Dr. Harker, Dr. Michels and my fellow colleagues in the Wednesday coffee club Patricia, Holly, Carol and Christine.

Thanks also go to my sister Karla for believing in me, my brother Eric who I knew would be proud, Jennifer Sturgeon for her technical assistance, Margot Panet for her editorial advice and Jennifer Londry for her words of encouragement.

Finally, my special thanks to my parents for all their support and patience without whom I would never have completed my degree.

Chapter One

Introduction

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of kindergarten children and their teachers about reading. This study endeavoured to explore emergent readers' perceptions of reading, using the premise that children exhibit a wealth of knowledge and experience about reading prior to formal instruction. It was a partial replication of a study of grade one children by Michels (1988, 1994). Michels (1988) states, "studies of children's perceptions should be conducted at other grade levels, including kindergarten" (p. 106). This is one reason why kindergarten children were selected as the sample population for this study. In order to examine how children's perceptions of learning to read fit together with instructional strategies, kindergarten teachers were also interviewed.

Background

Holdaway (1979) states "Learning to read and write ought to be one of the most joyful and successful human undertakings. Notoriously, it is not so" (p. 11). In the words of a tearful nine-year-old, already falling frustratingly behind his peers in reading progress, "Reading affects everything you do" (Adams, 1991, p. 2).

There are many differing opinions of what literacy involves. It is a complex area for which researchers have yet to reach a consensus. Goodman (1986) states,

> Labels such as 'early reading and writing' or 'beginning reading and writing' have been unsatisfactory to explain the complexity of literacy in children. Such terms have allowed teachers and curriculum developers to believe that the beginnings of reading and writing can be stated as a specific point in time that is visible and measurable. (p. 2)

Children are exposed to and engage in many facets of literacy before beginning elementary school. The term *emergent literacy*, coined by Marie Clay in 1966 "connotes development rather than stasis" (Teale & Sulzby, 1986, p. xix). Emerging literacy is defined by Ollilia and Mayfield (1992) as follows:

> Emerging literacy is multidimensional and complex. It involves not only the learning of cognitive skills, but also has linguistic, social, and psychological aspects. Literacy growth depends on children's interaction and active participation socially, linguistically, and cognitively with their environment - especially the people in their world. (p. 4)

Through this process of emerging literacy, "the child's perception of reading, or what reading has come to mean to her, is extremely important as we consider how reading is acquired" (Michels, 1990, p. 44).

Rationale

Michels (1994) argues that "instead of examining the relationship between what a child says and what an adult expects, it has become important to understand reading from a child's perspective" (p. 9). Young children offer rich understandings and insight into the world of reading.

Through "observing children and listening to their perspectives of reading, teachers can create students' literacy experiences from a framework that the child already understands increasing the probability of reading success" (Michels, 1994, p. 8).

Children's perceptions of the purpose and nature of reading have been pursued in the past primarily in quantitative research (Denny & Weintraub, 1966; Downing, 1969; Mayfield, 1983). Denny and Weintraub (1966) posed key questions pertaining to this study: "But why do children learn how to read? Do their reasons have any meaning for the teaching of reading?" (p. 441). In the 1960's, researchers were concerned primarily with "enabling children to crack the code and transform print into speech" (Michels, 1990, p. 41). Today, "educators are quick to point out that reading is a language activity and that language is learned in a social context" (Michels, 1990, p. 41). In order to better understand the social context of reading, Michels went straight to the source to interview and observe grade one children.

In The Child's View of Reading, Michels (1994) told the story of reading from children's perspectives based upon her qualitative research study. She wrote "in the tradition of qualitative research reporting, this book was written from the perspective of those studied as opposed to those doing the studying" (p. xiv). Based upon her findings Michels stated, "I have come to understand that first graders' perceptions don't always mesh with the perceptions of the adult world" (p. 141). Children's perceptions of reading can change and evolve and therefore should be monitored on an on-going

basis. Reissman states, "meaning is fluid and contextual, not fixed and universal" (1993, p. 15). Moreover, Michels (1994) states, "By better understanding how children perceive reading and themselves as readers, teachers can better facilitate continuing growth and build upon what children already know" (p. 142).

The researcher of this study chose to partially replicate Michels' work based on her conclusions that:

> first graders have developed rich perceptions about reading and are able to articulate these perceptions. Their definitions and meanings are not always consistent with those held by their parents, teachers, and/or other adults, but careful examination of these perceptions yields - valuable insight into the thought processes of beginning readers. (p. 28)

Michels' study (1988) examined the thoughts and perspectives of 29 first grade children. The children in Michel's study were described as white, middle-class, suburban youngsters. Her purpose was to determine what students think about reading. After spending six months in a 'typical' first grade classroom, Michels examined two additional classrooms with different children, teachers and instructional strategies. Michels referred to the classroom as 'typical' because it was described as such by the district superintendent. The teacher was known to be conscientious, cooperative and used standard instructional approaches. Open-ended interviews were conducted throughout the study with the three classroom

teachers. Michels (1994) reminds educator-researchers that one single response cannot be thought of as all one knows about the reading process.

Michels' (1988, 1994) findings revealed the importance of children's perspectives as gauges for instructional effectiveness. She states, "teachers should attempt to ascertain how their students are thinking about reading in order to validate and improve their instructional practices" (1988, pp. 90-91). In The Child's View of Reading, Barbara Perry provided the voice of an experienced elementary teacher in response to the children's observations. She states,

> we, as teachers, seem to be unaware of these children's views on something as significant as reading. This chapter challenges me to walk back into my classroom tomorrow and begin to listen, observe, and dialogue more carefully with my students regarding their reading activity. (Michels, 1994, p. 48)

Due to the insight provided by Barbara Perry, this study included informal semi-structured interviews with kindergarten teachers.

This study partially replicated Michels' study by investigating the perceptions and attitudes of kindergarten children about reading. It was designed to look at reading from children's perspectives in a kindergarten classroom based on "the premise that children have rich and valid understandings of reading" before they begin formal reading instruction in grade one (Michels, 1994, p. 142). In addition to kindergarten children a sample of kindergarten teachers were interviewed to investigate their

perceptions and attitudes towards reading instruction. Reutzel and Sabey (1996) state, " For many years now, research dealing with teachers' beliefs about reading instruction and research dealing with students' concepts of the act of reading have been like two cogs spinning in space barely touching, never fully interconnecting and engaging one another" (p. 323).

As educators, "what matters is not the label, but rather acknowledging the young child as thinking, knowing, understanding, being perfectly capable of enlightening adults as to what is really happening when a child says, "I'm learnin' to read." (Michels, 1986, p. xiv) It is imperative that we as teachers and researchers explore these perceptions through the 'eyes of a child' (Michels, 1994). By doing so we may better comprehend what reading is.

Research Questions

It was anticipated that a cross comparison analysis resulting from the interviews in this study might reveal similarities as well as differences with Michels' (1988) study. The participant-researcher aimed to compare and contrast the perceptions of kindergarten children in this study with those of the grade one children in Michels' study regarding reading. The study aimed to find out what the perceptions of kindergarten children are towards reading. Specific questions used for the study will be outlined in detail in Chapter 3. The researcher anticipated that the kindergarten teachers' perceptions of reading would help to illuminate the mystery of beginning to read. The teachers were asked questions regarding how they think about reading. These questions will be examined in detail in Chapter 3.

Method

The methodology for this study consisted of: a) interviews with the students and kindergarten teachers and b) informal participant observations of kindergarten children in reading related activities such as story time, library and individual reading time. This latter information was used to develop a description of "typical" reading related activities in the kindergarten classrooms of the school. Michel reports, "data gathering techniques such as participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and document analysis are used to discover meaning as others see it and to build a theory inductively from the experience" (1988, p. 5). Participant observations were conducted in kindergarten classrooms at one suburban elementary public school district in California. The kindergarten teachers working in the elementary school were interviewed and the interviews were recorded. After completion of the transcriptions kindergarten teachers were asked to read and comment on their interviews. The data were analyzed in the qualitative research tradition from the perspective of those being studied.

Limitations of the study

The limitations of the study include the following:

1. This study represents one period in time with one specific group of children and is therefore not generalizable beyond this group
2. The researcher acted as both a participant and teacher.
3. It was not possible to account for differences in home environments

or children's previous interactions with literature.

4. Interviews were semi-structured due to time constraints of the elementary school and researcher.

5. Interviews were conducted at the elementary school and often parents were present and participated, and this may or may not have affected student response.

6. It was not possible to account for differences in teachers' educational backgrounds.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. The first chapter introduces the problem and provides a rationale for the research. Chapter two highlights previous research into attitudes and perceptions of reading. Although the methodology is outlined briefly in chapter one, chapter three provides a more in depth account of the method for choosing the participants and collecting data for the study. Chapter four describes the data and data analysis. In conclusion, chapter five is a summary and discussion of the study results.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Although there has been extensive research on children's attitudes about perspectives on reading, as well as on teachers' attitudes and perceptions of reading instruction, few studies have attempted to examine the two together. In order to build on existing research, it is necessary to first provide a brief historical overview of research in this field. The researcher has summarized the research and literature which is most pertinent to this study into three categories: children's perceptions of reading; children's perceptions of reading instruction; and teachers' perceptions of reading and reading instruction. The research included in each section has been presented in chronological order to assist the reader in developing perspective.

Children's Perceptions of Reading

Over the past five decades, researchers have investigated children's perceptions of reading, attempting to solve the mystery of beginning to read. Brumbaugh (1940) pioneered research into students' perceptions of reading by investigating 'reading expectancy'. This study was conducted by student teachers performing their practice teaching in 31 kindergarten classrooms in New York City. The children were asked questions regarding their expectations of reading in grade one. The findings suggested that kindergarten children have definite expectations about learning to read in grade one. Many children interviewed in this investigation revealed fears and

anxieties related to reading. Brumbaugh (1940) states, "it is possible that future research might show that these emotional factors are more responsible than the mastery of letter symbol, either of form or sound, in prognosticating reading success" (p. 155).

In 1958, Edwards examined students' perceptions of reading by investigating the perspectives of 66 disabled readers in grades 2 to 4. The students were asked to remember what their parents and teachers meant when they described a student as a 'good' reader. Edwards concluded that the students' perceptions of 'good reading' primarily emphasized speed and fluency (Michels, 1988 ; Johns, 1986).

In 1966, Reid explored the perceptions of 5 year old children and how they came to learn about reading and writing. The subjects were 12 students, (7 boys and 5 girls) who were interviewed three times throughout their first year at school. The interviews included a set of 'kernel' questions such as: Can you read yet? The findings revealed that these students had very few ideas about beginning to read. Reid states, "though almost all were aware that they could not read, [they] had very little precise notion of what the activity consisted of (p. 60)". Furthermore, she added:

> this fact points to the difference between learning to read and learning to ride a bicycle. In some senses of the word 'know', children do know, in advance, what riding a bicycle is going to consist in. But reading prior to the experience, is a mysterious activity in which they come with only the vaguest expectancies. (p. 60)

In 1966, Denny and Weintraub, interviewed 111 first grade children in five first grade classrooms. The questions were:

1. Do you want to learn to read?

2. Why?

3. What must you do in order to learn how to read?

The children's responses were taped and organized into categories. In response to questions one and two, the seven categories were: 1) no response or an "I don't know' response, 2) vague, irrelevant or circular, 3) intrinsic: perform the act, 4) goal - seeking responses, 5) affective-valuational responses, 6) identification, and 7) negative. Twenty-five percent of the respondents' answers were placed in categories 1 or 2. Of the remaining responses, 42 per cent were classified in category 3, 31 per cent in category 4, 11 percent in category 5, 12 percent in category 6, and 4 percent of the children responded negatively, in category 7. A higher proportion of boys than girls could not express a reason for wanting to learn to read

The answers to question three, ("What must you do in order to learn to read ?") were placed in 5 categories. They were: 1 & 2) don't know, vague, 3) obedience-oriented, 4) other-directed, and 5) self-directed. Slightly over one third of the children offered no meaningful response to what one must do in order to read. Although the researchers did not infer a causal link, it would appear that kindergarten helps children to understand what is expected in school (Denny & Weintraub, 1966). Denny and Weintraub (1966) concluded,

Most research on learning supports the proposition that it helps the

> child to learn if he knows the reason for a learning situation and sees a purpose in a task. Inasmuch as reading is not nonsense learning, but a complex mental process, it may be important to identify it as such and to help beginners establish a purpose for wanting to learn to read. (p. 447)

Mason (1967) investigated preschool children's concepts of reading using Reid's interview technique. Contrary to Reid's findings, the 178 children ages 3 - 5 that Mason interviewed believed they could already read. Hence, Mason concluded that "one of the first steps in learning to read is learning that one doesn't already know" (p. 132).

In 1970, Johns asked 12 disabled readers to answer the question "What is reading"? Ten out of twelve responded "I don't know", which led him to conclude that a failure to understand what was involved in the reading process may be a factor in their reading difficulties. Moreover, based on the research from these studies, it was clear that "the students' perceptions of reading did not emphasize meaning" (1986, p. 33).

Johns and Ellis (1976) conducted one of the largest studies investigating student's concepts of reading, in grades one through eight. Over 1,600 children were asked the following three questions 1) What is reading? 2) What do you do when you read? and 3) If someone didn't know how to read, what would you tell him/her that he/she would need to learn? Based on their findings Johns and Ellis concluded :

1. Many students have little or no understanding of the reading process.

2. Older students have a somewhat better understanding of the reading process than younger students.

3. There were few sex differences in the data. However, when differences existed it was revealed that boys gave more vague or irrelevant responses than girls. Also, girls appeared to be more aware of the fact that decoding and meaning were essential for reading.

4. Most of the meaningful responses described reading as a decoding process. It may be that teachers are over-emphasizing decoding or "sounding out" strategies to the exclusion of the role meaning plays in reading.

5. Many children have a very restricted view of reading. They described reading as an activity occurring in the classroom or school environment which utilized a textbook. (pp. 125-126)

In addition, Johns and Ellis (1976) stated "it is disturbing to note that the vast majority of children have little or no understanding of the reading process" (p. 127). This concluding remark has been disputed by Harste, Woodward and Burke (1984) and Michels (1988; 1994).

In the words of a first grade girl, reading is "where you stand up and sit back down" (Michels, 1994, p.36). Interestingly, this view point was identical to a response Johns (1986) documented. A second grade child remarked

that reading was "stand up, sit down" (p. 31). Michels states, "I have come to understand that first graders' perceptions don't always mesh with the perceptions of the adult world" (p. 141). Furthermore, Michels identified children as capable, active, masterful learners. This perspective is consistent with those of Harste, Woodward and Burke (1984) who state:

> We began this program of research assuming that what the young children knew about reading and writing prior to first grade far exceeded what teachers and beginning readers and writing programs assumed. Now after six years of research and involvement in a wide variety of analysis, we realize we were not optimistic enough. Children know much more than any of us have dared to imagine. (p. 77)

Recently, McKenna, Kear and Ellsworth (1995) conducted a national study (in the United States) looking at children's attitudes towards reading. The role of attitude in reading acquisition is primarily important for two reasons. It may affect the reading level children attain, and a child with poor attitude may choose not to read.

McKenna, Kear and Ellsworth (1995) used Alexander and Filler's definition of reading attitude: "a system of feelings related to reading which causes the learner to approach or avoid a reading situation" (p. 934). They investigated the reading attitudes of 18,185 children in Grades 1 through 6. The students were asked to respond to a pictoral scale which had two subscales of attitude towards reading: recreational and academic. The study revealed a negative trend in children's attitudes about reading in elementary

school with the following five findings:

1. Recreational and academic reading attitudes became more negative steadily throughout the elementary years.

2. The trend towards more negative attitude was definitely related to ability (ability gap widened with age).

3. Girls possessed a more favourable attitude to reading than did boys both recreationally and academically at all grade levels (unrelated to ability).

4. Ethnicity played little role in the negative attitude trends.

5. The teachers' reliance on basal readers did not seem to affect attitude.

McKenna, Kear and Ellsworth, concluded, "early intervention in an effort to preempt reading difficulties may curb the attitude decline" (p. 952). In addition,

> there's evidence that positive new experiences in reading may have minimal effects on attitude if they are greatly at odds with established beliefs about reading. For example, when a student possessing a negative attitude reads an engaging book, there may be a small direct impact on attitude, but the belief system about reading may be minimally altered. (p. 953)

The findings of McKenna, et al study overlapped, Michels' study illustrating specifically that children are aware of how well they are doing in reading. In addition, the findings of the survey further support the

importance of investigating perceptions and attitudes of kindergarten children toward reading before they begin formal reading instruction, and before the negative attitudinal cycle begins.

Childrens' Perceptions of Reading Instruction

In 1969, Downing followed up Reid's (1966) investigation. Reid's three primary questions were replicated with thirteen five year olds in an infants' class in Hemstead, England. Downing's first conclusion about reading holds increasing importance today. He stated, "children's thoughts about reading, their notions and conceptions of its purpose and nature, present the most fundamental and significant problems for the teaching of reading" (p. 217). Downing found that students had difficulty understanding the purpose of reading and had only ambiguous perceptions of how people read.

In 1976, Tovey identified the lack of research on children's perceptions of reading. In his study, 30 (Grades 1 - 6) children were interviewed individually for 15-20 minutes. The study investigated children's perception of reading within the context of reading as a silent and predictive process, for example, "Do you look at every word when you read?" (p. 12). Tovey suggested that teachers were relying primarily on the word recognition equals reading premise. Moreover, he concluded that children need to think of reading as a more predictive process, deriving meaning from the smallest number of cues.

Mayfield (1983) also conducted a study addressing the perception and purpose of reading. The study investigated kindergarten children's

perceptions of reading before and after instruction about code systems. Mayfield concluded "that kindergarten children can learn the concepts and vocabulary of code systems and that such instruction is related to the children's perceptions of the nature and purpose of reading" (p. 161).

Johns (1986) posed a challenge to future educators. Although most students do learn to read, approximately 15% of students in North America encounter problems in reading. These students often perceive reading as tasks and workbook sheets. There is a possibility that these students may benefit from instruction into the nature and purpose of reading: "If an emphasis in this area will reduce the percentage of disabled readers, research on students' perceptions of reading will serve an invaluable end" (p. 40). In addition, educators may also "utilise children's perceptions as a gauge of instructional effectiveness" (Michels, 1994, p. 45).

Teachers' Perceptions of Reading and Reading Instruction

Barbara perry also commented on the children's responses in Michels' 1994 study; "What I am uncomfortable with as a result of what the children said is the usual performance of first-grade reading groups. I have witnessed children who "fell behind" in the first few months of first grade, never to catch up with the system" (p. 89). If one is to examine the attitudes and perceptions of children learning to read, one must likewise understand the teacher's thoughts and perceptions of beginning reading. It is a collaborative effort.

According to Harste and Burke (1977), theory is "a system of

assumptions through which experiences are organized and acted upon" (p. 32). In 1977, Harste's and Burke's research found that both teachers and students "have distinctive and identifiable theoretical orientations to reading and that once we have identified these orientations, subsequent reading performance and classroom behaviour was found consistent with the model from which the person was operating" (p.32). The three theoretical orientations included: whole language, skills orientation and decoding. Harste and Burke state "our field findings strongly suggest that student performance is often key to understanding teacher performance. Put simply, we have found student reading performance, at least in part, to mirror instruction" (p.33). They add, "put another way, students' predisposition to apply one theoretical model over another will be influenced by the instructional environment, i.e., teacher's theoretical orientation" (p. 33).

In 1983, Tovey explored the degree to which 30 elementary teachers understood the reading process. He stated, "if teacher knowledge is an essential component of effective instruction and learning, to what degree do teachers understand the reading process?" (p.5). The following questions were used as the basis for teacher interviews:

1. Have you ever thought about what you do when you read? If so, what do you think you do when you read?

2. Have you ever thought about how meaning is represented in written language? If so, how do you think meaning is represented in written language?

3. When you're reading what do you do when you encounter unrecognised or unknown words?

4. Do you look at every word when you read? Do you think you should? Why or why not? (p. 6).

Forty-three per cent of the teachers interviewed, revealed "they had not thought about what they do when they read". In response to Question 2, half of the teachers responded that they had never thought about how meaning is represented in written language. The results indicate that the teachers had far greater difficulty in answering the first two questions which were more abstract in nature than the latter two.

Tovey concluded, that on one hand, teachers had not given enough thought to the processing of written language. On the other hand, he noted that the responses indicated the teachers appeared to have intuitive knowledge of the reading processes based upon their own experiences which they are not able to articulate. In addition, Tovey notes they have no sense of purpose for doing so (p.12). He states, "it would appear that teachers need a more explicit understanding of the reading process" (p. 12).

In 1992, Cothern and Collins provided a theoretical description of attitude acquisition regarding reading. Developing positive attitudes about reading was regarded as an important goal in the teaching of reading. Cothern and Collins provided a chronological framework on which to better understand theoretical models of attitude acquisition.

Cothern and Collins described several instruments that can be used to

assess student attitudes (e.g., a written questionnaire which asks questions such as Do you like to read?). According to Cothern and Collins, "it appears that it is possible to influence attitude development when providing instruction, and the development of self concept is crucial in acquiring positive attitudes toward academic endeavours" (p. 95). The principal implication of their study was that children's attitudes must be assessed, and that this information becomes more valuable if it can be documented.

In 1996, Reutzel and Sabey explored the question of whether first grade students' concepts about reading differed as a function of their teachers' theoretical orientations to reading instruction. Their study investigated the following questions: a) Do teachers' instructional beliefs influence children's concepts of reading and reading strategies? b) Are there any differences between the strategies of students whose teachers hold differing beliefs about reading?

The teachers were administered the Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile which consists of 28 statements. Each one of the statements reflected a particular theoretical stance or practice. The teachers read the statement and rated them on a scale from 1-5, based upon a level of agreement or disagreement. The students were administered the Burke Reading Interview which consists of 10 questions designed to investigate their attitudes towards reading, concepts of the reading process, and strategies for reading. For example, "When you are reading and come to something you don't know, what do you do?" (Reutzel, Sabey, p. 329). While

Harste and Burke (1977) concluded that student reading performance, at least in part, mirrors classroom instructional strategies, the findings of the study revealed that "teacher instructional orientations to reading instruction do not affect the predominant use of reading strategies", (i.e., teachers' sounding out) (p. 341). However, teacher orientations to reading may "influence some very serious aspects of students' concepts about reading and becoming a reader" (p. 341).

The studies in this literature review focus on children's perceptions of reading, children's perceptions of reading instruction and teachers' perceptions of reading and reading instruction. In addition, many of the studies failed to account for the social context of reading, a fundamental aspect of emergent literacy. The research validates a need to further examine our methodologies for ascertaining children's perceptions of reading. Michels (1988) suggested, based on her qualitative research that children's perceptions of readings be explored with other grade levels including kindergarten children. The findings of Michels' study will be presented in chapter four.

Chapter Three

Methodology

This study was designed to reveal attitudes and perceptions of kindergarten children and kindergarten teachers towards reading. It began with the researcher's interest in early literacy acquisition. This interest was sparked by Michels' study entitled "Children's Perceptions of Reading". This study was designed as a partial replication of Michels' study (1998; 1994). The researcher partialy replicated Michels (1988; 1994) in order to check the validity of this earlier research findings with a different participant sample. This provided a much sounder basis for judging the validity of this study. In addition, it was extremely helpful as a guideline for a beginner researcher.

In this study, the participants were the kindergarten children and kindergarten teachers within one southern Californian school district. The research questions were formulated to reveal kindergarten children and teachers' perceptions of reading.

Participants' Questions

Kindergarten Children

The questions posed to the kindergarten participants of this study were based upon Michels' investigation with first grade children. The questions were modified to ensure the researcher would obtain the necessary information within the given timeframe. Michel's investigation used a technique she coined *listening questions.* It was the opinion of the researcher that during the time lines as dictated by the elementary school

and The Unniversity of Victoria Human Research Ethics Commitee it would be impossible to obtain the required information. In addition, the researcher wanted to discover whether the children found a connection between good readers and good writers. What are the perceptions of kindergarten children towards reading? More specifically; subjects were asked to respond to the following questions:

1. What do you think reading is?
2. Do you want to learn how to read?
3. What do you do when you read?
4. What do you like to read? What do you dislike to read?
5. How do you describe differences and similarities between reading at home and at school?
6. Do you think that a 'good reader' is also a 'good writer?'

In addition, the researcher examined the data to determine whether the kindergarten children's attitudes and perceptions about reading were similar to those of the first grade children in Michels' study?

Kindergarten teachers

What are the perceptions of kindergarten teachers towards reading? Specifically, subjects were interviewed to determine how kindergarten teachers think about reading? They were asked to respond to the following questions:

1. How do you define reading?
2. What do you feel is the hardest part of teaching reading?

3. How do you assess your students' attitude towards reading?

    a) Is it an informal or formal process?

    b) To what degree do you feel this information about student attitude influences your reading instruction?

4. Have your perceptions and attitudes regarding the teaching of reading changed/evolved over time? If so, how? why? [How do you explain any changes?]

5. How do you explain the relationship between reading and writing? Do you find good readers in your classes also to be good writers?

5. What specific steps or strategies do you employ to promote enthusiasm and excitement for reading in your young students?

Setting

This study took place in a suburban elementary K-6 public school in southern California, where the researcher was teaching second grade. Within the school district there are six other schools. The 1998-1999 academic year was the first multi-track school year. Teachers were required to begin the school year in July 1998. The enrolment of the seven schools within the district is approximately 5,650 children. The school used in the study has a population of 1200 students. The school was built within the last five calendar years and has recently been awarded the title of A California Distinguished School. Demographics in the area result in a high turn over of students and teachers at the school as well as rapid growth. A satellite

school will be opening in July 1999 to relieve some of the crowding.

The parent teacher association plays a strong role in the school with close to a hundred percent membership during the 1998-1999 academic year. Typically there are parent volunteers in the kindergarten room daily.

Participants

The subjects in this study consisted of 20 kindergarten children and 5 kindergarten teachers. The classrooms were selected on a voluntary basis. Once permission from the Principal had been obtained, teachers volunteering to help were contacted as to the most convenient time for interviews. Before interviewing the children, they were informally observed in their classroom environment by the researcher. As second grade finishes forty minutes before afternoon kindergarten ends, the researcher was able to spend that time observing in the kindergarten class twice a week for a period of a month.

The sample size of kindergarten children was selected as 20. California has recently enforced a reduced size classroom for the primary grades. Twenty is the maximum number of children allowed in a primary class. The children were between the ages of 4-5 years from a primarily middle class background. Children participating in the study demonstrated reliable attendance. As the research relied on interview and transcription, children with identified language difficulties were not part of the sample. All of the kindergarten participants' first language was English. From the children for whom parental permission had been obtained, the researcher

randomly attempted to collect an equal number of female and male children. During the week of the interviewing one of the females was absent and a male was selected to take her place. To ensure confidentiality in this study, each child was given a pseudonym. For the purpose of transcriptions each child was given a number.

The kindergarten teachers selected for the study were teachers in the same school district as the children. Five teachers volunteered to participate. Within the school district assigned grades often changed according to demographics. California is currently experiencing a serious shortage of teachers because of mandatory class size reduction. The teachers interviewed had diverse teaching backgrounds and education. All of the teachers held teaching certificates at the time of interviewing. Currently, to teach in California one must have passed the California Basic Education Test. However, one may be teaching while completing credentialing requirements. All of the teachers surveyed had taught a minimum of two years.

Michels' study (1988,1994) included three grade one teacher-participants. As this study aimed to include the 'voice' of kindergarten teachers, the number of participants included was greater than in Michels' study.

The kindergarten teachers in the district were given letters requesting their voluntary participation in this study. The researcher accommodated their busy schedules by arranging to interview the teachers at their

convenience after school, at lunch or before school. To ensure confidentiality in this study, each teacher was given a pseudonym. The school district embraced the systematic, and explicit teaching of phonics. This will be elaborated on in chapter four. The school district teaches a program entitled Project Read. All of the teachers were inserviced by a district 'coach' on how to implement this reading program during their first year with in the district.

Method

Interviews are one method of narrative inquiry. A precise definition of narrative inquiry is controversial and difficult to fit within tight parameters. Narrative analysis aims to give voice to personal experience. Narrative inquiry tells a story, in this case the story of kindergarten readers and kindergarten teachers. Reissman (1993) states, "the purpose is to see how respondents in interviews impose order on the flow of experience in order to make sense of events and actions in their lives" (p. 2). The following is an example of a typical interview conducted with a kindergarten boy:

R: What do you think reading is?

C: Something that you read about.

R: Something that you read about. Do you want to learn how to read?

C: Yeah.

R: Yeah, You do want to learn how to read? (slight pause) Why do you want to learn how to read?

C: So when I grow up I can (um) I can (pause) So when I grow up I can

read science and important papers.

R: Important papers?

C: Um hum

R: Anything else?

C: Ah...I also like like Like reading all the time. I just try to sound the words out so I can read.

R: You sound the words out? How do you do that exactly?

C: Well, like for example bus um you have like bbbb uuuus and then you say BUS.

R: I see, I'm just going to shut the door because it's getting a little noisy. So when you read you sound out the words to figure out what the word sounds like.

C: Um hum.

R: Okay, what do you like to read? What kind of stories do you like to hear?

C: What?

R: What kinds of stories do you like to read?

C: Ah...Let me think...The Three Little Pigs.

R: The Three Little Pigs. Why do you like The Three Little Pigs?

C: Because I like when the wolf blows the house down.

R: You like it when the wolf blows the house down. Anything else about the story that you like?

C: ah...Let me think (sigh) long pause

R: Are there any books you don't like to read?

C: Well, I don't like to read like um. Let me think again...The Three Little Wolves.

R: The Three Little Wolves...why don't you like to read that?

C: Because, it's mixed up, because it's suppose to be The Three Little Pigs instead of The Three Little Wolves and also because the big bad pig is supposed to be the big bad wolf.

R: Oh, I see.

R: Do you have a special place that you like to read?

C: The library.

R: Do you like to read at the public library?

C: I haven't been there but I'd like to go some day.

R: You mean the library at the school.

C: Yeah.

R: Do you have a special place at home you like to read?

C: Well, I read truck stories, chain stories...all have kinds of different books.

R: Do you think that the books at home and school are the same or different?

C: Different.

R: How are they different?

C: Because for like example I got Arthur, Arthur's Number Problem , A Truck Story because if Arthur's Number Problem was at my house and

the library they'd be the same. If not they would be different.

R: Okay, do you think that if someone is a really good reader they are also a really good writer?

C: Yeah

R: You think they are.

C: Yeah.

R: Do you think someone could be a really good reader and not a good writer?

C: Yeah.

R: What about in your class are the boys and girls who are good readers also good writers?

C: Yes

R: Yes they are. Do you have reading groups in your classroom?

C: Ah no.

R: Do you think you're a good reader?

C: I sound words out, I get a lot of help from my parents and sometimes when I sound I know um what the words are.

R: You're learning what the words are. Great! What about reading books on a computer. Have you ever read books on a computer?

C: Um Hum

R: What sort of books have you read on the computer?

C: Um like...I got a CD that ...I can make my own stories in the computer.

R: You write your own stories. Do you ever read books on the

computer?

C: Dalmations.

R: Have you read The Dalmations on the computer?

C: Um hum they read it to me there's both you can play and read or the person can read to you.

R: How do you read the the words on the screen?

C: The people from the CD tell us the word what it is.

R: Oh, the people on the CD tell the word and what it is. Do you like reading books on the computer?

C: Yeah.

R: You do. Okay, well do you have anything else you'd like to tell me about reading?

C: Yeah, about six more things.

R: Okay you go ahead and tell me.

C: Number one sometimes I like fairy tales and stuff.

R: You like fairy tales. why do you like fairy tales?

C: Well, because I like fairy tales because they are so different. Sometimes they're funny sometimes they're weird.

R: Sometimes they're weird. Do you like weird books?

C: Yeah.

R: Okay you had six things to tell me what is the second thing?

C: Well. I like Hallowe'en ones

R: Hallowe'en books.

C: Because sometimes when I go to bed I'm scared and sometimes when I go to bed by myself I'm not scared.

R: Oh, I see.

C: And when I'm not scared I read scary books and I won't even get scared.

R: Wonderful.

C: Number three, I like reading about volcanoes, nose problems, eye problems the Magic School Bus stories I like all kinds. Number four have colouring books because I love colouring. Number five I like different stories that are weird and interesting and help me learn stuff. Number six, I like reading stories of themes that I like and especially I like T.V. a lot.

R: Would you like to hear what you sound like on the microphone?

The child interviewed in the preceding interview offered valuable insight into the purpose of reading, how one reads, reading at home and school and 'six things about reading'. The researcher repeated what the child was saying in order to confirm the child's answer and lead into the next question. This typical interview differed from Michels' in the researcher's use of direct questioning. The researcher felt that in order to gain the necessary information she would have to provide some structure to the questions. The researcher was given a one hour window during morning and afternoon kindergarten in which to interview the children. In discussing qualitative research Goodwin and Goodwin (1996) state" Time-of-day and time-of-year

issues often arise in qualitative studies involving education" (p. 117).

Procedure

After obtaining consent from the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Committee, a letter explaining the purpose of the study and guaranteeing the teachers' anonymity was sent to each kindergarten teacher within the school district five teachers were selected from the six teachers who voluntered. These five teachers were all in the same school as the researcher. This was done because it allowed the researcher a better opportunity in which to access the participants. Due to the recent class size reduction in the State of California and a recent growth in demographics teachers were overwhelmed by the amount of time spent at work and professionally required inservices. In addition, the school district had just begun multi-track schooling. The researcher felt that in order to obtain the necessary information she would have to accomodat to their schedules. All of the teachers interviewed preferred to be interviewed at the school where they were teaching. One teacher commented that she would participate if necessary but felt she must mention she did not feel the district taught reading in the manner suggested by The California Kindergarten Association.

A letter, explaining the purpose of the study and guaranteeing the children's anonymity was sent to each parent/guardian within the six kindergarten classrooms at the school. The parent/guardian was asked to grant permission to have the interviews audiotaped. The parent/guardian was informed that the tapes would be used only for the duration of the study

and that they would be stored in a locked cabinet. Upon completion of the study the tapes were destroyed. The researcher received 42 permission forms for children whose parents agreed to include their children in the research. From this population 11 boys and 9 girls were interviewed. The kindergarten participants were selected with the assistance of the classroom teachers. One of the girls was absent during the week of taping and the teacher suggested a male student.

The kindergarten children were told that the researcher was completing a project for school and was interested in what they (kindergarten children) think about reading. The teacher-researcher then asked the kindergarten children for their help. In addition, the kindergarten children were asked for verbal permission before taping.

Informed consent allowed for the interviews with the children to be taped. In order that the study be as naturalistic and unobtrusive as possible, the children were interviewed and observed within their regular classroom environment. As the school is new, each of the kindergarten classrooms housed a small office off to one side which was ideal for recording purposes.

A letter, explaining the purpose of the study and guaranteeing the teacher's anonymity was sent to each kindergarten teacher. The teacher was asked for permission to audio tape the interviews. Informed consent allowed for the interviews to be audio taped for the purpose of transcription and analysis. Each kindergarten teacher was informed that the tapes were to be used only for the duration of the study and would be stored in a locked

cabinet. Upon completion of the study the tapes were destroyed.

A pilot study with 3 kindergarten children in this school district was conducted in mid-late September in order to refine the interview procedures. The pilot study revealed that children appeared more willing to participate if they held on to a microphone. Goodwin and Goodwin (1996) discuss strategies to aid in interviewing children like using props or playing a game. Moreover, the children seemed to engage more readily in conversation in a comfortable, familiar environment. The researcher also noticed the children appeared much less hesitant to respond to interview questions when other adults were in the office such as parent volunteers. In several of the cases parents asked to be included in the interview process. The researcher did not include these transcriptions in the sample population. The researcher also contacted Pamela Michels to discuss her study and any useful information she could offer. Dr. Michels was helpful and suggested that a complete replication would be difficult within a thesis timeframe. Michels, also discussed some of the difficulties in interviewing children such as time in the classroom and transcribing childrens interviews.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed by the researcher. The transcripts of the kindergarten children's interviews were analysed for emerging themes and ideas. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992) data analysis is:

> the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials that you accumulate to

> increase your own understanding of them and to enable you to present what you have discovered to others. Analysis involves working with the data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, synthesizing them, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others. For the most, the end products of research are books, papers, presentations, or plans for action. Data analysis moves you from the rambling pages of description to those products. (p. 153)

Following the kindergarten teachers' interviews, the data were transcribed by the researcher. The kindergarten teachers were asked to read their transcriptions and make corrections or expand on their comments. All of the teachers with the exception of one were satisfied with their responses.

This fifth teacher was completely dissatisfied with her response. She has had a wide variety of experience teaching reading. She left the second grade team to teach kindergarten, took a one year leave for professional studies and is currently teaching first grade. The biggest problem she found was in the earlier definition of reading. She felt reading represents a "union between the reader and the text". She furthered that phonemic awareness is a prerequisite to reading and progression takes place when children are able to make guesses using illustration, use context clues, make predictions, sequence and remember details. She also listed several strategies which will be discussed in chapter four. She commented that she would be available for further interviewing should the researcher require.

The teacher responses seemed to fit into the following four categories: process and definition of reading; assessment; and reading and writing strategies. According to Michels (1988), "validity in this type of study, refers to whether or not the researcher has represented the social world of the participants as they themselves see it" (p. 26). The researcher appears to have represented the social world of reading in the eyes of the teacher participants. In addition, the researcher enlisted the aid of a fellow Masters student to ensure that data was placed consistently in categories in order to increase validity.

Chapter Four

Results

As discussed previously, few studies have attempted to examine children's attitudes and perspectives on reading together with teachers' attitudes and perceptions about reading. Moreover, many of the earlier research studies conducted suggest that children's perceptions of reading are limited, vague, and show no understanding (Reid, 1966; Johns & Ellis, 1976). Results of this study clearly support Michels' (1988) findings that young children have rich perceptions of reading.

Analysis Framework

Close analysis and examination of these perceptions can lead to insight that may help solve the mystery of what a kindergarten child means by saying s/he is learning to read. As discussed in Chapter 3, Michels' (1988) study provided the framework to organize information surfacing from this study. Close analysis of the children's transcripts revealed the following themes: purpose for reading; how they learn to read; how they feel about reading; how well they feel they are doing; reading and writing; and books at home versus books at school. These results are consistent with the findings of Michels' (1988) study indicating that first grade children have a very rich and valid understanding of reading. Michels' states: first grade children discuss a great deal of information pertaining to reading including:

a) What they are doing in reading

b) How they learn to read

c) How well they are doing

d) How they feel about home and reading in school

e) Purpose for reading (i,ii).

This information provided the framework to allow the researcher to analyze and understand the children's perceptions and attitudes towards reading. The majority of children interviewed offered information pertaining to the six dominant aspects of reading as observed by Michels (1988). These aspects are as follows:

a) What they are doing in reading

b) How they learn to read: Process Driven

c) How well they are doing

d) How they feel about reading

e) A discussion of reading at home and school

f) Purpose for reading

Each one of these categories will be examined in the above order.

What They Do in Reading

Michels' study revealed that when first graders were asked what reading means "their first utterance is generally some sort of task description which describes what they do in reading" (p. 29). Unlike Michels' study the kindergarten children did not give responses which involved pencil and paper activities. Approximately ninety per cent of the kindergarten children interviewed made references to the purpose of reading and the phonetic process of sounding out words. When asked what do you do when

you read, a kindergarten child replied, "You have to read the letters."

How They Learn to Read: Process Driven

The kindergarten children interviewed showed a remarkable understanding of the processes they employ when learning to read. Almost all of the children alluded to the phonetic process of learning to read. One child stated, reading is "When you sound out words and tell people stories." Another girl remarked, "I make the letter sounds and then I try to figure out what sounds they are." The researcher asked, "What do you mean by sounding out the words?" One child replied, "When you sound out a letter sound like 'n', sound is nnnn." Michels' found that children frequently allude to sounding out words when reading (p. 32).

The children were asked " What do you do when you read?" A kindergarten boy replied, "I sound it out." The researcher then confirmed what the boy had said. The child, added, "And one book was easy, so I sound it out." Other children interviewed clearly understood exactly what they were implying when they gave a response related to the sounding-out process. The researcher questioned a 4 year old boy on how to sound out words. The little boy responded "Well, like for example bus, um you have like bbbb uuuus and then you say "BUS". The kindergarten children are also taught to sound out words using their hands. This is part of a district wide reading program entitled Project Read. A child begins making the initial sound with his/her thumb out then adds a finger each time an additional sound is added. The child is trained to then put the thumb and fingers

altogether and blend the sounds. The analogy the children learn is that of making a cake, they add all the sounds into a bowl and then mix the cake. The little boy was demonstrating how one uses his or her hands while talking. Another kindergarten girl replied "You open up the book and you see some words and then you try to sound them out and then when you sound out the whole book, then that's called sounding out in reading and last night I read a book."

As well as strong references to the decoding aspect of reading, one of the children made reference to the illustrations in a book. The researcher questioned "What happens when you open a book?" The child stated, "I look at the pictures." In the mind of this kindergarten girl reading happens when you open a book. One boy stated he already knew how to read. When asked how one learns to read he simply replied, "You practice."

The preceding quotes demonstrate kindergarten children's understanding of the reading process. The kindergarten children clearly linked reading and learning to read with decoding. Michels states, "Children are not mistaken when they suggest that 'reading is letters' or 'reading is sounding out words'. They are again, merely reflecting common instructional practices" (p. 92).

In order to examine how children's perceptions of learning to read fit together with instructional strategies, kindergarten teachers were interviewed. The interviewed teachers' definitions were predominately phonetic. One kindergarten teacher defined reading as "the understanding of words, maybe

not so much the understanding but the enunciation and the phonetic awareness of words. The understanding of words and comprehension can come at a later time. I would say the phonetic awareness initially." A second teacher when asked the same question, answered, "Reading is the blending together of sounds and letters to create words." It is perhaps relevant to note here that the teaching of systematic explicit phonics was mandated by the school district.

Reading was perceived by one teacher as a subject matter of its own. When asked to define reading, she replied, "That's a tough one because I'm not involved in reading. I'd say it's being able to take letters and sounds and putting them together to make words. It's being able to take those words and put them together to understand what they mean. It's being able to look at pictures when you're reading and get clues from the pictures." At the time of this interview the teacher was teaching the math program in the kindergarten classrooms. When later asked to read the interview transcript and comment, she amended her definition of reading to: "When there is a union between the reader and the text."

This information clearly supports Harste and Burke's (1977) findings that "both students and teachers have distinctive and identifiable theoretical orientations to reading" (p.32). In addition, they add that "student reading performance, at least in part, mirrors instruction" (p.341).

How well they are doing

Ninety percent of the children interviewed believed they were good

readers although they were not always able to articulate why. The children were asked whether or not they believed they were good readers at school. One of the children answered, "At school everyone's a good reader." The researcher asked this child why everyone is a good reader. The child responded, "Because they sound out the words and they know the words and the easiest word is 'the'." Another student commented that you know someone is a good reader because "they read a lot."

Several of the responses alluded to the importance of family and parents in the process of learning to read. When asked "How do you know you're a good reader?", one child answered: "Because I read to my mom everyday." When asked whether or not she was a good reader, one of the girls responded, " I sound out words, I get a lot of help from my parents, and sometimes when I sound [out the words] I know um what the words are."

Children understood clearly what reading groups they were in although they didn't articulate where their reading ability fell within the classroom. One child commented that he was in the green group. He added, everyone in the group was a good reader "because they read out loud." Another boy was asked, "How can you tell which group you're in?" He replied, "Because we have all different kinds of kids and I know the name and I can look for my group, and look for the name of it." The researcher questioned a female kindergarten student, "What can you tell me about your reading group?" She replied, "They read a lot of books." She explained that her group was named the yellow group.

One of the kindergarten children felt he was not a good reader. When asked "How do you know you are not a good reader in your class?", he replied, " Well, because I can only read one book." The researcher went on to question what a good reader in the class can read. He stated, " The Bernstein Bears and The Dalmatian Book and half of The Lion King cause I have it and that's all." In looking at the previous quotation, it is obvious that this little boy has an idea of what reading level his group is. Michels' study (1988) revealed that children who had been placed in the lower reading groups felt quite confident at the beginning of the year but by the end of first grade felt very differently.

How they feel about reading

How positive the children feel about reading is interconnected with how they are doing in reading. Michels' states "Emotions run the full gamut from the negative, 'There's a lot I can't read', 'I'm not a good reader', to the positive, 'I feel good when I'm reading', 'I'm a good reader cause my teacher tells me how to sound letters out' (p. 38) In this study, although there was one child who expressed negative feelings about not being able to read a lot of books there was not a "full gamut" of emotions evident in the data. The children were not asked directly how they felt about reading. Feeling emerged naturally in the context of conversations with the children. The following transcription is typical and illustrates how the children provided information on their feelings of reading. Statements were not necessarily negative or positive but more informative. This kindergarten boy reveals how

the length of the book affects his feelings about reading.

R: What do you think reading is?

C: It's a ...a long story. You can (pause) it's a long story. Some are long stories and short.

R: There are long and some are short?

C: Yeah.

R: Do you want to learn how to read?

C: Yeah.

R: Why do you want to learn how to read?

C: Because I like reading.

R: You like reading. What do you do when you read?

C: Um...I have to read all the kinds of books.

R: You have to read all kinds of different books?

C: Yeah.

R: What do you do when you read?

C: Ah...My Nanny does things for me. And sometimes it's called a funny. There's one really funny finish your mashed potatoes, no dessert until you finish your mashed potatoes. That's the funny one.

R: Oh, I see okay. What do you like to read? What sort of books do you like to read?

C: ah..Like to read ah...Sam I am.

R: Why do you like to read Sam I Am?

C: Because it's funny.

R: It's funny. So you like to read funny books?

C: Yeah.

R: Are there any books you don't like to read?

C: I don't like to read long books.

R: Why don't you like to read long books?

C: Because my head it just goes crazy.

R: It goes crazy?

C: Yeah.

R: Why does it go crazy?

C: Because when I read, on the fourteenth page it goes like wild.

R: Oh, I see. What do you see when it goes wild?

C: I see my eyes go like they're moving around and I can't hold the picture.

R: Oh, I see that's what you don't like about reading then?

Michels' (1988) states, "Children's feelings about how they are doing in reading significantly influence how they feel about reading and themselves as readers" (p. 41). Kindergarten teachers were asked to explain how they can tell how children feel about reading. One teacher answered, "If they hear they can't read they get very frustrated, and then they are afraid to try. But if people are encouraging them, telling them they're doing a good job, then they are more excited about doing it and more likely to take chances." Another kindergarten teacher answered, "They're glowing, I mean you see them click. There's confidence, there's self confidence." A third kindergarten teacher

discussed what she looks for in the classroom; "When we talk about books or that we're going to be reading a story, just their level of excitement or involvement, some will be really eager to, well let's say, if they're reading that they want to read. 'Oh, I want to read!' Then there's others that just kinda sink back and you can tell"... After about a three minute pause the researcher added "Their body language?" Long pauses were noted as part of the transcript. The researcher waited silently until a subject continued. The respondent continued: "Body language and just what they say. Some of them will tell you verbally that they want to read today and they're excited to read today. Others will kind of shy away usually those are the ones that are struggling a little more so they're a little fearful and it's just not enjoyable for them at that point because their level of anxiety I guess is higher. So, I guess their verbal cues they'll tell you and also their body language."

Reading at Home and School

Michels' (1988) study revealed that most children typically distinguished between reading in school and at home. Children imposed a dichotomy between the two and, more often than not, the discussion generally centred around the differences between the two (p. 42). Findings from this study revealed that ninety-five per cent of the children found the books they read at home to be different from those at school. They were not often able to articulate exactly why. The researcher asked a kindergarten girl how the books at home are different than the books at school. She replied, "They're created different." When the researcher questioned her as to how they're

created different she answered, "People made them different." Another child stated, "they're different kinds of stories." He was asked how they are different and he replied, "I don't know." A third boy answered "the illustrator made them different." Another kindergarten child observed, "They have different names." One girl described a book at her home, "One book that I have at my house is about like a girl who wishes for a lot of stuff but she shouldn't cause then and then she doesn't like who she is and then another book is about where this boy he doesn't want his mom so he lives in a place without his mom and then he doesn't like it."

The above quotes illustrate, when talking about books, kindergarten children see a dichotomy between the books they read at home and the books they read at school. Children were not able to articulate or elaborate on any differences.

Purpose for Reading

The kindergarten children were asked "What do you think reading is?" Of the children interviewed the majority of children described their purposes for learning to read. As one boy remarked, "It means you can learn." Another child remarked: "reading is fun". She added that it was also hard work. According to another little boy reading is "Something that you can learn about and when you grow up your little brother wants to read and he doesn't know how you can just read it for him." Nearly all of the children made a connection between reading and learning. "Reading is you have to learn."

Twenty per cent of the children had a phonetic based response to "What do you think reading is?" One little girl answered "It's when you sound out words and tell people stories."

This is somewhat different than Michels' as the children in Michels' study generally included some sort of task description of what they do when they read. For example, "as Jeff remarked, 'Reading is when the teacher says circle the word or you have to put a check on it'" (p. 29). As well as having definite responses on what they thought reading is, kindergarten children were also able to articulate reasons for wanting to learn how to read. The children were asked: "Do you want to learn how to read?". All of the children in the study wanted to learn to read with the exception of one who stated, "I already know how." The researcher asked him when he learned to read and he responded, "one year ago."

After questioning the children as to whether or not they wanted to learn to read, the children were asked why? Only ten percent of the children had no reason. One boy answered, "So when I get bigger I can probably know lots of words so I can start reading the big book my dad got me a long time ago when I was only three." When further questioned about the book he added, "It's something like ninth grade I think. I can't read it yet. It's like something it has a lot of maps to teach you like something, it's like a hundred.... I'm trying to think of the name because it has a lot of things, maps, teaching things."

In Michels' study many of the first grade children gave purposes for

reading that were school driven (p. 71). In this study only the boy quoted above mentioned a school related reason, with his reference to reading a ninth grade book.

Ten percent of the children interviewed wanted to learn how to read because reading is fun. One girl stated, "Because I think it's fun". Another girl mentioned " Because I like reading." Other children's reasons for learning to read were more specific as to their personal goals for reading. One boy answered, "Because you learn new things." Another male student mentioned, "So when I grow up I can read science and important papers." Ten percent of the children answered that they wanted to learn how to read in order to be smart. Another ten percent saw the value in learning to read as important in their family; "Because my sister knows how to read and she reads to me a lot" and "Because my mom wants me to."

Together with the home environment, surroundings, and teaching strategies play an important role in how children perceive reading. The Kindergarten teachers were asked what steps or strategies they employ to promote enthusiasm for reading. One teacher responded, "I act excited, and I tell them what a new adventure, and how wonderful it is. I think my enthusiasm rubs off on the children." Another teacher responded,

> I think [by] making the stories come alive to them and what I mean by that is how they can relate to the stories, how they can relate to the characters that are in the stories, or the situations. Talking about them oh 'has this happened to you?' 'Do you know people like this?' 'Have

you ever felt like this?' 'Why?' 'How do you think these characters are feeling?'. Just really getting them literally like they're stepping into the story and what it would be like for them. To get them really involved and talking about it and how they feel about how the characters feel. Also, just doing little projects afterwards that deal with the story, having fun, you know ways to express you know their thoughts about the book with art work, or in discussions about it, or role playing, or finishing the story a different way, different activities.

As the above quotes illustrate, kindergarten children in this study seem to have developed purposes for reading. The purposes generated included reading to learn information, reading for recreation, and reading with family. The teachers' quotations offer insights into the importance of teaching strategies and how they impact on perceptions.

Reading and writing

Kindergarten participants were asked to respond to: "Do you think that good readers are also good writers"? The following is a typical response:

C: Yeah.

R: Why?

C: because they illustrate and write books. They read them and see if they did a good job.

Ninety percent of the children appeared to notice a connection betwen reading and writing although not all of the participants were able to articulate

why. Teachers felt there was a strong relationship. In response to whether or not kindergarten children who are good readers are good writers one teacher commented:

> I think when they're exposed to um well when they're good readers and they read a lot, they understand I think the way a story works, probably more advanced writing beginning, middle, and end of stories but it also for the younger writer exposes them to vocabulary that they might not know you know on there own, um I think it just opens up there imagination to a lot more ideas, more a variety of things to write about and that they understand how ah I think they can see how they work together. Maybe not at first but as they read and they do there own writing you can compare to the story that we read and this is the story that you wrote, or a sentence and the word in the order that they go. So I think a strong reader not all of the time but most of the time can be a strong writer also.

In addition to information about good readers and good writers some of the kindergarten children offered valuable insight into books and computers.

Computers

The researcher asked the lindergarten participants to respond to the following question: "Have you ever used the computer to read a book"?

C: (Child nods)

R: You have. What kind of book did you read on the computer?

C: Reader Rabbit.

R: Peter Rabbit?

C: No, not Peter Rabbit. Reader Rabbit.

R: Oh Reader Rabbit. Can you tell me a little bit about Reader Rabbit?

C: Well you can ah it tells you how to read and um there's four different ones; there's a trash can, a train, and pictures that you see and some wood things wood squares that they make and they crack up into little pieces and when you chew both words you get to make it out of the box.

R: Oh I see there's boxes on the screen and you have to choose the right word for the story? What do you do with the trash can?

C: The trash can you have to find the ones that are right and you put them on this thing the shelf full of boxes the things and if you find the other ones you put them in the trash can because they don't start with the first word.

There did not appear to be any consistency in children's responses to the question regarding computers. About fifty percent of the participants had read a book on the computer and about fifty percent had not.

As stated by Michels' (1988) "Childrens' perceptions may often be inconsistent with the goals stated by adults or the objectives of reading programs. They are, however, real, valid, and rich perceptions and should not be dismissed as being confused, immature, or inferior (p.28)." The results of this kindergarten study support Michels' findings. Kindergarten children also have rich, valid perceptions of reading.

Chapter Five

Discussion/Implications

The purpose

The purpose of the study was to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of kindergarten children and their teachers about reading. This study endeavoured to explore emergent readers' perceptions of reading using the premise that children exhibit a wealth of knowledge and experience about reading prior to formal instruction. It was a partial replication of a study of grade one children by Michels (1988, 1994). As Michels' (1988) stated,

> For the past several years professionals in the field of reading have been advancing a variety of theories and personal definitions of what reading is and what it should become, however; few of the definitions advanced have been child-driven. (1988, p. 4)

As a result, there is a gap in the literature about children's perceptions of beginning to read. Researchers and educators have much to learn about beginning readers and their perceptions of reading. This study offers insight from kindergarten children on reading. Moreover, very few studies have attempted to examine children's attitudes and perspectives of reading together with teachers' attitudes and perceptions. Although this study design does not permit an analysis of a relationship between the kindergarten children and kindergarten teachers, it does allude to the possibility of future research in this area.

Children's responses to the purpose and nature of reading have been pursued in the past primarily in quantitative research (Denny & Weintraub, 1966; Downing, 1969; Mayfield, 1983). Few qualitative studies have been focussed on children and their perspectives on learning to read. Michels' study examined reading from the perspective of a first grader and was invaluable in providing a framework for the analysis of this study.

In this study, children clearly understood the process of learning to read. When asked how they would define reading, they referred to the process by making a direct reference to learning phonics and sounding out words. One kindergarten boy stated, "Well, like for example, bus, um, you have like bbbb uuuus and then you say 'BUS.'

These insights into reading clearly parallel the teachers' instructional practices. The teachers interviewed defined reading primarily as a decoding process. One teacher replied, "Reading is the blending together of sounds and letters to create words." A second teacher added, "comprehension can come at a later time."

In addition to understanding the process of learning to read the study provided evidence that kindergarten children did indeed understand the status of membership in various reading groups. They were in the group which read out loud, read a lot of books or they did not know how to read. One teacher commented, "If they hear they can't read they get very frustrated, and then they are afraid to try. But if people are encouraging them, telling them they're doing a good job then they are more excited about

doing it and more likely to take chances." The teachers interviewed had many strategies in which to teach children to help children to take chances.

The importance of parental and family involvement in the process of early literacy development surfaced throughout the study. One child explained that the reason for learning to read was "So when I get bigger I can probably know lots of words so I can start reading the big book my dad got me a long time ago when I was only three." Over half of the kindergarten participants linked reading with the pursuit of knowledge. Reading is learning. It was evident from the research that kindergarten children also offered information on the relationship between good readers and good writers.

The information obtained from this study indicates that children know a lot about emergent literacy and what they do when they are learning to read. If we as educators would like children to embrace literature we must listen to them when they offer insight into what reading is. Each child comes to kindergarten with knowledge of what learning to read is. If we listen to what the child knows about reading we may begin as educators to invite them into the world of literature allowing them to infer how a character feels or picture a story setting. Misconceptions still exist today that there is a specific way in which all children learn to read. In fact some school districts prescribe the method for teaching reading. We must begin with an individual reading profile with all students in order to assess what they know and build upon it.

Implications of the study

This study could have implications for educators regarding instructional strategies for beginning to read. Johns (1986) states that research into the purpose and nature of reading may have implications for students with reading difficulty. The findings of this study may prompt additional questions into children's and teachers' perceptions of beginning to read. Are teachers able to recognize reading difficulties based upon childrens' attitudes about reading? What can educators do to ensure reading success? Michels (1994) states,

> By better understanding how children perceive reading and themselves as readers, teachers can better facilitate continuing growth and build upon what children already know. Such information can also help teachers understand if the child's perception of reading is consistent with the teacher's and can provide a sound base for theoretical practice. (p. 143)

In addition, this study may further develop our appreciation of the "powerful articulations of the children's awareness "regarding reading (Michels, 1988, p.21).

It is the researcher's aim that this study will prompt additional questions into children's and teachers' perceptions of beginning to read. What is a child thinking when s/he is beginning to read? Are these children's perceptions similar to the perceptions of their teachers? How can we as educators best foster literacy acquisition? The questions are endless. With

these questions in mind one must also examine the limitations of the study as noted in chapter one.

The limitations of the study include the following:

1. This study represents one period in time with one specific group of children and is therefore not generalizable beyond this group
2. The researcher acted as both a participant and teacher.
3. It is not possible to account for differences in home environments or children's previous interactions with literature.
4. Interviews were semi-structured due to time constraints of the elementary school and researcher.
5. Often, concerned parents were present and participated, and this may or may not have affected student response.
6. Wording of the interview questions may affect student response.

It is difficult to state whether or not a parent's presence influenced children's response in these interview situations. It was clear however at the time of the interviews that parents had their own value system regarding reading. It was obvious that parents felt that there were right or wrong answers to the questions although informed to the contrary. The parents were very involved at the school and concerned for their children's education. The researcher decided to eliminate these data from the study analysis because they could have possibly interferred with the researcher's results. If replicating this study in the future the researcher would include parental views in the analysis in order to better understand the culture and

phenomena being studied.

This study offered valuable insight into ethnographic research. With the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection, decisions were frequently made as to what to record, include, how and when. If replicating the study the researcher would include all of the interviews allowing a greater understanding of the culture and site at which the study was conducted. The partial replication of Michel's study enabled the researcher to provide a more reliability and validity to the research. It was extremely helpful for a beginner researcher. It is possible that replications of this nature may lead to bias information.

The study provided valuable insight as to the reason why there is limited literature research in this area of study. It is difficult to obtain information from young children about their perspectives (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996). Children may be easily distracted or have a completely different interpretation of what the question appears to be asking. In response to 'what do you do when you read?' several of the participants made reference to a family member who sits with them. It is difficult to account for the social aspect in emergent literacy. It is also possible that children of this age may not be able to fully articulate everything they know. In future the researcher would attempt to have less structure imposed in the questions used for interview purposes and make the questions more of a free flowing format using only an outline of points. If completing a study of this nature in the future I would not wait silently for the participant to

respond instead try to explain the question in a different manner. I would also not repeat children's language in order to clarify what has been said but use body language in order to let the participants know I understood what they were saying. It might also be insightful to have the children read to the researcher and explain what they are doing as they read. I believe more insight into perspectives on reading would be gained in this manner. The format used for this study impacted negatively on this study due to the time constraints imposed. As the children were all kindergarten children there was only a short window in which to interview the children. The kindergarten program was a half day program with a recess break, daily calender, and phonics lesson which left a window of 90 minutes in which children were interviewed.

When triangulating the data the researcher handed each one of the teachers a copy of their transcript made from the interview process. The response was somewhat disappointing. Only one of the teachers felt she had additional information to add and requested time to reflect on what she had said. After considering this for several weeks it became clear to the researcher where one of the pitfalls in educational research lies. The teachers in this study were simply in survival mode. They had little time outside of their life at the school to dedicate to family and friends let alone consider the implications of this study. Kindergarten teachers spent frequent evenings working at the school and often worked through the weekends. These demanding expectations appear throughout the education

profession.

It also became evident that teachers all answered the questions in accordance to district policies regarding the teaching of reading. Was this because they were all in agreement with the current policies or was there a belief that there would be consequences of being in non-compliance? Many questions surfaced for future studies. If replicating this study in the future the researcher would consider the importance of teacher feedback and implement ways of designing the study to be non-threatening, as teacher feedback is essential.

Does the mandated teaching of phonetic decoding leave the door to reading for meaning, closed? If we as educators teach children that reading is only decoding are we limiting their understanding of what reading involves?

There is no question that teaching reading does involve the use of decoding strategies. However, when we teach children to read we must also allow them to see the meaning in reading. Children must learn that phonics and reading for meaning go hand in hand. By understanding what children's thoughts and perceptions of reading are, teachers may begin to teach with the foundation of what children already know. Students' perceptions of reading should be continually assessed. Teachers should also continually reflect on their instructional practices. The message that children receive is not always what teachers believe they are teaching.

Would professional development in this area allow teachers the time to reflect on classroom practices and what is actually happening when the

children in their class are learning to read? Is there a way to provide creative and meaningful professional development in reading without adding to the already heavily burdened work load of the teachers? These are questions that merit future considerations.

In conclusion, the findings of this study reveal that kindergarten children have rich, valid perceptions of reading. These perceptions provide the basis for future researchers to build on. Michels stated, "We must include the child's perspective and acknowledge its power to advance and enrich literacy acquisition research" (1988, p. 107). If we acknowledge this power we become one step closer to solving the mystery of what is happening when a child says s/he is learning to read. It is evident from this study that further research on children's attitudes and perceptions of beginning to read is needed. Such investigation may include an examination of the relationship between teachers' instructional practices and students' perceptions, long term longitudinal studies, and additional exploration of children's perceptions of reading.

It is the hope of the researcher that studies such as this may prompt teachers and educators to stop and reconsider what they are doing when they teach a child to read. Early student reading profiles would allow each child to begin where they are as opposed to what is mandated to teach. A framework such as this would provide teachers with the organizational tools required to assess what children know about reading and build upon it. The

child's perspective on reading is the most powerful tool we have as educators to ensure early literacy growth.

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APPENDIX

Research Questions

Kindergarten children:

What are the attitudes and perceptions of kindergarten children towards reading? More specifically:

1. What do kindergarten children think about reading:

a) What do they think reading is.

b) Do they want to learn how to read? Why?

c) What do they do when they read?

d) What do they like to read? What do they dislike to read? Why? (What do they love about reading? What do they think is the worst part of reading?)

e) How do they describe differences and similarities between reading at home and at school?

f) Do they think that 'good readers' are also 'good writers?'

2. Are the kindergarten children's attitudes and perceptions about reading similar to those of the first grade children in Michel's study?

3. Do the kindergarten children discuss feelings about reading in relation to how well they feel they are doing in reading?

4. Are there differences between the girls and boys regarding their perceptions of reading?

Kindergarten teachers:

1. What are the attitudes and perceptions of kindergarten teachers towards reading? Specifically, how do kindergarten teachers think about reading?

a) How do they define reading?

b) What do they feel is the hardest part of teaching reading?

2. How do they assess their students attitudes towards reading?

a) Is it an informal or formal process?

b) To what degree does this information about student attitude influence their reading instruction?

3. Have their perceptions and attitudes regarding the teaching of reading changed/evolved over time? If so, how? why? [How do they explain theses changes?]

4. How do they explain the relationship between reading and writing? Do they find good readers in their classes to also be good writers?

5. What specific steps or strategies do the teachers employ to promote enthusiasm and excitement for reading in their young students?

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Title of Thesis:

Perceptions of Reading: Kindergarten Children and Their Teachers

[redacted]

Sandra J. Swan

August 30, 1999.

University of Victoria
Human Research Ethics Committee

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

Principal Investigators	Department/School	Supervisor
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Title: ***Perceptions of Reading: Kindergarten Children and Their Teachers***

Project No.	Start Date	End Date	Approval Date
98064	**16 February 1998**	**30 June 1998**	**16 February 1998**

Certification

This is to certify that the University of Victoria Ethics Review Committee on Research and Other Activities Involving Human Subjects has examined the research proposal and concludes that, in all respects, the proposed research meets appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the University of Victoria Research Regulations Involving Human Subjects.

[redacted]

J. Howard Brunt,
Acting Associate Vice-President, Research

This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the procedures. Extensions/minor amendments may be granted upon receipt of "Request for Continuing Review or Amendment of an Approved Project" form.

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