Great Expectations: Stepping into the Shoes of a Group of 4-year-old Readers, Their Parents, Teachers and Peers

— Dr Valerie G. Margrain
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Abstract

Case studies of 11 4-year-old precocious readers highlighted that parents, teachers, the children’s peers, and the children themselves have differing expectations of children, and of education in the early years. In this doctoral study, parents tried to balance children’s social and emotional well-being with the need for their children to be challenged. Although the parents did not focus on academic factors exclusively, they were the key advocates for academic challenge and extension. The children themselves had a yearning to learn, were self-reflective and also enjoyed competition. They demonstrated literacy abilities many years in advance of their chronological age that had been acquired without having been formally taught. The children’s teachers and peers, however, dissuaded competition and instead strongly encouraged the children to conform to expectations association with being ‘normal’, and ‘acting like 4-year-olds’. The findings of this study show the impact of diverse perspectives, values and expectations on children, and how the children mediate expectations of them.

Theoretical perspectives for this study include social constructivism, cognitive constructivism and the bioecological perspective. For precocious readers, no single theoretical perspective explained the children’s learning. Expectations of young children in schools and early childhood settings reflect social constructivist beliefs of their teachers and peers. However, the abilities of precocious readers clearly demonstrated individual cognitive construction. In supporting their children, the parents modelled flexible approaches that could be linked to multiple perspectives. Approaches that were the most supportive for the children were those that recognised multiple influences and responded to the children’s individuality.
Acknowledgement

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Introduction

Precocious readers have been referred to as *young fluent readers* (Clark, 1982), *young early readers* (Staintorp & Hughes, 1998, 1999), *young able readers* (Margrain 1998) and *precocious readers* (Jackson, 1988, 1992; Jackson & Biemiller, 1985; Jackson, Donaldson & Cleland, 1988; Jackson, Donaldson & Mills, 1993; Jackson & Kearney, 2005; Jackson & Lu, 1992; Jackson & Myers, 1982; Fletcher-Flinn & Thompson, 2000; Staintorp & Hughes, 2004). Precocious readers can be identified because they ‘have made substantial progress in reading comprehension before entering first grade’, and their achievement is important because ‘these children have had little or no exposure to standard reading instruction’ (Jackson, Donaldson & Cleland, 1988, p. 234). Stainthorp and Hughes (2004) define precocious readers as ‘children who are able to read fluently and with understanding at an unusually young age before attending school and without having received any direct instruction in reading. Precocious readers appear to have taught themselves to read’ (p. 107). This means that precocious readers differ from early readers who have been formally taught by such methods as Doman word flashcards or reading kits. Parents and early childhood teachers of precocious readers may have used *informal* teaching support, for example reading to children, but without the express intention of teaching early reading.

Parents of precocious readers assert that precocious reading appears ‘spontaneously’ and is led by the child. Research by Thompson and Fletcher-Flinn (1993; Fletcher–Flinn & Thompson, 2000) points to induced or implicit understandings gained as a result of earlier book experiences. Jackson and Roller (1993) note: ‘No formula for creating a precocious reader has been identified by researchers’ (p. xviii). What has been consistently noted in the literature is that precocious readers play an active role in initiating and extending their literacy learning (Teale & Jeffries, 1982). According to Jackson and Roller (1993), ‘the most sophisticated precocious readers are children who have driven their parents and teachers to keep up with them’ (p. 32). Anbar (1986) affirms that children are the critical ‘success factors’, with parents responding to their children’s interest in reading rather than deliberately
teaching. In Clark’s (1982) study, parents repeatedly asserted that the children created the conditions for their own success — the children were insistent on reading activities, not the parents. Although formally ‘taught’ early readers tend to even out by the age of 8 years (Hendy-Harris, 1990; Jackson & Klein, 1997), ‘naturally occurring’ precocious readers appear to maintain their advantage (Durkin, 1966, 1976; Jackson, 1988; Jackson & Klein, 1997; Juel, 1991).

A striking feature of precocious readers is their ability to read very rapidly (Jackson & Klein, 1997; Jackson & Roller, 1993) and a voracious appetite for reading (Anderson, Tollefson & Gilbert, 1985). Precocious reading is a gifted behaviour and the child demonstrates gifted performance. However, the performance perspective can mean that children who have potential or ability, but who choose not to ‘perform’, are not identified.

The main research question for the study reported in this paper was: How are social scaffolding and self-scaffolding demonstrated within the learning of precocious readers? This question considered sociocultural influences on learning to read. Beliefs and practices of parents and teachers, and how they impacted on the children, were critical aspects of the study. In addition, the study explored learning that could not be attributed to scaffolding or self-scaffolding. Parents described this as ‘spontaneous learning’. Understanding the experience of being a precocious reader was as important to the study as data that identified reading performance level and strategies.

This paper focuses on the connection between the theoretical perspectives and findings of the study relating to expectations. Other papers have discussed different aspects of the study, including: learning (Margrain, 2006a); the role of adults (Margrain, 2006b); assessment (Margrain, 2006c); children’s voices (Margrain, 2006d), hothousing (Margrain, 2007), and parenting (Murphy & Margrain, 2007).
Theoretical perspectives

In this section three theoretical perspectives are presented: social constructivist, cognitive constructivist and bioecological. The first two of these may be familiar to many educationalists. In this paper it is argued that Vygotsky’s social constructivist and Piaget’s cognitive constructivist theories have more in common than is widely recognised. The bioecological perspective draws from both social and individual perspectives. The findings of the study reported in this paper suggest that both of these elements are important for understanding the development of precocious readers.

Social constructivism

Vygotskian theories and perspectives have been referred to as social constructionism (Duran & Syzmanski, 1995), social constructivism, sociocultural (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2004), dialectical constructivism and situated learning (Woolfolk, 1998). Regardless of the label, these perspectives maintain Vygotsky’s (1978) focus on learning as a social process of making meaning from the world that is influenced by social and cultural contexts. Vygotsky’s theories of human development and learning have been interpreted as children actively constructing their view of the world by interacting with others exploring their own environment (Bodrova & Leong, 1996; Edwards, 2003; Fleer, Anning & Cullen, 2004; McNaughton, 1995; Rogoff, 1990; Smith & Elley, 1994, 1997).

Vygotskian theory asserts that adaptive learning begins through social experience. Interpretations that suggest that learning occurs only as a result of external influence upon children may be challenged. Vygotsky himself (1962) stated:

Verbal thought appeared as a complex, dynamic entity, and the relation of thought within it as a movement through a series of planes. Our analysis followed the process from the outermost to the innermost plane. In reality, the development of verbal thought takes the opposite course: from the motive which engenders a thought to the shaping of the thought, first in inner speech, then in meanings of words, and finally in words. It would be a mistake, however, to imagine that this is the only road from thought to word. The development may stop at any point in its complicated course; an infinite variety of movements to and fro, of ways still unknown to us, is possible. A study of these manifold variations lies beyond the scope of our present task. (p. 152)
The psychology of the individual is, according to Rohrkemper (1989), ‘a multiplicative product’ of social encounters (p. 147). Differences in social and instructional environments, as experienced by students, are important to consider ‘because they not only make demands on students, but they are also simultaneously sources of empowerment as students internalise and mediate their experiences’ (p. 154).

Contemporary interpretations of Vygotsky’s work have tended to focus on the critical influences of social interaction and environment (Rogoff, 1990, 1998, 2003). Despite subsequent interpretation of his work, Vygotsky never discounted the individual abilities of learners. He recognised that both ecological and biological aspects are fundamental to learning (Vygotsky, 1993; Wenger, 1985):

> Within a general process of development, two qualitatively different lines of development, differing in origin, can be distinguished: the elementary processes, which are of biological origin, on the one hand, and the higher psychological functions, of sociocultural origin, on the other. The history of child behaviour is born from the interweaving of these two lines. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 46)

Although learning is directly related to the course of child development, the two are never accomplished in equal measure or in parallel. Development in children never follows school learning the way a shadow follows the object that casts it. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 91)

New Zealander Stuart McNaughton (1995) applies Vygotsky’s concepts to a theory of co-construction, stressing that children’s own mental constructions constantly interact with those of their family and cultural group. New Zealanders Smith and Elley also highlight the joint construction role of personal and social activity (1994, 1997). In this study, the term social constructivism acknowledges the active construction of children’s learning within social settings and the connections between Vygotskian and Piagetian perspectives.
Cognitive constructivism

The case study approach of this study acknowledges the importance of individual children’s thinking, and is influenced by a post-Piagetian perspective. Construction of knowledge ‘in an individual’s mind’ (Marshall, 1996, p. 30) is relevant to this study of precocious readers because of their independent thinking and learning.

One of the common critiques of Piaget is that he overly focused on the individual and gave insufficient credence to context. Yet Piaget’s original work, while interested in the individual, does acknowledge that individuals exist within a social context. Piaget’s earlier work also acknowledged interdependence:

That is, that adaptation — intellectual and biological, hence adaptation of intelligence to ‘things’ as well as of the organism to its ‘environment’ — always consists in a balance between accommodation and assimilation . . . To put it still differently, the object only exists, with regard to knowledge, in its relations with the subject . . . The object is not a ‘known quantity’ but the result of a construction. Now this interaction of intelligent activity and experience finds its counterpart, on the biological plane, in a necessary interaction between the organism and the environment . . . Consequently there is interdependence between the organism and the entire universe, on the one hand, objectively, because the former results from the latter while completing and transforming it, on the other hand subjectively, because the adaptation of the mind to experience presupposes an activity which enters as a component into the play of objective relationships. (Piaget, 1953, p. 375)

Piaget remains known as one of the key theorists in educational psychology, despite criticism of a rigid stage model, underestimation of children’s abilities, and some methodological approaches. Even texts that focus on Vygotskian perspectives tend to spend considerable time discussing the contribution of Piaget. Post-Piagetians accept criticism of the structural aspect of stage theory, but instead focus on the constructivist elements of Piaget’s work: generation, elaboration, and revision (Inagaki, 2002). McNaughton (1995) summarises part of Piaget’s contribution to education as follows:

Another legacy of Piaget’s work is the idea that learning takes place as children confront and solve problems. They act on problems in that they are motivated to make sense of their worlds, to reduce ambiguity and uncertainty, and to become more expert in their immediate environments. (p. 13)
Bioecological perspective

Bronfenbrenner is best known for his model of the ecological environment as ‘a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls’ (1979, p. 3). Bronfenbrenner’s theory proposes that development occurs through interaction between a developing person and the surrounding, interconnecting systems of influence (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem). The theory has a strong influence on current education practice owing to acknowledgement of critical contexts of influence for children and communities. The hub of Bronfenbrenner’s model deserves equal attention: the individual, and ‘the child’s evolving construction of reality’ (1979, p. 11). Not only do systems influence individuals — individuals also influence systems.

Neither a psychological nor an ecological model fully illuminates interaction between children’s minds and play. Roskos (2000) comments that ‘the preoccupation with what children were doing — their behaviours — overlooked their mind, that is, what they were thinking and learning. We obtained description after description . . . but lost sight of the developing child’ (p. 133). The bioecological approach provides a lens through which to examine cognitive and contextual influences on learning, both of which are important.

The bioecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994), as opposed to the earlier contextual ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), seeks to ensure that both person characteristics and social context are considered. For example, Roskos (2000) states, ‘genetic beginnings do not determine developmental ends. This is not to underestimate the power of innate knowledge structures. Nature certainly provides humans a ‘leg up’ in cognition; supplying biological assists that guide attention to relevant environmental inputs’ (p. 128).

Roskos, who seeks to connect biological and social aspects of literacy learning, notes that, although unintended, the ecological lens may result in ‘losing sight of the individual as a contributor to context creation’ (Roskos, 2000, pp. 128–129):

Traditionally, interaction has been treated under the more inclusive category of environment in developmental research with two less than fortunate consequences. It has tended to cut the individual’s contribution out of considerations of context, emphasizing more so what is done to the individual in terms of environmental ‘press’ (Serpell, 1993). It has also underestimated the profound ways processes are affected by the biopsychological characteristics of the developing person as well as changes in human activity over time. (Roskos, 2000, pp. 128–129)
Summary of theoretical perspectives

The three theoretical perspectives that underpin this study are social constructivism, cognitive constructivism and the bioecological perspective. The combination of these perspectives connects aspects of learning of precocious readers in this study, including children’s cognitive learning and achievement with social settings and contexts.
Methodology

Research paradigm and design

Constructivism is a relevant paradigm for this study because ‘we are all constructivists if we believe that the mind is active in the construction of knowledge’ (Schwandt, 1994, p. 125). Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p. 13) cite constructivism as being an interpretive paradigm evident in interpretive case studies and ethnographic fiction. The constructivist paradigm is variously referred to as interpretive/constructivist, naturalistic, phenomenological, hermeneutic, symbolic interactionist, ethnographic, and qualitative (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The key factor that distinguishes constructivism (or interpretivism) is the process of making meaning within social contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Magoon, 1977).

The research approach of the study reported in this paper was case study design (Harker, 1997; Kemmis, 1980; Stake, 1980). Multiple-case design was utilised (Stake, 1994, 1995; Yin, 2003), with 11 concurrent case studies of 4-year-old children, their families, early childhood centres and some schools. The purpose of case study research, according to Harker (1997), is to:

- observe, probe and understand an individual unit (whether a child, a group, a class, a school or a community) as a whole — what goes on within the unit, and the unit’s relationships horizontally with other units, and vertically with other orders of units. It is the attempt to understand meaning within units and to understand the individual, unique construction of reality. (p. 3)

Thus, case studies provided a relevant methodology for a study aiming to probe and understand the meaning and experience of being a precocious reader.

Because multiple case studies provide an opportunity for replication, multiple-case design evidence can be considered more compelling and studies more robust than single-case studies (Herriott & Firestone, 1983). Although Yin (2003) uses the term ‘multiple-case study’, Stake refers to the ‘collective case study’ approach (1994, 1995). In this paper, the term ‘multiple-case study’ is used in order to acknowledge the importance of each individual participant. Stake’s (1994) definition of collective case study is nevertheless useful, stating that it is:

- not the study of a collective but instrumental when extended to several cases . . . They may be similar or dissimilar, redundancy and variety each having voice. They are chosen because it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding, perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases. (p. 237)
Participants and recruitment

The study reported in this paper was conducted between 2000 and 2005, in children’s homes, early childhood centres and new entrant classrooms. The 11 children attended 10 different early childhood centres, including two Montessori centres, six kindergartens and two centres that describe themselves as ‘private pre-schools’. Four of the children continued within the study for several months after beginning school, each child attending a different school. Because of the small number of participants in the study, pseudonyms have been removed from any quotes that could compromise anonymity. School names have also been changed.

Children were recruited as a result of personal contacts within the early childhood education sector. Flyers, inviting contact from people who ‘know of a pre-schooler who is able to read’, were also sent to local early childhood centres, kindergartens and playcentre associations, and home-based early childhood education networks (Margrain, 2005, Appendix A). It was estimated that the services approached had 3500 three to four-year-old children on their combined rolls. Flyers were also left at public libraries inviting contact. From the recruitment processes, 15 children were nominated and all assessed by the researcher as having reading accuracy levels beyond 6 years using the Neale Analysis of Reading (Neale, 1999). Eleven children with reading accuracy levels close to or beyond the age of 7 years were invited to participate in the full study, and these 11 children, their parents and teachers all agreed to participate.

Children’s ages at initial assessment ranged from 4:01 to 4:10. Four of the children were girls, and seven were boys. All families included both father and mother. Four of the families identified as Asian, and seven families identified as European New Zealanders. Parent occupations, sibling order and the involvement of other significant adults in children’s lives are reported in the study (Margrain, 2005).

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1 Four years, one month to four years, ten months of age.
Instruments and materials

The study had ethics approval from Victoria University of Wellington, with fieldwork conducted during 2001 and 2002. To be able to address the research question How are social scaffolding and self-scaffolding demonstrated within the learning of precocious readers? a range of formal and informal methods were used within the case study approach. Methods included:

- standardised tests of reading such as the Burt Word Reading Test (Gilmore, Croft & Reid, 1981) and the Neale Analysis of Reading (Neale, 1999)
- The British Picture Vocabulary Scale (Dunn, Dunn, Whetton & Burley, 1997), a test of receptive language
- Coloured Progressive Matrices (Raven, Raven & Court, 1998), a test of visual problem solving
- special ability rating scales (Jones, 1988; McAlpine & Reid, 1996)
- semi-structured interviews with parents
- informal interviews with teachers and parents
- observations of children in early childhood and school settings (two per child, per setting, of approximately 1 hour each observation).

Of these methods, the data reported in this paper on expectations is primarily drawn from the tests of reading, interviews and observations.

In addition to standardised testing, it was important that other activities occurred as part of the relationship between the children and researcher. This focus on building rapport was especially important given the children’s young age. Some of the ways this occurred was when children showed me their bedrooms, toys, gardens, and photos, or drew me pictures and maps. Flexibility regarding test conditions was also important for this age group. For example, one child read to me while sitting inside a packing box. In most cases, I sat with the children on the floors of their homes while they read. Testing was generally conducted in the children’s own homes, at times to suit the families.
Precocious reading abilities

Accuracy level

The children participating in the study all had reading ability levels well in advance of their chronological age. Accuracy rates on the Neale Analysis of Reading (Neale, 1999) varied from 6:08 age equivalency for a child aged 4:07, to 10:08 for a child aged 4:09 (see the appendix to this paper). Henry read the following passage from the Neale in 89 seconds, with 110 words read correctly out of the 117 total words. The seven errors are shown in bold, with the correct word in brackets afterwards.

Among animals the fox has no rivval (rival) for cunning. Aspychus (suspicious) of man, who is its only natural enemy, it will, when purshowed (pursued), perform extraordinary feats, even alighting on the backs of sheep to divert its scent. Parent foxes share the responsibilities of cub-rearing. Through their hunting expeditions they acquire an uncanny knowledge of their surroundings which they use (repeated: ‘which they use’) in an emergency. This is well illustrated by the story of a hunted fox which led its pusers (pursuers) to a negited (neglected) mine-shaft enclosed by a circular hedge. It appeared to surmount the barrier. The hounds followed headlong, only to fall into the indirectly (accumulated) water below. The fox, however, apparently on familiar (familiar) territory, had skirted the hedge and subsequently escaped.

Henry’s reading of this passage illustrates his competency in reading — although he made seven errors, he had an accuracy rate of 94% on this passage. Many of his errors were mispronunciations. There were many words in the passage that are not usually able to be read competently by a 4-year-old, including: ‘extraordinary’, ‘responsibilities’, ‘expeditions’, ‘knowledge’, ‘surroundings’, ‘illustrated’, ‘circular’, ‘apparently’, ‘territory’ and ‘subsequently’.

Reading ability levels on the Burt Word Reading Test (Gilmore, Croft & Reid, 1981), which involved reading words from a list rather than in a text, were consistent with the ability levels on the Neale Analysis of Reading (Neale, 1999). For example, Gillian, aged 4:03, obtained a reading age of 6:10 on the first form of the Neale, and 6:11 on the parallel form of the Neale two weeks later. She completed the Burt between each form of the Neale, with an equivalent age band of 6:08 to 7:02 years.
Age-equivalent band scores on the *Burt Word Reading Test* (Gilmore, Croft & Reid, 1981) ranged from 6:10 to 10:06 years of age (averaged, see the appendix). Examples of words that children could read from the *Burt* are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**: Burt Word Reading Test results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Final three words read correctly</th>
<th>Examples of errors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A overwhelmed, fringe, trudging</td>
<td>desteeny (destiny), champion (champagne)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D journey, explorer, tongue</td>
<td>bury (beware), twist (twisted)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E encyclopaedia, trudging, urge</td>
<td>pilsopher (philosopher), re-known (renown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G luncheon, shelves, explorer</td>
<td>emergy (emergency), obitin (obtain)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H urge, binocular, economy</td>
<td>termology (terminology), gleyeserine (glycerine)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J shelves, terror, urge</td>
<td>projeking (projecting), underversal (universal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L overwhelmed, universal, destiny</td>
<td>scarsilly (scarcely), thory (theory)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M explorer, events, overwhelmed</td>
<td>norusmat (nourishment), scarecly (scarcely)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N luncheon, events, emergency</td>
<td>shivers (shelves), believe (belief)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O trudging, binocular, destiny</td>
<td>autobiography (autobiography), contemptis (contemptuous)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When Lewis (aged 4:08) was asked if he knew any other words (as the manual directs) he carefully searched then said, ‘Yes, New Zealand’, pointing to the fine print ‘New Zealand Council for Educational Research’ at the foot of the form.

**Comprehension**

Comprehension was assessed in the *Neale Analysis of Reading* (Neale, 1999), with five standardised questions being asked after each passage read with less than 16 errors. The appendix indicates that as a result of the children’s responses to comprehension questions, their reading comprehension age was between 6:03 and 8:03.

Comprehension scores were slightly below the reading ability ages for the children in the research, but still well above their chronological age. For example, Erin, aged 4:07, had a reading ability of 8:01 on the first version of the *Neale Analysis of Reading* (Neale, 1999), and a comprehension level of 7:01. Although her comprehension was a year below her reading ability, it was still 2½ years above her chronological age.
Fluency

A key finding from the Neale Analysis of Reading (Neale, 1999) results was clear confirmation of the children’s reading fluency. Every child who participated in the study had a fluency rate significantly above their chronological age, and most of the children had fluency rates above their reading ability rates. For example, Erin had a chronological age of 4:07, a reading ability level above 8 years on the two forms of the Neale, and a fluency rate above 13 years equivalency. Similarly, Julia had a chronological age of 4:01, reading ability around 7½ years and fluency rates of 9:01 and 12:03 on each form of the Neale.

Children also read words on the Burt Word Reading Test (Gilmore, Croft & Reid, 1981) assessment rapidly, so their reading was fast whether words were in text or in isolation. The children participating in my study did not appear to ‘decode’ in terms of breaking down a word into ‘chunks’. Instead, they simply ‘said’ the word, even when incorrect. An example is the word ‘philosopher’. Many readers would break this word down to fi/lo/so/fer, but the way Oscar read this word was to rapidly say the whole word — he said ‘polsofer’. Although incorrect, it was read smoothly. Erin similarly read ‘fi/osof’r and Henry read ‘feelosofer’ rapidly as single words, without sounding out in chunks.

Reading strategies

Analysis of errors from the Neale Analysis of Reading (Neale, 1999) indicates that almost half of all errors were mispronunciations and a third of errors were substitutions. Few errors were refusals, additions or omissions, and none were reversals. The use of mispronunciations and substitutions fits with the fluency of children’s reading — they rarely faltered.

Children’s reading of passages on the Neale Analysis of Reading (Neale, 1999) was analysed according to meaning, structure and visual cues, using Reading Recovery procedures (Clay, 1993). At ‘easy’ and ‘difficult’ levels, the most frequent cue source used at error and self-correction was visual. Structure was the most frequent cue source at instructional level (90–95% accuracy), and the second most frequent cue source overall at error. Meaning and visual cues were evenly the most frequent cue source at instructional level, and meaning was the second most frequent cue source at self-correction.
Self-corrections were made at all levels, on at least 40% of passages. On average, errors were self-corrected once every 2.8 errors at easy level, once every 3.5 errors at instructional level and once every 7.8 errors at difficult level. This analysis shows that children utilised a broad repertoire of reading strategies, self-monitoring and self-correction, and sustained the use of strategies at all levels of difficulty.

Engagement

Parents affirmed that the children read with fervour, enthusiasm and delight. Many families referred to the children’s ‘love of reading’ and stated that they ‘devoured books’. The following responses are examples of replies to the parent interview question ‘How does [your child] feel about reading?’:

Father: I think he loves it.
Mother: He loves it so much that it comes before socialising.
Father: Or eating.
Mother: He reads first at kindy, then he plays.
Father: He’s obsessed with it — when he’s satisfied, then he plays.

Really interested, feels confident in himself that he’s able to read. Feels capable, really happy he’s able to read — maybe a sense of achievement.
She loves it, really enjoys it. By wanting to read, by doing it. We see her laughing in bed.
She loves reading. She’s continually got her nose in a book.
Father: He loves it
Mother:Yep. He’s seldom seen without a book.

Parents also referred to their children’s engagement with reading at other points throughout the interviews. They linked this to a desire and ‘thirst’ for learning.

Parents wanted me to clearly understand that reading was the children’s interest, and not something that had been imposed by them. They described children ‘demanding’ to be read to from a young age, their ‘spontaneous’ ability to read appearing around the age of 3 years, and their ‘thirst’ for reading and learning.
Matthew’s family, for example, was astonished when the prologue for *Star Wars* rolled onto the screen and he began to read the words aloud (‘In a galaxy far, far away . . .’) — Matthew was aged 3 and had not seen *Star Wars* before. Like the other children in the study, he had not been formally taught. Other parental observations included:

Isla revealed she could read just before 3 years when she took a cereal packet out of the cupboard and began to perfectly read what was written on the side — I couldn’t believe my ears. [The packet text] included the word ‘fantastic’. 

Not my choice — he demanded to be read to. It wasn’t coaching — not ‘What’s that letter?’ — just reading. 

He enjoys it a heck of a lot. There is no way he’d do this much if he didn’t enjoy it. It’s just something he does. 

At the [bookshop], [he would read for] 2½ hours there. 

He devoured books. 

He's seldom seen without a book . . . he's always got a book. 

All of the children had a plentiful supply of books in their home, and books were part of their lives from an early age, yet this is so for many children. Precocious reading ability occurs in only 1–2.5% of the population (Jackson, Donaldson & Cleland, 1988). Although the parents provided ample reading material, and the provision of resources is a social constructivist activity, it was the children who initiated and drove the process of learning to read this material themselves. Because precocious readers were not formally taught, the activity of precocious reading reflects cognitive constructivism and bioecological influences.
Expectations for children: Parent and teacher perspectives

Expectations for the children in the study, held by teachers, parents and the children themselves, are reported in this section. In particular, tensions existed between cognitive constructivist perspectives, such as the need for children to be challenged and extended, and social constructivist perspectives, such as ensuring that children are not overtly ‘pushed’.

‘I don’t want . . . a pushed child’

In this study, parents expressed the wish that their children not have unfair expectations imposed on them. The parents did not want limits imposed on their children’s potential, but also didn’t want the children to feel ‘pushed’, ‘under pressure’, ‘different’ or ‘misunderstood’:

They go, ‘Oh, Wow! He’s very bright — he’s genius material’. It makes one very uncomfortable. Or they say ‘He’s dux material’ — I don’t want expectations put on him of what he’ll be when he’s 17. I don’t want him to be a pushed child.

Parents acknowledged that they didn’t want the ‘academic side’ of their children to be focused on exclusively. They wanted their children to have experiences that would support cognitive, affective, social and physical skills. The experiences were provided as ‘opportunities’, without achievement expectation. The children were involved with a range of activities including music, dance, swimming, playing with friends, visiting the beach, computers, building, drawing, languages, and family walks. Parents did not ‘hothouse’ the children with standards to achieve in each area — they simply wanted their children to have ‘broad’ experience. Alistair’s mother stressed that his reading was just ‘one part’ of him. She provided a list of ‘things that are more important to later life’ than reading:

- to socialise with other children confidently and effectively
- to have an understanding of other people’s feelings
- to use manners and socialise effectively
- to develop the cooperative skills you need as a grown-up.
Parents also wanted to provide experiences so that the children had *opportunity*. The expectations that parents had included that their children be open minded, curious, active and social. With some of the activities, the children were naturally exceptional, with others, they were participants — but in neither case were they ‘pushed’. The parents believed that if ‘pushed’, their children would feel stressed and unhappy. They focused on social constructivist strategies that supported ‘happy and healthy’ children. ‘We encourage them to do whatever they can’

Parents had insisted that they did not want their children to feel pressured by external expectations, yet they also recognised that the children needed cognitive challenge. Parents were aware that general expectations of what a 4-year-old could do were lower than what their children could achieve in specific areas, and this meant that some opportunities were normally not available. For example, a child wanted to attend computer-based maths classes with his older sister, but the organisation offering the classes initially insisted that he would not have the concentration or ability at age 4 to handle them. Parents saw their role as supporting, encouraging, advocating and minimising barriers. One mother pertinently stated, ‘We don’t impose any limits . . . we encourage them to do whatever they can’. She added:

> [We] don’t stop encouraging. We don’t impose any limits on what he wants to do, or read, and [his sister]. We encourage them to do whatever they can . . . I have tried to encourage him, point him in the right direction, open doors . . . If anything, the frustration is to convince the authorities that he’s ready to do these things. They say we don’t do these things before [age] 4 or 5, we need to keep at them to give him a shot.

An interesting finding from the study was the differing, sometimes conflicting, perspectives of teachers and parents. For example, an early childhood teacher had concerns that a parent ‘didn’t allow’ this ‘poor child’ any ‘play’ time, but instead focused on ‘only academics’. The parent perspective was that she was responsive to her child’s passion — he had begged to ‘play schools’ and learn more things, and he found the reading material provided by the teachers to be so simple that he had asked for more challenging material. When judging parents, it must be remembered that as well as representing their own interests, they also act as advocates for their children. The ‘play’ that occurred in this home reportedly included academic elements *because it engaged the child*. Intellectual play is nevertheless still play:

> We do school sessions on a Saturday if time permits. One of us is the teacher or a student. We do spelling, times tables. We line up the chairs, have pretend students — teddy bears. My living room changes around — it’s a painting room, a classroom, a living room.
The early childhood teachers commented that the child of another family got quite a lot of academic ‘stimulation’ and ‘rote learning’ at home. When a comment was made to a teacher that some children ‘taught themselves’, a particular teacher retorted that she wasn’t sure that this was the case for the child at her early childhood centre, as on this occasion ‘they have Reader Rabbit on the computer and so on’. This suggests that the teacher discounted bioecological perspectives, and assumed that the child learned to read as a result of the resource. If this was the case, all children with Reader Rabbit would become precocious readers. Further, the early childhood teachers felt that their early childhood centre had provided the only context in which the child ‘learned to laugh, to play and to be a child’. The quote below illustrates that the parent perspective did link learning and play:

Telling stories . . . every night. We sometimes play with him and read, you know . . . some writing time and reading. He plays by himself. I don’t try to impose on him. He tells me ‘Mummy, I want to write, I want to read’ . . . he wants to be a pilot [so] he knows how to read maps, knows continents . . . It depends on his interest, the more he knows. He likes Bob the Builder, so knows parts of the house.

Teachers at another early childhood centre were concerned that the abilities of the child participating in this study might lead to his thinking he was ‘better’ than others. Parents appeared to mediate this concern by balancing individual challenges with skills for social participation:

He’s slightly confused by why everyone doesn’t (read) — why all his friends don’t. It worries me that he’ll say this to others . . . I don’t want him to have an ego. Recently he said (about another child) ‘How come I know lots of stuff and he doesn’t?’ I said ‘He knows lots about Australia — maybe you should ask him about that’.

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2 Reader Rabbit is a popular series of computer software for early learning, including early literacy skills.
3 Bob the Builder is an animated television and book character who has a building/construction company.
Age-related teacher expectations: ‘Just a little boy’, ‘A little girl’

Perspectives of how a 4-year-old ‘should’ act repeatedly emerged within this study. Parents appeared to base their expectations on their children’s individual cognitive potential, but reported they repeatedly received socially constructed age-related comments from other people. Teachers highlighted the chronological age of the child, with statements such as ‘just a little 4-year-old’:

- David is still a little boy — cries if he doesn’t have a pencil.
- She’s a little girl, matches my group. Things that match her match my group [of children the same age].

Early childhood teachers reinforced age-based social hierarchy with regular comments about the order of birthdays and the order of when children would be going to school. This social hierarchy reinforced that the social ‘order’ is based on age, not height, cognitive ability, leadership skills, socio-economics or length of time at the centre. It may be that New Zealand teachers feel that, if there must be a ‘pecking order’, age is a more comfortable criterion in a supposedly egalitarian education system.

Some teachers focused on children’s difficulties rather than their strengths, perhaps in order for the children to appear ‘age-normal’. A school principal, for example, told one child’s mother that unless a child was outstanding in every curriculum area they could not possibly be gifted. Another teacher minimised a child’s reading ability by noting that the child was ‘still a 5-year-old writer’. In another example, a family member who had been a primary school teacher warned a family in this study that the teachers would see early reading negatively and give them ‘a hard time’. This deficit approach highlights the child’s ‘needs’, and also validates the teacher’s role to ‘help’ the child. This approach may indicate that some teachers wanted to find reasons to justify that the children were not ‘special’. The examples reflect the ‘dumbing down’ of ‘tall poppies’ (Price, 1995).

A former kindergarten teacher of one of the children in this study met the child’s primary school teacher at a professional meeting. The kindergarten teacher said how lucky the school teacher was to have the child in her class, and what a wonderful reader he was. The primary school teacher reportedly snorted and said, ‘Hm, but he can’t tie his shoelaces and he takes forever to eat his lunch’. She also criticised him for sitting and daydreaming alone with his lunch on his lap instead of playing with the other children as soon as possible at break times. The primary school teacher valued independence in her class pupils more than advanced academic skills. The kindergarten teacher reported this anecdote to me because she was sad that the child’s ability and potential was not appreciated once he began school.
The expectations that teachers had of children were not only based on their thoughts of the children’s own well-being. The teachers’ expectations of children also strongly related to their perception of their own role as teachers. In primary school settings in particular, expectations were placed on children regarding how they should ‘fit in’, how they could make life easier for the teachers, and how they could make teachers’ work more satisfying.

**Overview of expectations for children**

Early childhood teachers and new entrant teachers reinforced social hierarchy based on age, with older 4-year-olds having higher status. This social hierarchy reinforced expectations around the milestone of ‘turning 5’.

Expectations for children transitioning between early childhood and school settings are influenced by the perceptions of teaching roles. Some teachers had expectations that children should have self-management skills and be able to ‘fit in’ socially at school. They did not expect children to be academically advanced and did not necessarily appreciate their being so. Teachers’ expectations of children related to their perception of their own roles as ‘teachers’ — they expected to be teaching, reading, and not performing ‘childcare’ duties.

*Te Whāriki*, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996), has a holistic perspective of the child, with the five curriculum strands being ‘belonging’, ‘well-being’, ‘communication’, ‘contribution’ and ‘exploration’. The expectations that parents had for their children supported this broad curriculum focus, balancing affective and cognitive dimensions of the children. It could be argued that because parent perspectives included both cognitive constructivism and social constructivism, parents held a more holistic view of learning than some of the teachers in this study. Parents were aware that for children to be truly happy and healthy they should be appropriately challenged, yet not under stress. Parents also acknowledged that expectations should be pertinent to the individual child — parent expectations differed for Alistair, David, Erin, Henry and each of the other children. One parent stated:

> I am checking ERO [Education Review Office] reports. Am looking at a school that has extension/enrichment — a prerequisite . . . extension/enrichment, behaviour of children, flexibility, a ‘feel’ — a whole gamut of things . . . I don't want him to be bored. If he's bored he'll talk — can lead to put-downs. I want him to fit in and feel part of it, to feel comfortable.
As in the vignette above, parents of children in this study balanced a number of factors, particularly children's social and emotional well-being and the need for the children to be challenged. Parents did not focus on academic factors exclusively; yet it was parents who were the key advocates for academic challenge and extension. There was tension between the need for children to have their special abilities recognised and catered for (through extension/enrichment), and the need for them to ‘fit in’ (to belong and feel part of it, to feel comfortable). In other words, they were different, but did *and* didn’t want to be seen as different.
Parent expectations of early childhood and school

Parent expectations of early childhood teachers were influenced by the type of early childhood service their child attended. Early childhood was seen as a time for both learning and play, although the balance between these aspects was seen to vary between kindergarten, Montessori and ‘private preschool’.

Parent expectations of primary school teachers focused on the tension between ensuring that children were happy and stimulated. This tension reflects the earlier discussion in relation to children’s need to be cognitively challenged without being under ‘pressure’. Parents wanted their children to have further challenges, but didn’t want to have to ask the teachers for anything special for their child.

Expectations of early childhood education: ‘They learn [and] play’

Parents had expectations that sometimes differed from the perspective of early childhood teachers. While early childhood teachers focused their discussion on play and social interaction, there were academic learning opportunities within the programme that were valued by parents. Parents evaluated early childhood education by considering the social, affective and cognitive needs of their child. When asked if she had any goals for her daughter’s early childhood education, one mother wanted a ‘balanced education’.

Another mother appreciated the physical and social play experiences that kindergarten offered her son, although she felt his previous centre had been more intellectually stimulating. She stated, ‘Kindy is physically enough, though not mentally’. She wanted the kindergarten to support socialisation, confidence, compassion, manners and cooperative skills, and did not feel that reading was a necessary objective for the teachers to focus on. She stated:

Reading is him — these things are more important to later life, to help be a part of society, not aggressive.

Open communication between the kindergarten and family was noted at another kindergarten. The mother described the teachers’ willingness to consider planning extension activities for her child if needed: ‘we’ve discussed things a lot as we’ve gone along’. It was agreed by both teachers and parents
that the regular early childhood programme appeared to be enough and the child concerned ‘provided his own extension’ (teacher). This suggests that the important role of the individual within cognitive constructivism was recognised by some teachers.

Another parent commented on her expectations of the kindergarten teachers as trained professionals. She believed that these expectations were not met in many ways, particularly with regard to literacy and school transition. She decided that kindergarten supported the child’s social needs, and ‘any other gaps’ could be addressed by the family:

But in some ways I was disappointed — their philosophy has not changed to cater for the twenty-first century child. They are not accepting that most of these children have skills that previous children didn't have. They are fearful of encroaching on schools — for example with teaching the alphabet. The way I saw them using big books made me want to ring up and ask how they teach kindergarten teachers now — I saw big books folded over on their knee — why haven't they got an easel? Why not show kids words, why aren't they? [Are they] lacking in knowledge or fearful?

The only thing I want from the kindergarten for Isla was her great need of social skills and friends. I don't care about anything else — she's a people person there — anything else is a bonus. [My goals for her are that she is] prepared for school, able to socialise and share. How to cope when a child snatches, skills in a group, that's all. [Isla's mother] and I have the skills to fill any other gaps if necessary.

Kindergarten was described as ‘only a play school’ by one family, although they appreciated that this was important for social skills: ‘When there, they see other children, they learn, play, they need the experience’. It was commented that the child would be going to ‘learning school’ (primary school) soon. This suggests that parents did not all have faith that early childhood teachers would sufficiently cater to their children’s cognitive learning needs.

Parents did not see organisational structure and routines as a key strength of kindergartens, particularly in afternoon kindergarten sessions or sessions that had a wider mix of ages. Parents did, however, note that there were ‘realities and constraints’ for teachers:

Mother: Social skills . . . there’s only so much that adults can provide. He’s very good around adults, not shy at all, but with children, it is different. He doesn’t know how to approach them to say, ‘Can I play with you?’ — he will go and stand in their face. But more and more he will say, ‘I’m lonely, I want a friend’.

I had hoped that he’d learn a routine, but they have a floating morning tea. My friend’s child is finding it difficult to adapt [to school] because [the child] is not used to the structure.

Father: But there’s a reasonable routine at home.
Mother: Not lessons, but a living routine. I wish they'd had the two sessions\(^4\) — then the morning would have been more structured. But I know the teachers can't be everywhere at once, and we don't have the numbers for two sessions.

Most of the parents of children at 'private preschools' and Montessori 'preschools' saw early childhood education as preparation for school. They also reported that they had deliberately chosen preschool forms of early childhood service because they believed that they were more formal, structured and academic. Despite this perception, many families felt that their children could be working at a higher level than expected by the early childhood centre teachers. Parental comments included the following:

He only has the rest of this year. We want to see him with a really good grounding for moving into 5-year-old 'real school', as opposed to preschool. It certainly worked for [his sister]. She was well-prepared, well-prepared . . . He is frustrated at preschool now and ready to move into the next level, can do that level. He could do it now, wish he could.

We trust the [pre]school, but one thing I ask is push, push, push. They tell me '[he] is a preschooler: they don't do homework'.

The thing that gets her going most is if she has competition. She's bored at preschool now because she's at the top of the range: there's no challenge. She's clingy in the mornings, won't let go, holding on more and more. She used to do that at kindy, used to cry. It stopped when she went to preschool, it was obviously what she needed. She was happier, using her brain. Do schools do that?

Our aspirations are for him to extend and use the challenge of an all round education, i.e. general knowledge/geography/maths and in addition to (be) improving his reading ability.

One mother said that her choice of centre included consideration of learning and structure. She didn't like the 'free play' philosophy of other forms of early childhood service. Family friends shared their philosophy of early education.

For early childhood I thought Montessori was a good method of teaching. When we came here [she] was 2 years old. We didn't know much about how things were taught here. We talked to friends. She's not the type . . . in kindy they go from activity to activity . . . she's the type to sit and wants to finish. In kindy kids are running around — I'm not sure if this is right [information]. We were very new. [Our friends] prefer to keep the children home and teach them than send them to kindy. We went to the [Montessori] school to see what they did and we liked it.

\(^4\) The mother here is referring to many larger kindergartens having two separate rolls: older children in the morning (generally 4-year-olds) and younger children in the afternoon (generally 3-year-olds). This smaller kindergarten had one combined roll of 3 and 4-year-olds.
Preschool parents also commented on how much they valued their children’s contentment and enjoyment of their early childhood centre. When asked if she had any goals for her daughter at her preschool, one mother stated:

I don’t really. Obviously the preschool is offering her reading and maths. I certainly don’t want her knowing 10 times tables or reading at a particular level. She really enjoys it and that’s the most important thing. Contentment, whether academic achievement or her own example, is very important.

Parents appeared to have higher and more defined expectations of the preschools than of the kindergartens. This would be partly because the ‘preschools’ charged set fees (approximately $100 per week), while the kindergartens had a minimal charge or asked for a donation. Parents expected a stronger academic aspect to the ‘preschools’, and believed that the main strength of kindergartens was social interaction between children. The various expectations parents had of early childhood teaching no doubt differ from the philosophies held by the services themselves. Nevertheless, despite the type of service, early childhood education services acknowledge the importance of both social constructivist and cognitive constructivist opportunities in early childhood education.

**Expectations of school: ‘Hopefully the school will understand her needs’**

Two key themes emerged from data regarding parent expectations and values relating to beginning school. First, parents affirmed that it was important their children were happy, confident and settled. Second, they asserted the importance of cognitive challenge and stimulation. These factors are complementary, yet also in tension with one another. Although it can be difficult to facilitate an effective balance between challenge and support, providing children with appropriate challenges is part of providing support and contributes to children’s happiness and satisfaction.

Parents recognised both cognitive and affective aspects — key issues for children were independence, motivation and social interaction. Motivation was linked to appropriate challenge; but social and personal goals for children in their first few months at primary school were frequently also mentioned as important to parents. One mother stated that her goals for her daughter would be ‘integration with school friends’ and a feeling of ‘this is my school and be happy about that’.
Mother: That he’ll get enough stimulation to keep him intrinsically motivated, that he’ll be happy, make friends, not be bullied in the playground . . .

Father: I don’t know that I’ve thought about it much — I hope he’ll find that he can learn a whole lot of new things, not just in books. If it’s only what he (already) knows he’ll wonder what the point is.

Mother: That he’ll eat his lunch.

Another family focused on social and behavioural goals when considering goals for their child during her first few months of primary school. ‘Above all’, they hoped that ‘positive attitudes’ toward reading and learning would be maintained, and not ‘destroyed’:

. . . adjusts happily to the teacher and routine of school. Hopefully the school will understand her needs and be very conscious of not destroying the positive attitude she has at this stage, and that she will understand her personality . . . That she’ll settle happily and is happy. It won’t matter if she doesn’t make a huge amount of progress. May need to monitor her adjustments — she could fly ahead.

Parents were particularly concerned that schools provided an environment within which the children participating in this study were cognitively challenged and stimulated. Fear of boredom was a repeated concern of parents. The comments below are all from interviews with different families, even though the comments made are similar:

I don’t want him to be bored. If he’s bored he’ll talk — can lead to put-downs.

Her brother goes there, it’s local. I don’t know what we’ll do if she doesn’t get what she needs from that school. My biggest worry is that she’ll get bored. They have a sunshine room for the new entrants. I hope she doesn’t get bored — a couple of weeks there at the most. If there’s no challenge or competition, someone to compete against, she’ll get bored.

I hope it fosters the sort of environment where he wants to learn. We don’t want a babysitting service, we want his mind stimulated.

My hope for [him] is that when he starts primary school . . . I know in my head he’ll have no problems. In Year 1 he’ll sit in Year 2/Year 3 reading and maths, will interact with older kids. They won’t hold him back, for example, Year 3 reading and Year 1 art. Year 1, 2, and 3 are all together in one big room. The classes go this way [she gestured horizontally and vertically] — some have the ability to go up.

The parents were uncertain that school would be sufficiently challenging for their children. Although they continued to want their children to be happy and accepted, moving on to school meant that cognitive challenge within the programme was more of an issue than in early childhood. The parents were concerned that if the children became bored at school it would have a long-term negative affect on their learning and motivation to learn. Parents wanted their
children to be accepted and to fit in, but they also wanted assurance that their individual needs would be met. They were worried that unless their children were recognised as ‘different’, they would not have their academic needs met. They were also concerned at any possible consequences of ‘being different’, and wanted reassurance that their children would ‘belong’.

Experiences of finding a school

The process of choosing a school was, for many families, a stressful experience. The following comments summarise two families’ experiences. Both families made a decision to choose state schools, but found strong differences between individual school environments. Neither parent found any school that convinced them that they could cater for their child’s reading abilities:

[Choosing] has been a hell on earth. A lot of bloody research. The size of the roll, quality of resources and facilities . . . We paid attention to the atmosphere, a nice atmosphere. The local school is [name omitted] — the pool is condemned, the place was untidy — the same with all state schools. . . . We seriously thought about home schooling but he is starting to need the social interaction with [child's] peers. I know you can do other things with other home schoolers, but it's not the same as on a daily basis. The state system treats kids as if they're all going to learn at the same pace [discussion of two other schools continued] . . . We felt happy that we'd made the effort to go round and look.

The following anecdotes all describe the second family’s search for a school:

I went to [name omitted] and mentioned the word gifted — a friend said you should mention the word gifted to see what response you get — as well as saying he was a good reader. [The principal] asked if he was talented in every aspect, and said that if he is not talented in every area, for example with physical skills, he is not gifted. I was a bit upset by that, and left there [upset]. I heard via gossip that he didn’t believe me. He said in the staffroom that a parent had come in and claimed her child could read. We were looking for a principal to say ‘we will work with you to do what’s best for [your child]’ . . . The door was closed — not willing to go down that path. The visit was very frustrating. I had asked to see the new entrants’ class and the next class up as the new entrants was a settling place. They hadn't rung to say the class would be in the hall. I was pregnant and struggling. If he was bored and a behaviour problem I felt I needed to be taken seriously, if I could go to the principal.

At [name omitted] the principal quoted the curriculum and what the curriculum said — flexibility to work alongside older children for one subject, flexibility. The new entrant teacher said [something different] . . . I went back to the principal and asked how come the head of school says one thing and you say another. The principal said the head of school decides, and backed down, and said that if we weren't happy with their school we should look elsewhere, the world was my oyster and we could walk . . . It was annoying, as I quite liked the principal. Other things concerned me — crowded classes.
At [name omitted] the principal was very good at giving me information from the curriculum. I was put off because she only talked about reading. Watching the new entrant class, the learning process for new entrants, I was staggered about how basic it all was. What was he going to do while they were all going ‘a/a/A, b/b/B’? It still worries me – what's he going to do? Is he going to play up? There is a community feeling about the principal not being very good. Giftedness never came up. I'm not sure how I'd get on.

With [name omitted] I was not impressed at all with what [the principal] told me. He told me [my child] would go into the next class — away from (peers) — old hat . . . dismissed it out of hand — most unimpressed at the open night. We're looking for a good education.

[Name omitted — private school, with high fees] would extend him no problem, but bankrupt us. Socially I was worried [my child] would have trouble keeping up with friends or accepting [the child] would not have everything they had . . . I went into the class with [my child] and [the child] didn't feel comfortable — [the child] wasn't welcomed, left sitting in the corner.

[Name omitted] took [my child]. I took [my child] with me on this visit. We happened to have a book in case [the child] had to sit and wait. She [the principal] very quickly picked up what [my child] was doing and believed everything I said. She was very keen to have [my child] at the school and keen to work with me. The new entrant teacher had had an early reader herself and had empathy . . . The principal is supportive of his special ability, willing to give it a go. The new entrant teacher’s background. Small size . . . [not] a big school — not too daunting. A family atmosphere – all the teachers work together [clarified the school said they weren't sure how to support the child, but would try, and would work with the family].

The family who chose this last school was reassured to find a school that they felt was empathetic to their child. They valued its small roll, family atmosphere and community location. In particular, they appreciated the school’s honesty in saying that they didn’t know how to cater for the child’s needs, but would work with the family to do what they could to support the child.

These experiences of trying to find a supportive school illustrate that it can be extremely difficult. Parents found that few schools were able to reassure parents that they would be able to support the learning and emotional needs of their children. The parents also met few principals or teachers who held expectations of children that acknowledged giftedness, or cognitive constructivist or bioecological perspectives of learning. Parents found the reality of needing to choose the best of ‘less than perfect’ alternatives to be stressful.
Peer expectations of children

‘We don’t need you’

During the observations in early childhood centres, children were seen to play with peers for extended periods of time. The children from the study did not stand out from their peers. Overall, the children in the study appeared to value interactions with others and sought out children’s company. Some examples of positive peer interactions between children included playing chasing games, reading books side by side, playing with trains, animals, dinosaurs and cars, being part of a dragon, joining in music, role play of TV characters, art activities, block construction, board games, collage, water play, and swinging from monkey bars.

The participating children demonstrated examples of positive interpersonal interaction. For example, Julia pointed to another girl’s work and said, ‘I like this and that’. When one child drew pictures alone, he created detailed pictorial representations. His parents showed me examples of art that illustrated the difference between what he created alone, and what he created at his early childhood centre with friends. A shared picture painted with his friend at kindergarten looked like colourful, random lines and shapes. The child showed awareness of social context and activity appropriateness — by engaging with his friend within the other boy’s zone of proximal development he ensured that the experience was positive. His mother explained: ‘With [his best friend] he scribbles. At kindy paintings they both do it — it becomes something different, a social activity . . . he does not scribble at home’.

The extent of overtly negative interactions between children during observations in early childhood centres and schools within this study was surprising. Despite a curriculum couched in positive language, positive role modelling from teachers, and positive media images, many of the experiences between children were negative. Children were observed to exclude each other and to use disparaging comments. For example, when one child was talking to friends in the playground, another child interrupted, stating: ‘That’s the stupidest thing I ever heard’ — having been rejected, the child being observed didn’t finish his conversation. When another child tried to join in with two girls who were drawing on a blackboard with chalk, she was repeatedly told that she could not play, with comments including ‘Too bad’ and ‘I’m not going to be your friend’. On another occasion, this child was criticised for ‘scribbling’ when she tried to draw the motion of bees in flight.
Children at an early childhood centre were observed creating a pretend fire engine by putting chairs into rows. Some children were sitting on chairs. A child in this study went to join the group, but was told ‘No, you need to sit down on the floor’. The child continued to try to join in, but was told not to, because there were two children with the same name at the early childhood centre, and only the other one was allowed to join in. This example illustrates that children have social ‘rules’ that need to be learned and negotiated.

In another early childhood centre, the child being observed was sitting at the play dough table with three other girls and one boy. One of the children was talking about making eggs: ‘Look at me. I’m squashing play dough out of this’. The child replied with ‘I’m making an egg too’. One of the girls asserted, ‘No, don’t help as we don’t need you’. The child remained at the play dough table, and offered some play dough to the girl, presumably in order to achieve acceptance. Two boys joined the table and took the child’s play dough away. The child asked them not to take the play dough, but they ignored the request, and no one else helped. Several times the child spoke, but received no acknowledgement at all. This example shows that children can be bullied and also that children can be excluded and isolated within group settings.

Negativity and exclusion continued at school. A class was playing a game with children in a circle passing around a giant inflated ball — when the ball came to the children standing either side of the child in this study, the other children returned the ball back the other way so that the child was repeatedly missed out.

There did not appear to be any valid reasons for the negative peer experiences, although sometimes negativity escalated after the children participating in the study had made intelligent comments. Children appeared to be rewarded by peers and by teachers when they acted ‘like a 4-year-old’ rather than to their ability level. During an early childhood centre observation, a group of children ‘socialised’ Julia by rewarding her for ‘off-task’ play and excluding her when she focused on completing the academic task ‘correctly’. The example illustrates that peer socialisation in this study encouraged age-appropriate behaviour and discouraged children from using their individual abilities to full potential.

The following observation occurred in an early childhood centre context:

A small group of girls get a tray of animals. Girl 1 comes and grabs the giraffe, saying ‘I want the giraffe’. The group argues noisily. The early childhood teacher comes to the group and tells them that they are not using the animals ‘correctly’ — the task is to sort the animals, and they will need the continent map to help them. Girl 2 [who I was observing] gets a tray with continent puzzle pieces and brings it to the mat. The other girls hold their animals up to the continents and make slurping noises as if the animals are drinking. Girl 2 says, ‘You have to look and see where these
animals come from,’ and gestures to a book. Girl 3 replies, ‘No, we don’t want to’. Girl 2 then says, ‘Only if you want to, you have to look in here, only if you want to’. She holds up a reference book to show them that they need to consult it to see which continent the animals come from. There is no response from the other girls. Girl 2 puts the book down and takes a lion. Girl 3 holds a giraffe and a snake on her head and sings, ‘Na na nana na — you can’t get me’. Girl 2 waves her lion about and then Girl 3 smiles at her for the first time.

Parents commented on negative peer behaviour at various unsolicited times during the study. One parent, while completing a special ability rating scale, commented on the link between ‘peer pressure’ and perfectionism. Two other parents commented on bullying.

The data presented in this section have illustrated that age peers of the children in the study strongly ‘socialised’ the children. This occurred through the peers being negative toward or socially excluding children if they were ‘different’. When children minimised or masked their abilities, they were rewarded with acceptance and social inclusion. The children participating in this study generally had positive social skills themselves, with the ability to adjust their actions to different contexts. The desire for social acceptance meant that at 4 years of age some children in this study were already beginning to ‘conform to the norm’.
Self-expectations

‘The laboratory inside my head’

One of the participating children, Alistair, spontaneously drew a picture for his early childhood teacher, which he referred to as ‘the laboratory inside my head’. He pointed out the areas where ‘creative things happen’, and also explained that there was more in the laboratory, but he could not draw it all. Alistair also told his teacher that ‘not everyone has a laboratory in their head’. During a research interview with his early childhood teacher, she mentioned her concern that Alistair’s comment may be elitist and might mean that he considered that he was better than other children.

The importance of Alistair’s contribution includes his self-reflection on learning and on his own cognitive and creative abilities. Alistair was also aware of differences in ability and learning style between himself and other children. Each of the 11 children in the study could be considered as an individual ‘laboratory’ within which ideas fermented and developed. Findings of this study support the thesis that individuality needs to be acknowledged, including recognition of differing individual potential. The fact that the children had not been overtly ‘taught’ reinforces the importance of children’s own abilities being recognised. There did not appear to be any environmental/teaching factors that caused the precocious reading ability — adult support was necessary, but was not sufficient to ‘create’ precocious reading ability.

Other children reportedly shared self-reflective comments with their parents, including ‘I’m brilliant’ and ‘I’m a good reader’. These comments no doubt reflected the affirmation parents gave the children. However, during over 20 hours of early childhood observations, the only self-descriptors that children shared were references to age (I’m 4½). The children’s peers appeared to base social hierarchy on age rather than ability, probing whether children were aged 4, 4½, or nearly 5.
‘Need to know’

The children in the study showed a strong desire to learn. The children’s parents described them as ‘inquisitive’, ‘determined’, ‘curious’, and ‘demanding information’. Matthew’s mother commented that:

He’s . . . a little bit more — I don’t want to say intellectual, but he wants to know — what 12 and 18 add up to, and 65 and 66, and 110 plus 200. He wants to know the meaning of different words I or [his father] have used — he would ask ‘What did you say? I didn’t understand’ — not switch off, which I think is probably remarkable. (Emphasis added.)

Another parent commented:

I think she has to do it; she has to get it done.

Children in the study showed that they had effective strategies for learning, including being methodical, analytical and reflective. The children used tools and props effectively to enhance their learning, particularly books and computers. Erin’s mother hypothesised that Erin may have loved reading because of the learning from books:

She loves reading. She’s continually got her nose in a book. Not so much now, but when she was younger she would disappear in her room, constantly with her nose in a book. [She reads] books about dinosaurs, books that she can learn new things from, a book about wetas and possums.

The opportunity to learn from books was appreciated by all of the children in the study, who collectively read maps, encyclopedias, dictionaries, newspapers, puzzle books, and a variety of non-fiction material. Henry illustrated his non-fiction knowledge when he animatedly discussed the ‘orbit’ of planets. He knew about all nine planets and drew me a picture of them, including the lines showing their orbit of the sun. As he drew the picture he discussed details — for example, ‘that’s Mars’, as he drew the fourth planet from the sun in red.

Competence with computers was a feature of nearly all of the case studies. In particular, David told me that, shortly after starting school, he preferred preschool, because there were more computers at the preschool. His mother used his competence with computers to affirm his analytical abilities.

He has a way of analysing what the problem is . . . He has the ability to think a problem through and think of a way to fix it . . . It took him no time at all to pick up things like the computer. I bring laptops home from work and he gets through the passwords. I almost have to ask him how to do things.
As with books, the children enjoyed the opportunity to learn from computer resources, including the Internet. One of the children had even developed an American accent through copying this from the computer.

The key finding from the ‘need to know’ voice is that the children in this study, at age 4, read to learn rather than learn to read. With reading ages up to 12 years old, the children did not need to be ‘taught’ to read, but they appreciated ongoing opportunities to continue to learn. Such examples illustrate the bioecological perspective of learning due to the innate abilities and dispositions of the children.

‘I want to be first’

Parents described a strong competitive drive within their children. Mostly, this reflected the importance of an intellectual challenge — to extend themselves, achieve to their potential, and avoid getting bored. Isla, for example, ‘loves competitive games’ according to one of her parents. Other parental comments included:

. . . needs to be challenged — David and [his sister] need to have something to challenge them.

He is motivated by the challenge, the race. Likes competition.

Parents felt that they had been able to meet their children’s desire for challenge in the early years, but worried about whether there would be sufficient challenge once the children went to school:

If there’s no challenge or competition, someone to compete against, she’ll get bored.

My biggest worry is that she’ll get bored. They have a sunshine room for the new entrants. I hope she doesn’t get bored — a couple of weeks there at the most. If there’s no challenge or competition, someone to compete against, she’ll get bored.

I hope it fosters the sort of environment where he wants to learn. We don’t want a babysitting service, we want his mind stimulated.

At other times, challenge was interpreted by the children as wanting to achieve compared with peers or family members. This can be interpreted as wanting to be ‘a winner’. David wrote the following story shortly after beginning school.

My name is David. I am in [name of school house]. I want to be first.
Parents were aware of their children’s competitive interest in self-extension at home, and supported them by providing resources, and encouraging them to ask questions and try their best:

Our family makes a conscious effort to take time to talk to him as an adult, listen to what he has to say. If he asks a question we explain, we take the time.

We certainly believe in acknowledging intelligence and respect if they ask us. We might not go into technical detail, but we like to think we give the facts straight. We don’t beat around the bush, just tell them. They do understand. This is our way. We do believe information is good. If they ask us a question, we answer it completely and properly. We believe they learn that way.

At their early childhood centres and schools the children also experienced social negativity if they showed competitiveness in these settings. When the children in this study used advanced vocabulary, investigative skills, metacognitive skills, persistence or reflection, their peers would often exclude them from play. The children would either be ignored, receive negative comments like ‘we don’t need you’ or ‘we don’t want you’, or be physically rejected. When the children acted the same as their peers (‘normal’), they were invited back into social groups. Teachers reinforced non-competitiveness and ‘normalisation’ by reinforcing that, despite the children’s reading abilities, they were ‘just little’ children. The children deliberately minimised their abilities in order to be socially accepted. An example of this was when a 4-year-old with a reading age of 8 years pretended that an emergent text was difficult because the teacher had said ‘it’s a hard one today’, and other children were watching.
Advocacy and support

It can be argued that the ability of parents in this study to advocate for their children was limited by general social prejudice and misconceptions. On many occasions parents felt that it was in their children’s best social interests to hide their ability. A parent explained that she ‘bit her tongue’ and chose not to comment about ‘small concerns’. Instead, she made sure that she made affirming and positive comments to the teachers about their teaching. She cleaned paintbrushes and put away reading books at the end of the week, helped in the library, was on the fundraising committee and helped with class trips. By contributing her time and resisting approaching with small concerns, she hoped that if there was ever a bigger issue the teacher would be more inclined to listen to her. For the same reason, the parents were careful how they spoke about their children to teachers and other families. They were also careful to be seen to support the teachers — building the foundations of a relationship that might be beneficial later.

Mother: We tried very hard not to talk to other parents [about his reading]. They get green — it feels like you’re boasting.

Father: Also, because of your early childhood philosophy about not pushing, or formal teaching.

Mother: I feel embarrassed, people will think I’ve been one of those pushy parents — it’s not very trendy, popular, ‘PC’

Father: We don’t want him to feel... that he’s different.

Mother: Or embarrassed that people are talking about him over the top [of his head].

Other examples within the study illustrate that people may have been more negative because of the children’s abilities. The new entrant teacher who was frustrated that a child with a reading age of 8 years could not tie his shoelace and ate his lunch slowly may not have been so frustrated with other children in the class if they needed help. Children in some of the early childhood centres excluded children from play as long as they appeared ‘clever’, and included them when they acted the same as their peers.

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PC is an abbreviation for ‘politically correct’. In this instance the parent is clarifying that it is not PC or socially acceptable for parents to be seen as parents who ‘push’ their child to achieve.
These examples challenge the view that advocacy is simply about speaking up for children’s needs and rights. Advocacy is also about supporting the best interests of children. In this study, there was tension between advocacy for children’s individual needs and for their social acceptance. In many instances, working to cognitive potential would conflict with social inclusion. Children had learned at a young age to adjust their behaviour to different contexts — for example, drawing complex maps at home, but doing ‘scribble pictures’ with friends at an early childhood centre. Many parents appeared to accept that this disjointed functioning was necessary. They focused their support on the areas of extension and challenge in the home context and on social acceptance in the early childhood and school settings, advocating for them both.

Teachers, as professionals, are also advocates for children. The case studies suggest that teacher advocacy was influenced by a number of considerations: what was in the best interests of the class; what would most effectively support individual children; and what was most supportive for the teacher. Despite both the school and early childhood curricula referring to the needs of individual children, teachers also talked about the importance of not treating children as if they were ‘special’, because then all children would need to be treated that way. An example is the teacher who could not provide books at the child’s instructional level because there would be too many in the group and the group had sets of only eight books (meaning that the number of books dictated a child’s reading group level, not the child’s ability or need). Some teachers advocated a vision to parents that it was in the children’s best interests to learn rules and expectations — if they ‘settled down into a class routine’ the teacher could get on with teaching and the children with learning. This reasoning also suggests that teachers were advocating for approaches that were manageable for them, and suggests an ethical dilemma: does part of preparing the child for school include preparing them for school agendas and expectations, even if these are not child-centred?
Theoretical assumptions and practice

The argument proposed in this paper is that expectations of children are influenced by theoretical perspectives. Social constructivist perspectives suggest that children’s learning is shaped by their social contexts. Precocious readers make an important research contribution because of the level of their achievement despite the fact that they have not been explicitly taught to read. Because of this, there must be more to the children’s learning than social constructivist theories explain.

The children in this study clearly were influenced by their teachers and peers. However, these social influences were not always positively supporting learning. Teachers sometimes refused to accept exceptionality, and both peers and teachers heavily encouraged the children to hide their abilities. The cognitive constructivist perspective recognises the children’s exceptionality, and the individual role that children play in constructing their own learning. The bioecological perspective acknowledges that exceptional ability may be innate, and individual learners shape and capitalise on their environment to extend their talents. If teachers reject these theoretical perspectives, then children are less likely to be able to access opportunities for extension and challenge.
Summary

One of the key findings from this study was the focus on age-related expectations in schools and early childhood centres. The focus on chronological age positioned the children as ‘4-year-olds’ rather than as ‘precocious readers’ or as ‘children with special abilities’. The children are, in fact, each of these descriptors. However, there appeared to be a clear agenda among teachers and other children that age should direct socially acceptable behaviour. This view reinforces a social constructivist perspective. The view may reflect the principle of egalitarianism, with a hidden agenda of ‘normalisation’. Parents were more open to focusing on individual abilities and interests, regardless of the age-equivalency of the cognitive ability reached, or the source of the learning. They did not want there to be any limits on their child’s learning, although they realised the importance of social acceptance. Parents also did not want the children to be under any external pressure and recognised that motivation and passion were initiated by their children. Children demonstrated the ability to operate in different ways in different settings. They did ‘normalise’ themselves in early childhood and school settings and accepted the social directives applied by peers. At home, with the support and encouragement of their parents, they flourished intellectually.

This paper has drawn from case studies to illustrate the difference between assumed advocacy for children and the reality of their experience. Children are given a mixed message: that schools and early childhood centres are places to learn, play and have fun, and also that they are places to conform, ‘fit in’, learn rules, assimilate and behave. Parents acknowledged multiple perspectives: the child’s cognitive potential, affective needs and social contexts. At times these aspects were in tension with one another. Earlier in this paper, a parent clarified that her expectations for her son included that he ‘fit in and feel part of it . . . to feel comfortable’. The tension parents found was that ‘fitting in’ sometimes meant acting ‘average’, yet this process minimised children’s opportunity to ‘fly’ (Carr, May & Podmore, 1998) and reach their potential. The children are less likely to ‘feel comfortable’ if they have only their social needs met, without opportunities for intellectual and cognitive challenge. It is critical that advocacy for children draws on multiple theoretical perspectives in order to enhance expectation and support.

‘The quality of expectations determines the quality of our action’ (Godin, n.d.).
References


Margrain, V. (1998). Young able readers: Parental perceptions regarding their children’s literacy learning and transition to school; and parent experiences of school collaboration and consultation. Unpublished Master of Educational Psychology project: Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.


## Literacy Abilities

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*Refused to read second version of the Neale Analysis of Reading.*

(See also: Neale Analysis of Reading, Burt = Burt Word Reading Test, BPVS = British Picture Vocabulary Scale)