

Adultocentrism?
The role of the adult in supporting
gifted learners:
Case studies of precocious readers.

Valerie Margrain
The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand
Rising Tides conference, July 2006



Session Overview

- **The children:** Methodology of the study, Results of reading tests, Children's learning
- **The role of adults** in supporting children's learning
- **Definitions, Q & A**

Precocious Readers

What do we already know?
Brainstorm



Methodology

- **Case study**; Multiple case design
- **Purpose**: “*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” (Harker, 1997, p. 3).



Precocious Readers: A Definition

We 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 (Stainthorp & Hughes, 2004, p. 107).



Research Questions

How are social scaffolding and self-scaffolding demonstrated within the learning of precocious readers?

Can precocious readers provide evidence for the concept of spontaneous learning?



Methods

- Standardised tests
 - *Burt Word Reading Test*
 - *Neale Analysis of Reading*
 - *Coloured progressive matrices*
 - *British Picture Vocabulary Test*
- Semi-structured interviews with parents,
- Informal interviews with parents and teachers
- Observations of children in ECE and school settings



Methodology

- **Participants** were recruited via flyers displayed in EC centres and public libraries, and through networks with ECE and families.
- **Ethics approval** from Victoria University of Wellington.
- **Fieldwork** was conducted during 2001 and 2002.

Precocious reading: an example from the *Neale Analysis of Reading* (4:09)

Among animals the fox has no **rival** (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.

(H: 4:09, 89 seconds, 94% accuracy)

Burt Word Reading Test

to is up for big
he at one my sun

went girl boys day some
his that of an wet

love water no just pot
or now things told sad

carry village quickly nurse beware
return scramble twisted journey luncheon

known shelves explorer tongue projecting
terror serious belief events emergency

refrigerator steadiness obtain overwhelmed universal
nourishment encyclopaedia commenced circumstances fringe

formulate motionless trudging theory destiny
scarcely exhausted labourers urge atmosphere

apprehend binocular domineer melodrama economy
ultimate reputation humanity excessively philosopher

autobiography contemptuous terminology mercenary glycerine
unique microscopical perpetual efficiency influential

perambulating renown physician champagne exorbitant
hypocritical atrocious constitutionally contagion palpable

melancholy eccentricity fatigue phlegmatic fallacious
alienate poignancy phthisis ingratiating subtlety

THE BURT WORD READING TEST (New Zealand Revision)

© 1981, Scottish Council for Research in Education.

Published by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

- Overwhelmed, fringe, trudging, journey, explorer, tongue, encyclopaedia, urge, luncheon, shelves, binocular, economy, terror, universal, destiny, events, emergency,

Reading Abilities

| | | | | |
|----------------------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|
| <i>Identifier</i> | A | E | H | O |
| <i>Gender</i> | M | F | M | M |
| <i>Entry Age</i> | 4:08 | 4:07 | 4:09 | 4:10 |
| <i>Neale accuracy</i> | 8:01 | 8:10 | 10:08 | 7:08 |
| <i>Neale comprehension</i> | 6:11 | 7:02 | 8:03 | 7:01 |
| <i>Neale rate</i> | 13:0 | 13:0+ | 12:02 | 7:02 |
| <i>Burt word reading</i> | 8:07- 8:07 | 8:03- 8:09 | 10:04- 10:10 | 8:10- 9:04 |

Comprehension & Engagement

Comprehension

Erin

- Chronological Age
4:07,
- Accuracy level 8:10
- Comprehension 8:03,
- Rate 13+

Engagement

Alistair

“He enjoys it a heck of a lot. There is no way he’d do this much if he didn’t enjoy it.” (*Parent interview*)



Activity

To what extent are adults integral to children's learning, particularly learning to read?

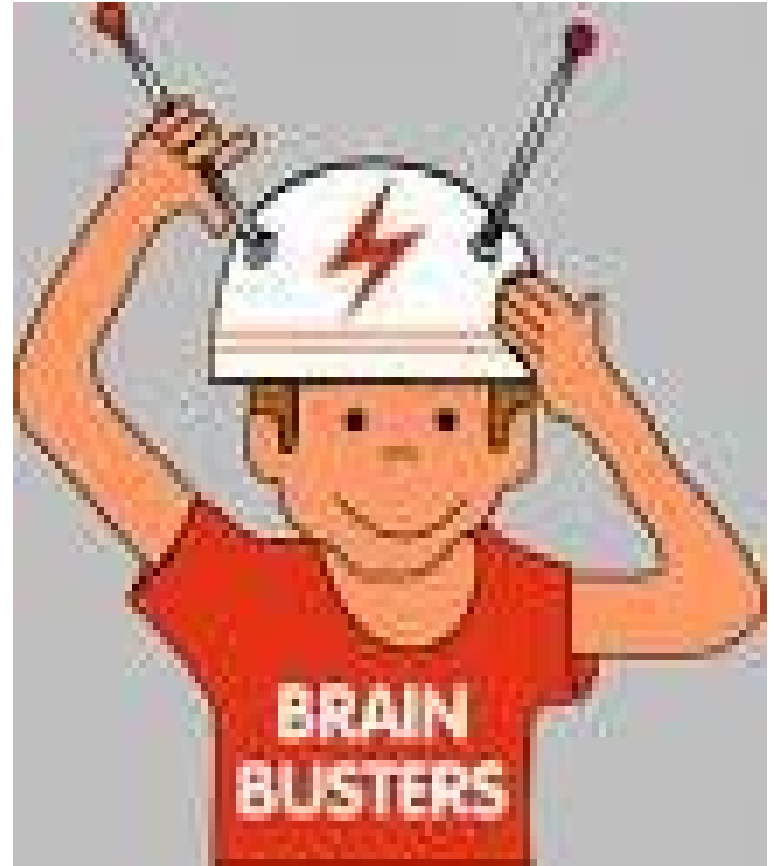
- Necessary
- Desirable
- Hindrance

Discuss in groups and report back.

Children as Learners

Three types of learning:

- socially supported
- self-regulated
- spontaneous





Social Support

- *He learns from everywhere. Comes home with things from other kids' houses, TV, books, phrases from the computer. The 'sponge analogy' – learns from everywhere.*
- *It does not even seem like Matthew is learning. Yet he is constantly absorbing information and remembers them in context, and that is just amazing.*

Social Support cont.

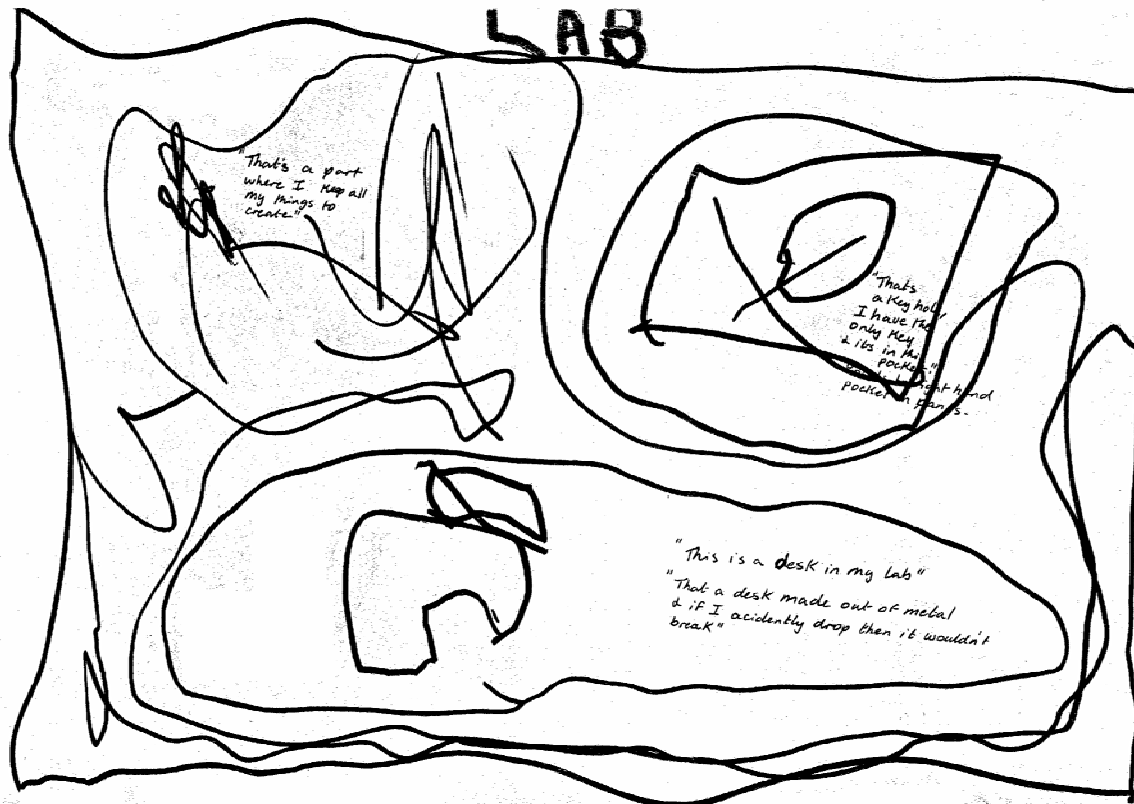
- *We [parents] were told early on that the best way to help is to give wide experiences – looked laterally. We haven't done skiing trips but have involved them with daily life. Cooking is good with maths, reading, patterns, conclusions. We go to museums – can be harassing, but they enjoy it. Love libraries. By encouragement and giving him time and the opportunity to do stuff ... We haven't actually sat down and taught him stuff, except in a passive way – but I 'spose reading is active.*

Self-regulation

- *Taught herself, that's the amazing thing.*
- *Reading – she sussed that one out.*
- *A self-starter – we try to keep up with him.*
- *Has an idea in his head of exactly what he wants.*
- *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.*
- *He sits and looks a long time first, then gets it right when he tries... . . . I don't see that he gets it wrong.*

Self-regulation cont.

A laboratory in my head



Spontaneous Learning

- "it just happened"
- "natural"
- "just could"
- "spontaneous"
- "unexpected"
- "came from nowhere"
- "overnight"

"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'."

Spontaneous Learning cont.

- *"It is just something that happened ... spontaneous."*
- *"I've not deliberately taught her."*
- *"Isla hasn't been taught – not consciously."*
- *"At no time did I set out to teach her to read. From her earliest years I have followed her lead and interests though I have introduced new books, tapes, ideas to her to see if she'd be interested in pursuing them. If not I've left it until a later time or dropped it. At all times I've been ultra careful with her attitude to learning."*

Spontaneous and Rapid Learning

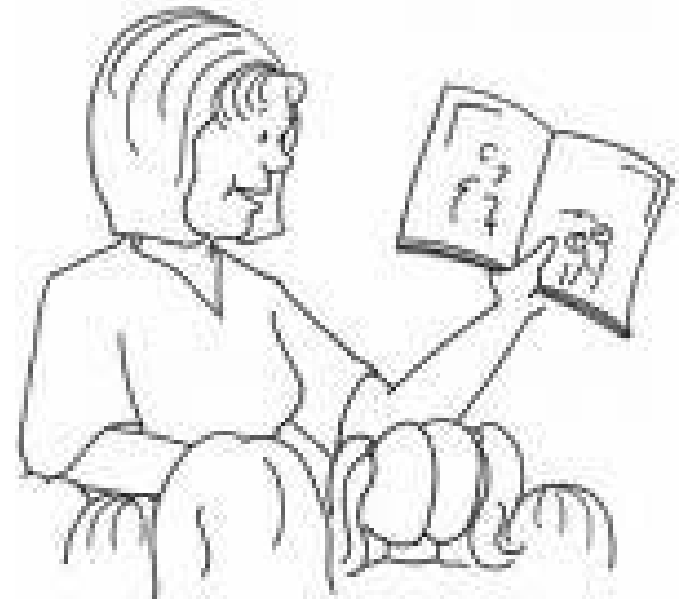
- *"It may be compressed in my memory, but it seemed to go quickly from knowing names and knowing sounds to being able to attempt words – all within a span of 3 months."*
- *"She's one of those kids that things happen so rapidly through the stages that you just about miss it."*
- *"She's galloping ... gobbling up her book like eating very fast. I tell her it helps her to space, help her to breathe."*
- *"The teachers told me that he devoured books, for example reading all of their new library collection in a single morning."*

Responsive and Directive 'Teaching'

Responsive

- *When I see a teachable moment*
- *We take the time to listen*
- *When she showed an interest or readiness I presented materials*
- *Cooperative/shared*

Directive



Responsive Teaching, cont.

We sang to her, nursery rhymes, danced around with her ... We present ideas to see if she's ready to learn new things. [Her mother] is giving her a variety of experiences that will help her. Discuss and present her with books. Try to give her new things, social development, play ... She's not in a situation of difficulty because we're always supportive.



Responsive Partnership

Parents acknowledged the children's contribution and participation:

- "*helping me* work on things in the garage".
- "we've spent quite a lot of time on the beach *together*"
- "*helping* feed the animals".

Directive Teaching

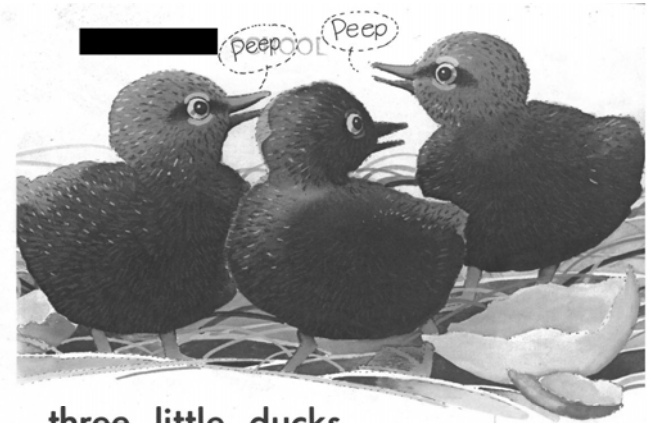
(20 hrs observations in ECE)

- Only 2 positive comments from teachers to children
- In 3 observations, *no* interactions between the child and *any* adult.
- In at least one observation, the *only* comments to a child were directive, for example, “do your work”.
- 81% of all interactions were brief, unsustained
- Children sometimes initiated interactions but received no reply
- 9% teacher comments were rhetorical
- 48% teacher comments were directive (“sit down”, “tidy up” or “be quiet”)

“Teaching” Points

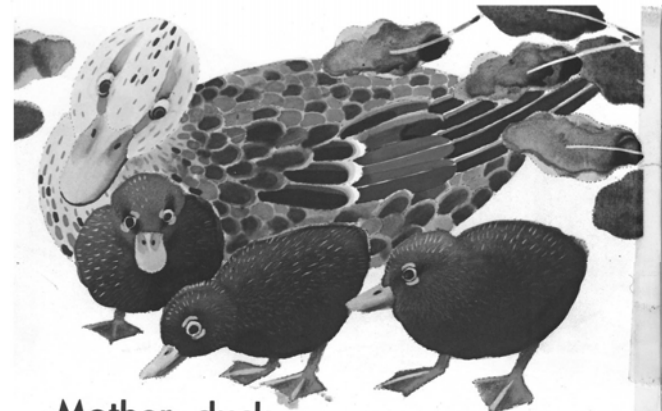
Three Little Ducks

- book title
- one-to-one finger pointing
- colours
- concepts like “big” or “little”
- *Three little ducks*: “A hard one today”



three little ducks
came out of the eggs.

5



Mother duck
looked after them.

6

Just a Little 4-year-old (or 5-year-old)

- "Still a little boy."
- "She's a little girl, matches my group."
- "In other ways a normal little 5-year-old."
- "Hm, but he can't tie his shoe laces and he takes forever to eat his lunch."
- Unless outstanding in every curriculum area they could not possibly be gifted.
- "Still a 5-year-old writer."
- Focus on "broadening out", "settling in", "being rounded", "contributing" "acting appropriately" and "learning what is expected of a 4-year-old".



Values & Beliefs

- Predicament
- Challenge
- Problem
- Control thing
- Not special
- Let writing catch up first
- Not enough books
- Thriving on challenge
- Amazing
- Incredible
- Wonderful
- We learn from him
- Learning
- Sharing

Definitions

Activity: match the definitions:

social constructivist

cognitive constructivist

coconstructivism

adultocentricism

genetic predisposition

zone of proximal development

zone of executive functioning

differentiated giftedness-talent model

bioecological

catalyst

multimondial

bimondial

precocious



Adultocentrism

An adultocentric view of the child's behaviour [is]... too exclusively concerned with what is being done by the dispensers of knowledge ... A child performing in the zone of proximal development with an adult believes himself to be accomplishing the task and that the adult's organization of the task ... permits that illusion or fantasy (Litowitz, 1993, p. 190).



Conclusion

The case studies of precocious reading highlight that learning is both an individual and social phenomenon. Children's learning may be *affected by* adults, but adults cannot claim responsibility for all of children's learning. Sometimes children learn spontaneously, without adult influence or involvement.