

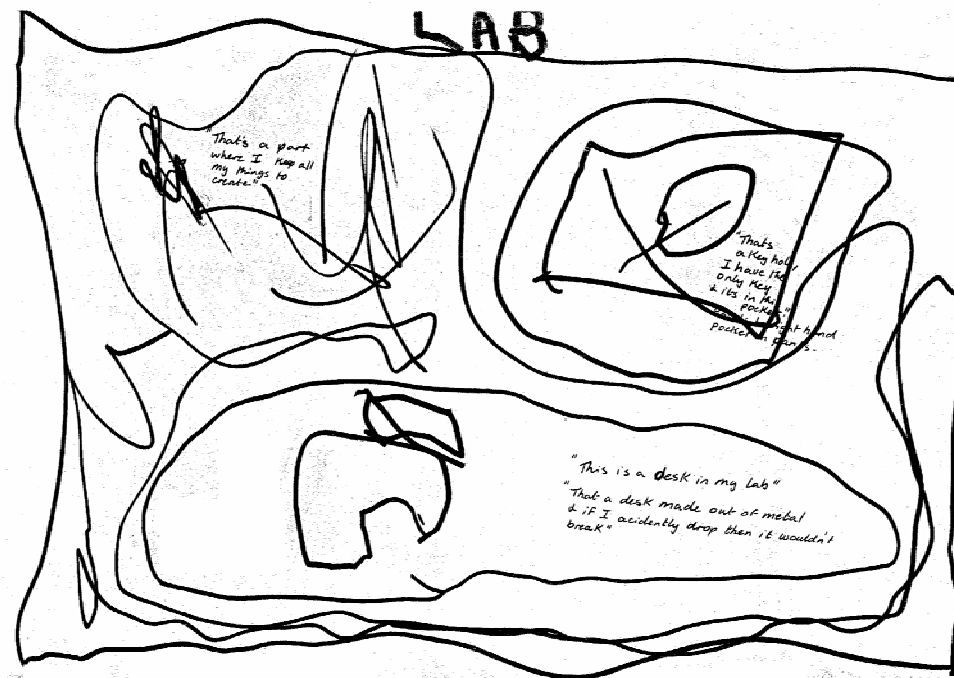
# JUST A LITTLE 4-YEAR-OLD?

## Case Studies of Precocious Readers

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Poster presentation at *Rising Tides Conference*, Wellington, August 2006



One of the case-study children, 4-year-old 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 ECE teacher that “not everyone has a laboratory in their head”. However, during an interview with his EC 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.

## Precocious Reading Abilities

Henry read the following Level 5 passage 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 afterward. Henry's reading of the former passage, from the *Neale Analysis of Reading*, illustrates his competency in reading; although he made seven errors, he had an accuracy rate of 94% on this passage. There were many words in the passage that are not usually able to be read competently by a 4-year-old: "extraordinary", "responsibilities", "expeditions", "knowledge", "surroundings", "illustrated", "circular", "apparently", "territory" and "subsequently".

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: Test Results)

Age-equivalent band scores on the *Burt Word Reading Test* ranged from 6:10 to 10:06 years of age (averaged). Examples of words that children could read from the *Burt* include: "overwhelmed", "fringe", "trudging", "journey", "explorer", "tongue", "encyclopaedia", "urge", "luncheon", "shelves", "binocular", "economy", "terror", "overwhelmed", "universal", "destiny", "events", "emergency".

Children's comprehension test results from the *Neale Analysis of Reading* ranged between 6:03 and 8:03. Comprehension scores were slightly below the reading accuracy ages for the children in the study, 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*, and a comprehension level of 7:01.

Rate of reading, or fluency, was well above chronological age and accuracy level for all the children. They were also highly engaged, self-motivated readers.

Galloping ... gobbling up her book like eating very fast.

He devoured books.

He enjoys it a heck of a lot. There is no way he'd do this much if he didn't enjoy it

*Literacy Abilities of 11 Precocious Readers*

| <i>Identifier</i>                | A                | D                | E                | G                | H                  | I                | J                | L                | M                | N                | O                |
|----------------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|--------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| <i>Gender</i>                    | M                | M                | F                | F                | M                  | F                | F                | M                | M                | M                | M                |
| <i>Entry Age</i>                 | 4:08             | 4:02             | 4:07             | 4:03             | <b>4:09</b>        | <b>4:09</b>      | <b>4:01</b>      | <b>4:08</b>      | <b>4:03</b>      | <b>4:07</b>      | <b>4:10</b>      |
|                                  |                  |                  |                  |                  |                    |                  |                  |                  |                  |                  |                  |
| <b>Neale Form 1 Accuracy</b>     | <b>8:1</b>       | <b>7:05</b>      | <b>8:01</b>      | <b>6:10</b>      | <b>10.08</b>       | <b>7:10</b>      | <b>7:03</b>      | <b>8:01</b>      | <b>6:10</b>      | <b>6:09</b>      | <b>7:08</b>      |
| <i>Neale Form 1 Comprehens'n</i> | 6:11             | 6:05             | 7:01             | 6:07             | 8.03               | 7:01             | 6:09             | 6:09             | 6:07             | 6:03             | 7:01             |
| <i>Neale Form 1 Rate</i>         | 13.0             | 8:09             | 13.0+            | 7:07             | 12.02              | >10.08           | 9.01             | 8.06             | 8:0              | 7:0              | 7:02             |
|                                  |                  |                  |                  |                  |                    |                  |                  |                  |                  |                  |                  |
| <b>Neale Form 2 Accuracy</b>     | <b>7:11</b>      | <b>7:09</b>      | <b>8:10</b>      | <b>6:11</b>      | *                  | <b>7:07</b>      | <b>7:05</b>      | <b>8:01</b>      | <b>7:05</b>      | <b>6:07</b>      | <b>7:08</b>      |
| <i>Neale Form 2 Comprehens'n</i> | 7:02             | 6:06             | 7:02             | 6:04             | *                  | 7:05             | 6:04             | 6:10             | 6:08             | 6:06             | 6:06             |
| <i>Neale Form 2 Rate</i>         | 9:04             | 7:11             | 13.01+           | 9.0              | *                  | 10.03            | 12.03            | 8:0              | 7:05             | 7:03             | 8:08             |
|                                  |                  |                  |                  |                  |                    |                  |                  |                  |                  |                  |                  |
| <i>Neale version used first</i>  | Form 2           | Form 2           | Form 2           | Form 1           | Form 1             | Form 1           | Form 1           | Form 1           | Form 2           | Form 1           | Form 2           |
|                                  |                  |                  |                  |                  |                    |                  |                  |                  |                  |                  |                  |
| <b>Burt Word</b>                 | <b>8:01-8:07</b> | <b>7:05-7:11</b> | <b>8:03-8:07</b> | <b>6:08-7:02</b> | <b>10:04-10:10</b> | <b>7:06-8:00</b> | <b>7:09-8:03</b> | <b>8:00-8:06</b> | <b>6:11-7:05</b> | <b>6:11-7:05</b> | <b>8:10-9:04</b> |
|                                  |                  |                  |                  |                  |                    |                  |                  |                  |                  |                  |                  |
| <i>BPVS age equivalent</i>       | 6:01             | 4:07             | 5:05             | 4:07             | 8:04               | 6:08             | 5:02             | 5:07             | 6:02             | 5:11             | 5:08             |
| <b>BPVS Percentile</b>           | 82               | 58               | 66               | 58               | 99                 | 91               | 80               | 72               | 91               | 84               | 74               |

*(Neale = Neale Analysis of Reading, Burt = Burt Word Reading Test, BPVS = Burt Word Reading Test)*

\* Refused to read the second assessment of the Neale Analysis of Reading

### Parent expectations not limited to age: “We don’t impose limits”

[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. (D: Parent interview, p. 13)

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.

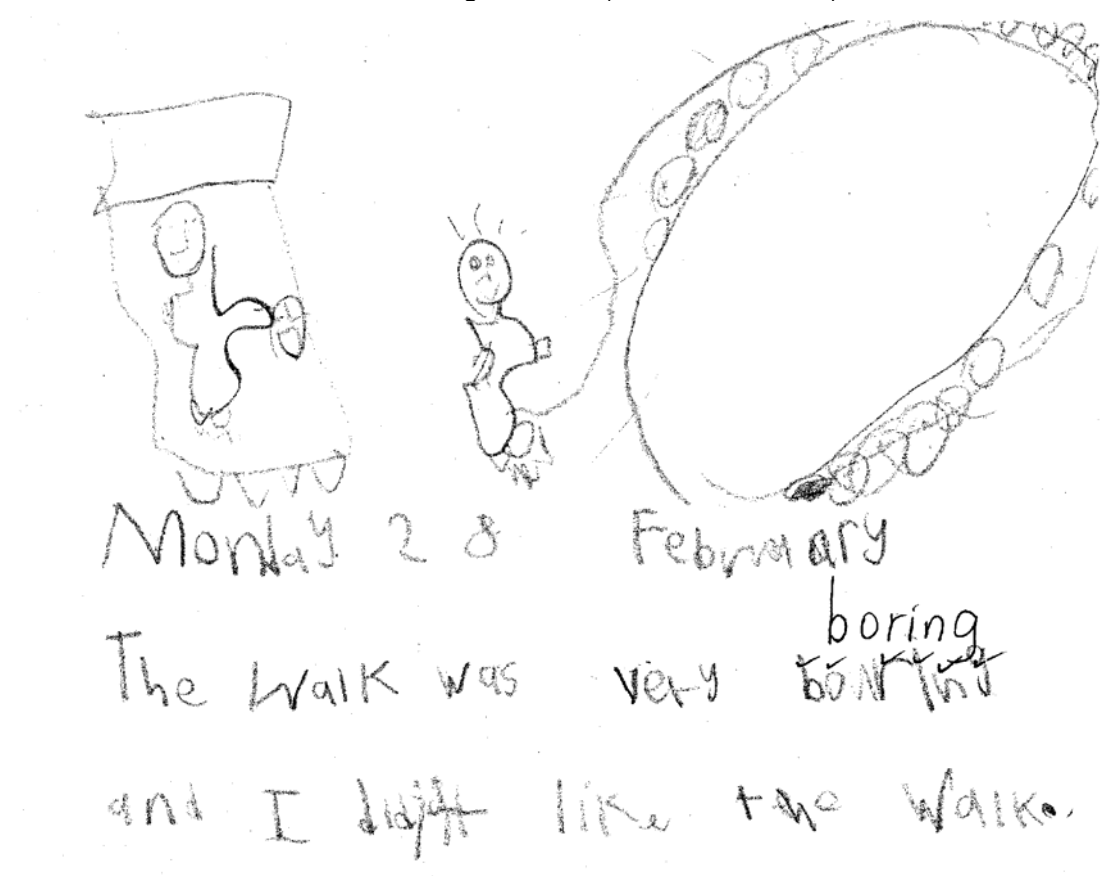
### Need for Challenge

Needs to be challenged – David and [his sister] need to have something to challenge them. (D: Parent interview, p. 4)

He is motivated by the challenge, the race. Likes competition – getting into the car first, getting the car seat belt on . . . (O: Parent interview, p. 3)

My name is David. I am in [name of school house]. I want to be first [story by David on wall at school]. (D: School 2, p. 1)

I think she has to do it; she has to get it done. (J: Parent interview)



### **Age-related teacher expectations: “Just a little boy”, “A little girl.”**

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 (teacher).

(Despite her reading ability) In other ways she’s a normal little 5-year-old (parent).

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 setting.

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 a teacher’s role to “help”.

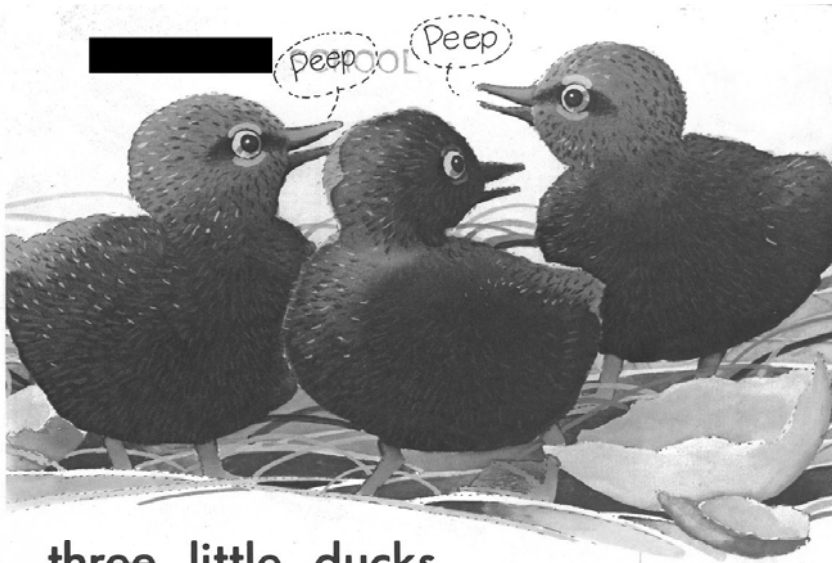
A former kindergarten teacher of one of the children in this study met the child’s primary school teacher at a professional meeting. The kindergarten teacher said how lucky the school teacher was to have the child in her class, and what a wonderful reader he was. The primary school teacher reportedly snorted and said, “Hm, but he can’t tie his shoe laces and he takes forever to eat his lunch”. She also criticized 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 school teacher valued independence in her class pupils more than advanced academic skills.

### **‘Teaching’ Points**

*Literacy:* Book title, one-to-one finger pointing, colours, concepts like “big” or “little”.

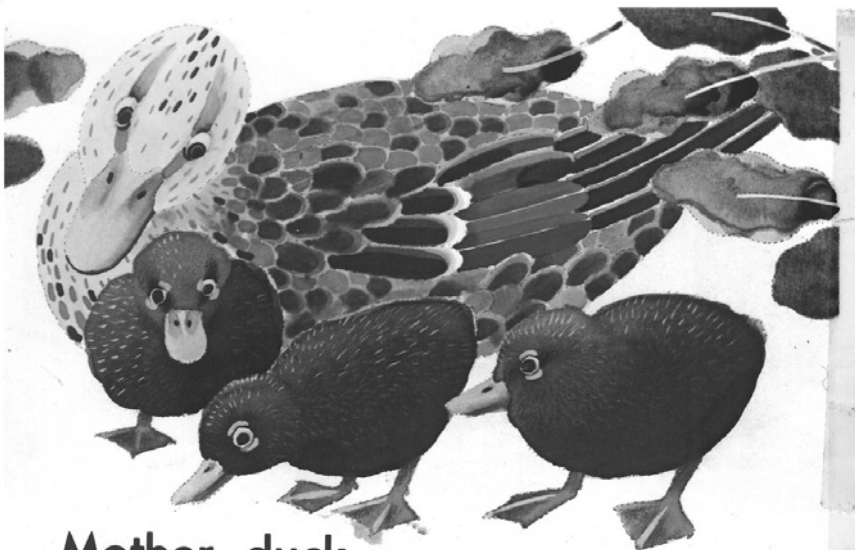
*General:* “broadening out”, “settling in”, “being rounded”, “contributing” “acting appropriately” and “learning what is expected of a 4-year-old”.

*Three Little Ducks* – “A hard one today” (to child with reading accuracy age of 8 yrs).



**three little ducks  
came out of the eggs.**

5



**Mother duck  
looked after them.**

6

Margrain, V. G. (2005). *Precocious readers: Case studies of spontaneous learning, self-regulation and social support in the early years*. Unpublished PhD thesis: Victoria University of Wellington.