'Words and stuff': Exploring children's perspectives of classroom reading in the early school years

Pauline Harris

University of South Australia

ABSTRACT

This is a study of how we can talk with children about their classroom reading experiences, and be informed by what we learn in this conversational space. This study, based on children's rights to have their voices heard in matters affecting their lives, explored children's perspectives of reading in their early grade classrooms. A cohort of 15 children were tracked across their first three years of school. This paper presents a slice of this observational study, reporting findings of a photo-sorting activity that was used with individual children to understand the complexities of children's perspectives of classroom reading and shifts that occurred in their views during their first three years of school.

Children are the most directly affected by reading education policies and practices at school. Yet in Australia they are the least consulted, despite Australia's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) in 1991 – including Article 12, 'Respect for the views of the child', which states:

> When adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account.

In the child-care and preschool sectors, efforts to engage children's participation and voice have burgeoned (e.g., Mac Naughton, Hughes & Smith, 2008; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2009; Sommer, Samuelsson & Hundeide, 2010). This wealth of research testifies to the capacity of children, including the very young, to engage in decision-making processes about matters affecting their lives.

Yet, in matters of literacy education – and specifically reading instruction, the focus of this paper – children's voices have been quite silent. This is not to say that researchers have not represented children and documented their voices in their reading studies, and reported children's voices in the interactions they have in their education settings. But doing so is not the same as consulting with children, and finding out directly what children actually think about what's going on and how things are or are not working for them. As argued by Certo, Moxley, Reffitt & Miller (2010, p. 245), 'we need to honour students' voices at least as much as project what researchers think students perceive about their experiences.'

There has been a smattering of recent studies of children's perspectives of literacy, which deepen understanding of the nature and uses of literacy in children's lives. For example, Pahl and Allan's study (2011) illuminated literacy as social, multimodal practice by documenting children's perspectives and experiences of literacy practices important to them in a library setting but hidden from adults' views.

Revealing what's hidden from adults' views by asking children about their perspectives has been useful for understanding the relative merits of various instructional practices – for example, children's preferences for print stories over oral stories (Harrett & Benjamin, 2005), and children's changing perceptions of literature circles across Grades 1 to 5 (Certo et al., 2010).

Engaging with children's voices also provides important and much-needed provocation for educators to question their own assumptions. For example, Levy's (2008) study of children's perceptions of themselves as readers in the 'third space' between home and school, showed a disconnect between children's and policy

perspectives: these children brought a wealth of literacy resources to their initial school years that they felt they had to abandon in favour of more traditional literacy practices prioritised at school.

By giving voice to children's perspectives, such research reveals unintended consequences of instructional choices. For example, Levy's (2009) study of a group of children's first school year found that their definitions of reading 'narrowed substantially' (Levy, 2009, p. 375), to the point that they came to see themselves as readers only if they could master the levelled readers in their classroom – despite these children reading and enjoying multiple texts of various genres in their out-of-school lives. Lever-Chain (2008) documented unintended negative effects of skills-based approaches on five year old boys' attitudes to reading; and Hancock and Mansfield's investigation (2002) of 6- to 13-year-old children's views about the literacy hour in their classrooms brought into question if the hour is as productive for children's literacy learning as it is claimed to be. As these researchers wrote:

> It is essential that we improve our understanding of how learning takes place through the eyes of those who directly experience what we teach and how we teach it. If we do not give children the opportunity to tell us how they feel, and a chance to influence how they spend their time with us in school, then we make it difficult for them to engage with us as people and with education itself. (Hancock & Mansfield, 2008, p. 197)

Taken together, these early years literacy studies, against the much vaster backdrop of more general participatory research that engage children's voices, validate engagement with children's voices to provide fresh insight into the efficacy of policies and practices written for, not with, children.

In similar spirit, the study reported in this paper broadly canvassed children's views of instructional situations in their classroom reading programs, which are representative of commonplace practices in the early school years – and reports what children thought about these experiences in terms of their emotional wellbeing, perceived difficulty, self-efficacy and relevance to learning to read.

Research design

A theoretical perspective of reading as social practice frames this study (Comber, 2010; Harris, Turbill, Fitzsimmons & McKenzie, 2006). Reading is conceived as practice situated in people's day-to-day lives and is shaped by the contexts of situation and broader social and cultural settings in which reading happens, as Heath (1982) demonstrated in her germinal research study many years ago. From this perspective, reading is defined as engagement with written, visual, auditory and multimodal texts that involves a repertoire of practices that relate to engaging with textual codes, meaning, purpose and critical analysis (Luke & Freebody, 1990).

In exploring what children think about their reading at school, this paper presents a slice of a three year longitudinal study founded on the new sociology of childhood. It is framed by a participatory research approach that openly invites children's perspectives and views children as competent participants to whom the researcher respectfully listens and responds as children share their views (Mayall, 2002). Such an approach acknowledges young children as social actors, competent human beings and key informants on their own lives with views they express with wisdom and insight – indeed, our best source of advice for matters affecting them (Mac Naughton, Hughes & Smith, 2008).

Site and participants

The children in this study attended a NSW suburban school chosen for its socio-cultural diversity and its ongoing relationship with the researcher's university. A group of 15 children was tracked during their time in Kindergarten (K – first year of formal schooling in NSW), Year One (Y1) and Year Two (Y2). Parents of these children gave informed consent in K (when all children were invited to take part) and who remained until the end of the project.

The researcher observed the children in their classrooms, and observations were documented as field notes and audio-transcripts. During these observations, the researcher developed rapport with the children, which was essential to establishing the significant trust that is required when exploring with children what they think about reading in their classroom.

Classroom orientation initially began with full day visits that then narrowed to observing a full 90-minute literacy session each week over two ten-week school terms (Terms 2 and 3) in each classroom, focusing upon reading and related activities.

Each teacher across the three years organised their reading experiences as part of a 90-minute literacy session at the beginning of each school day. Across the three grades, the literacy session involved whole class shared reading, which included the teacher reading to the class and explicitly modelling reading strategies and vocabulary development. Children were read to frequently outside the literacy session and engaged in silent reading (that is, a period of time when all children in the class read quietly alone) and reading with a friend on a daily basis.

These observations documented how each teacher

Table 1. Organisation of reading in the literacy session across the three grades.

1. Whole class shared reading – teacher reading to class and modelling reading strategies with big books
2. Reading Groups – ability-based, informed by teacher assessment and benchmarking with levelled reading series Guided reading with teacher Worksheets and activities (e.g., labelling, completing sentences, sequencing sentences, innovating upon texts, acrostics, crosswords and anagrams)
3. Independent reading – Reading with a friend and reading alone

across the three years organised their reading experiences as part of a 90-minute literacy session, as shown in Table 1. A point of difference among the grades concerned decoding instruction. In all three grades, decoding instruction occurred explicitly and intentionally in the literacy session and involved word building exercises supported by word charts, worksheets and levelled readers, and a strong interplay between spoken and written language. In K and Y2, these materials were provided by the teacher in the main. In Y1, these materials were most often co-constructed by the teacher and children and frequently used within and beyond the literacy session and explicitly connected to other aspects of the literacy program and children's lives. Such connections were much less in evidence in K and Y2. Big books featured prominently in the K program, as they did in Y1, but the nature of the talk in K focused less on making connections with other texts children were reading and to the development of their decoding skills in the context of these big books. Big books were less prominent in Y2.

In Y1, it was not unusual to see children in this class avail themselves of these displays during their individual and small group literacy activities – and to make links to what they recollected in their whole class lessons when working more independently.

The photo-sorting activity

Observations of each classroom's literacy experiences and consultations with each teacher informed the initial development of an innovative photo-sorting activity (PSA) to explore children's perspectives on a one-to-one basis.

The PSA was implemented toward the end of each year's data collection period in Term 3. The PSA was designed to initiate and sustain dialogue between the child and researcher; provide a consistent structure so any emerging trends across the children could be noted; capture the nuances of children's meaning; be flexible enough to explore children's tangents; and have depth that would allow children's thematic interests and concerns to emerge.

The activity involved a set of photos of seven reading situations that recurred across the children's three classrooms as confirmed by the three grade teachers in advance and then triangulated with the observational data. The photos, described in Table 2, were taken in another school, so as not to have people known to children in the photos that might detract their focus on the situations *per se*. These situations varied according to their content focus, instructional emphasis and the kinds of texts used; participants' roles and relationships, shaped in turn by group size and structures; the part that written, spoken and visual language plays; and physical amenities and accommodation. Together, these variables constituted key differences among the social situations in which reading was embedded in the children's classroom (after Harris et al., 2006).

Photos of these situations mediated conversations with each child, with time taken to talk about the photos and ensure a shared understanding of what each photo showed. The child was then asked to sort the photos according to the following criteria:

- Emotional wellbeing: Times I feel happy / Times I feel sad
- Self-efficacy: Things that I'm good at doing / Things that I'm not good at doing
- Perceived difficulty: Times I'm doing easy work / Times I'm doing hard work
- Relevance to learning to read: Things that help me learn to read / Things that don't help me learn to read.

It was made clear that the child did not have to place the photos in either group; and if the child was unsure, they could leave those photos out or place them in a third group. After each sort, the child was asked why s/he had placed the photos as such. Each activity was audio-recorded and transcribed, supported by on-the-spot field notes.

Emergent interpretive techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Glesne, 2006) were used to analyse the transcripts to identify and categorise themes that emerged.

The study's credibility was enhanced by basing the PSA on observed situations in the children's classrooms. Accuracy was ensured by audio-recording and

Table 2. Descriptions of photos in the photo-sorting activity.

Photo	Description
1. Two children reading together	Two children are sitting on a small sofa, intently reading a book together. The book is propped across their laps. One child is pointing to something on the open page, and the other child is looking at what the child is pointing to.
2. Children doing a reading game	A group of four children are sitting on the floor. They have the picture book, *Rosie's Walk*, in front of them. They have a number of cards in front of them on the floor, each card showing a different part of the story. The task is to sequence the cards in order of the story. The children's gazes are on the cards, one child holds a card and another child is pointing to a card they have placed on the book.
3. A child doing a reading worksheet at a table with a book nearby	A child is sitting at a desk in the classroom, doing a worksheet. There are four other children partially in view, also with worksheets at this group of tables. All are intently gazing down to their work, writing with their pencils and with picture books next to them.
4. Children writing at a group of tables	Three children are shown writing stories in this photo, with three other children at the fringes of this photo, who are also sitting at these tables. One child is resting on her elbow and appears to be thinking about her story that is in front of her. The other two children are writing on their paper.
5. Teacher reading to the class	A teacher is reading a picture book to the class. The photo shows the teacher's face as she reads, with backs of children sitting on the floor in front of the teacher and looking at the book.
6. Teacher giving a decoding lesson	A teacher is standing by the chalkboard in front of a class of children who are sitting on the floor. On the board is a chalk drawing of a tree with initial consonant sounds and vowel sounds written on it. Above the board are a number of letter/sound charts and word displays.
7. A child reading alone	A child is sitting at a desk reading a book during silent reading time. The child is intently looking at the open book and about to turn a page. Two children are in the background, sitting in the reading corner quietly reading their books.

transcribing the photo-sorting interactions. Evidence of convergence, inconsistency and contradiction in the data was tracked by triangulating transcribed data with observational data, and triangulating what a child said across each different photo-sort.

Findings

A summary of the PSA outcomes for the seven reading situations over the three years is presented in Table 3. The themes that emerged across the three years from children's discussions are summarised in Table 4. Key data trends are explored for each pair of sorting criteria below, accompanied by children's explanations in their own words that link to the themes overviewed in Table 4.

Emotional wellbeing: Times I feel happy/Times I feel sad

The highest proportion of 'happy' associations occurred for two children reading together and a teacher reading to the class, as seen in Table 3. Children across the three years associated children reading together with a happy time for reasons predominantly related to others. Over the years, children showed an increasing awareness of the give-and-take help children provide one another – for example, *'We read together'* (K child), *'I really like reading with another person'* (Y1 child) and *'If they don't know a word, I can help them, and if I don't know a word, they can help me'* (Y2 child). Enjoying being in a social setting with *'sharing'* (K child) and *'not being lonely'* (Y2 child) also featured strongly here. However, the 'sad' responses in K and Y1 showed that some children preferred to read alone – for example, *'I don't want anybody to read it with me because I can read it on my own self'* (K child). The 'sad' responses in Y1 and Y2 related to what was being read – for example, *'Sometimes there might be a sad thing in the book that might make you sad'* (Y2 child).

Across the three years, the children predominantly associated a teacher reading to the class as a time they feel happy. In K, Y1 and Y2, children's 'happy' reasons related to their own enjoyment of stories or their view that teachers enjoy reading to children – as one K child said, *'Teachers like reading books'*. 'Sad' reasons related to children not enjoying the story being read – for example, *'Sometimes I'm happy and sometimes I'm sad, because, well, that's the way I just feel. Sometimes the teacher reads a story I like, and sometimes I just don't like it'* (Y1 child). Generally across the three years, the children *'want to have a listen'* and

Table 3. Overview of children's photo-sorting outcomes across the three years.

	H	S	G	NG	EW	HW	HL	DHL
1. Two children reading together	87% 93% 80%	13% 7% 13%*	87% 73% 67%	13% 27% 33%	73% 53% 73%	27% 47% 27%	67% 93% 87%	33% 7% 13%
2. Children doing a reading game	53% 60% 80%	47% 33%* 20%	20% 53% 60%	80% 47% 40%	47% 53% 60%	53% 47% 40%	27% 67% 80%	67%* 27%* 20%
3. A child doing a reading worksheet at a table with a book nearby	93% 73% 67%	7% 27% 33%	53% 93% 93%	47% 7% 7%	60% 53% 80%	40% 47% 20%	60% 67% 73%	40% 33% 20%*
4. Children writing at a group of tables	80% 53% 67%	20% 47% 33%	60% 73% 80%	20% 27% 20%	47% 60% 73%	53% 40% 20%*	73% 67% 73%	27% 33% 27%
5. Teacher reading to a class	87% 80% 80%	7%* 13% 13%	67% 87% 67%	33% 13% 33%	60% 100% 67%	40% 0% 33%	87% 87% 80%	13% 13% 20%
6. Teacher giving a decoding lesson	60% 80% 60%	40% 20% 33%*	60% 80% 73%	40% 20% 27%	40% 53% 47%	53%* 47% 53%	67% 93% 80%	33% 7% 20%
7. A child reading alone	60% 60% 60%	40% 33%* 40%	60% 53% 67%	40% 47% 33%	53% 60% 60%	47% 40% 33%*	53% 87% 93%	47% 13% 7%

n = 15 children * = one child undecided

First percentage in each cell is for Kindergarten; the second percentage Year 1; the third percentage Year 2

Key

H = Times I feel happy
S = Times I feel sad
G = Things I'm good at doing
NG = Things I'm not good at doing
EW = Times I'm doing easy work
HW = Times I'm doing hard work
HL = Things that help me learn to read
DHL = Things that don't help me learn to read

'like hearing books'. The presence of others emerged as an explicit 'happy' reason, such as when a Y2 child commented, '*You've got people sitting next to you, and when you haven't, it's lonely*'. There was an implicit sense of the collective brought to the fore, such as when a Y1 child observed, '*We like stories at school*'.

This sense of the collective contrasted with the situation of a child reading alone, for which children's views shifted when talking about happy and sad times – revealing consistent outcomes across the three years. Here it was the absence of others that children highlighted. Some children saw this absence as a negative feature – for example, '*There is nobody to talk to*' (K child), '*You don't have anyone else to read*' (Y1 child) and '*You haven't got anyone to help you and it's lonely*' (Y2 child). However, other children viewed this absence more favourably – for example, '*Reading on my own is good and I don't feel lonely*' (K child); '*You're reading by yourself*' (Y1 child) and '*You don't kind of get angry and stuff like that when you're fighting over a book. Like if you get a book straight away and read it at the table, nobody at the table will bother you*' (Y2 child).

Enjoyment of reading alone and self-efficacy as a reader increased from 50% of 'happy' reasons in K; for example, '*I love reading stories*' to 83% in Y1, for example, '*I like reading to myself*', but dipped to 17% of 'happy' reasons in Y2. Concern with others, although not directly present in this situation, dominated Y2 children's responses. Children felt 'happy' when they felt they were not being disturbed and 'sad' when they perceived others distracted them – for example, '*No one can hear me and I can read faster and I have lots*

Table 4. Distribution of emergent themes across the three years.

Total instances of each theme	Instances of each theme in K	Instances of each theme in Year 1	Instances of each theme in Year 2
Others 298 instances	128 (43%)	82 (28%)	87 (29%)
Content 230 instances	105 (46%)	67 (29%)	57 (25%)
Self-efficacy 225 instances	42 (19%)	75 (33%)	107 (48%)
What reading involves 157 instances	37 (24%)	62 (40%)	57 (36%)
Learning 125 instances	25 (20%)	40 (32%)	60 (48%)
How school works 85 instances	52 (62%)	20 (23%)	12 (15%)
Wellbeing 40 instances	35 (88%)	2 (6%)	2 (6%)
Total instances of themes = 1,160			

of time to read and I know how to spell and I finish the book'.

Children's responses held quite steady in K and Y2 for times they reported they felt happy in a teacher-led decoding lesson, with a distinct spike in Y1. 'Happy' reasons in K related to learning – for example, *'The teachers can learn you everything, even reading.'* Learning prevailed as a reason for being happy in this situation in Y1, with a clear focus on learning words and letters – for example, *'I like when the teacher tells me so I can learn the letters'*, *'I can join some words together, because I know lots of words that I can do that with'* and *'You learn. You can learn everything.'* Learning also emerged as the most frequent reason given for relating this situation to a happy time in Y2 – for example, *'We can learn and get more knowledge in our head and so we can remember it'*. 'Sad' or ambivalent reasons concerned too much work to do, for example, *'You have to write all those things. It's too much'* (K child); physical wellbeing, for example, *'I get sore feet. I'm staying there too long'* (K child); already knowing how to do what is being taught, for example, *'It's just OK because I know lots of words and I know how to do all that already'* (Y1 child); and being able to contribute, for example, *'I'm happy sometimes, sometimes I'm sad because sometimes I can think of words and sometimes I can't think of many words'* (Y1 child).

Self-Efficacy: Things I'm good at doing/ Things I'm not good at doing

The highest proportion of 'good at' associations was made with a child doing a reading worksheet. As Table 3 reveals, there was a doubling of such associations from K to Y1 that persisted in Y2. In K, others were sometimes perceived as a support to one's self-efficacy, for example, *'I'm good at doing this because that's nice to do, because you got lots of friends at your desk'*; sometimes a hindrance, for example, *'I'm not good at doing this because friends talk to me while I work'*. A minority of K children felt more efficacious when working alone – for example, *'I'm good at this one because I'm working. I'm working by myself'*.

In Y1 and Y2, there was more of a focus on how children viewed their efficacy in terms of what they saw reading involved in this situation – for example, children said they were good at worksheets because *'I write letters'*, *'I'm good at working'* *'I try and sound out the words'*, and *'I know how to spell lots of words. I can write very well and I know how to copy books and I know where to put the books so I can see clearly'*.

Children's sense of how reading works at school emerged as the most frequent reason that K children said they were 'good at' worksheets – for example, *'If I'm in Kindergarten and I don't know the words, I can just get out of my desk and say what I mean and the*

teacher will write the word for me on a card and I can copy it'.

There was a progressive decline in 'good at' associations from K to Y2 for two children reading together. All the K children's 'good at' reasons for two children reading together related to others being there, self-efficacy and what one does as a reader. In Y1 and Y2, self-efficacy emerged more explicitly as a concern – for example, '*I can't read properly*' in Y1 and '*I'm not very good at reading, maybe because I can't read properly*' in Y2. The other 'not good at' reasons related to children not liking this situation – as one child stated quite plainly, '*I just don't like it*' (Y2). Some children in Y1 and Y2, however, did explain positive reasons related to their self-efficacy in this situation – for example, '*I'm good at reading because I look at the words and sometimes I can read them*' (Y1 child) and '*We can both read a story and if we don't know, then we can stop and then we'll sound it out*' (Y2 child).

The presence of others dominated children's reasons across the years for relating this situation to things they are good at doing – for example, '*My friend's there and he's kind to me*' (K child), '*I'm not reading on my own. I'm with the children*' (Y1 child) and '*If you don't know, the other person knows it, maybe*' (Y2 child). However, some K children related this situation to something they are not good at doing because they saw others as a hindrance or not helpful – for example, '*I don't want to read with somebody else, only myself, because I won't know the words and I want to get help from the teacher*'.

In Y2, self-efficacy as a reader emerged explicitly as the predominant reason children associated reading alone with something they are either good or not good at doing – for example, '*I can read very well and I know all the words. I know what the story is about*' in contrast to '*I'm not good at this because I'm not good at reading*'. Acknowledging what reading involves was captured in these self-efficacy reasons, and away from self-efficacy, children acknowledged the complexity of reading – for example, a Y1 child explained, '*Well, reading is a very hard thing to do. You have to try and look at the word. Then if you don't know a word, that's hard. It's very hard*'. In contrast, a Y2 child commented, '*Reading on your own is easy if you're good at it. You can just get nothing wrong. I'm good at reading, believe me*'.

When the children talked about a teacher reading to the class as something they were good/not good at doing, there were similar sorting outcomes in K and Y2, with a marked increase in Y1. Children in K associated being good at this situation when they enjoy the stories being read, for example, '*I love the book*'; they learn, for example, '*I like listening, I might learn about reading';* they interpret how teaching happens, for example, '*I can say the words and that's how you get teached to read*'; and they do not perceive any impediments, for example, '*I haven't got blocked up ears*'. In Y1, the children's reasons all related to their efficacy at listening to the teacher and connected such listening with learning. Y1 children also noted their self-efficacy in terms of '*doing the alphabet*' and '*knowing the words*'. Similar 'good at' reasons emerged in Y2, with strongest emphasis being put on the importance of listening to the teacher – for example, '*If you don't listen to the teacher, you don't quite do it good. But when you do listen to the teacher, then it will get easy and you can do it very good*'.

Perceived difficulty: Times I'm doing easy work/Times I'm doing hard work

There were quite evenly mixed 'easy' and 'hard work' associations across all situations in the three years – with the notable exceptions of two children reading together and a teacher reading to the class.

For two children reading together, the presence of others dominated children's 'easy work' reasons in K and Y2. However, in Y1, self-efficacy dominated as both a reason for 'easy work'; for example, '*I know how to read*' and for 'hard work'; for example, '*I can't read properly*'. Also in Y1 and Y2 for this situation, some children's 'hard work' responses acknowledged the difficulty of reading without detracting from their sense of self-efficacy as readers – for example, '*Reading is the hard thing because you have to look at the words and stuff*' was a reason one child gave who saw himself as a good reader.

As for a teacher reading to the class, K children finding this situation to be hard work referred to their physical wellbeing being a problem, for example, '*I get sore legs and sore arms. It takes too long*' and difficulty listening, for example, '*You have to listen. That's hard, because if you're not listening, the teacher won't read a book to you, it's too noisy*'.

In Y1, children who associated this situation with 'easy work' were those who relinquished their agency to that of their teacher – for example, '*It's easy because the teacher reads and we don't have to read*'. Children's sense of diminished responsibility in this situation persisted into Y2 – for example, '*It's easy because all you do is just listen to the teacher. You don't have to do any work*'. That said, some children in Y1 and Y2 linked this situation to learning – for example, '*My teacher reads a book and then I will learn the words from the book*' (Y1 child).

Connecting reading alone with easy work varied

only slightly across the three years, as seen in Table 3. For all 'easy/hard work' sorts in K, Y1 and Y2, others emerged as the prevailing reason – for example, *'It's easy because I like reading on my own. Because if someone helps me, I won't be able to think the words'* (Y1 child), *'It's hard because you don't have anyone to speak to'* (K child); *'It's easy because no-one can hear you'* (Y2 child) and *'It's hard because I haven't got anyone to help me'* (Y2 child).

'Easy work' saw a clear increase from K to Y2 for doing worksheets – predominantly because children increasingly over the years construed this situation as one that involved copying. In K, children found the situation to be hard work because there was no-one helping the child, for example, *'You are just alone by yourself'*; physical discomfort, for example, *'My hands get tired';* and excessive work, for example, *There is too much to do'*. Those K children finding this situation to be 'easy work' talked about going through the motions – for example, *'I just scribble all the time'* and *'It is easy to write anything'*. In Y1, a similar proportion of children continued to find worksheets to be 'hard work', although most of these same Y1 children reported they were good at doing worksheets – both constructs arising from similar reasons related to self-efficacy in writing, for example, *'I can write the words by myself and I know how to spell';* sounding out letters, for example, *'I try and sound out the letters';* and trying hard, for example, *'I have to write and it's hard but I'm good at working'*. By Y2, all the children's reasons related to copying, regardless of whether or not they associated worksheets with easy or hard work – for example, *'This is hard because you don't know what word you're up to because you are copying'* and *'This is easy because you can copy the words'*.

There was a steady increase in 'easy work' associations for children writing at a table (from 47% in K, to 73% in Y2). In K, children's 'easy' reasons related most frequently to looking after their physical comfort, for example, *'I just write it very slowly and gently'*, and their 'hard work' reasons most often related to there being too much work to do and other children disturbing them, for example, *'All the children talk and it disturbs me'*. By Y1, children placed stronger emphasis on the mental effort involved – for example, *'Well, you have to try and concentrate on writing because sometimes you make mistakes and your paper is all dirty'*. Otherwise, children commented on their self-efficacy as writers that they attributed to enjoyment and evidenced in helping others. Similar reasons emerged in Y2.

There was all but an even split of 'easy' and 'hard work' associations with a teacher giving a decoding lesson. In K, children's reasons primarily related to matters of self-efficacy in terms of writing letters, doing tidy work and recognising words, letters and sounds. In Y1, these self-efficacy reasons re-emerged as did learning and listening – for example, *'You listen and learn and look'*. In turn, listening and learning were reprised and most predominantly featured in Y2 – for example, *'You can just look with your eyes, you listen and look with your eyes, and then what she's saying will then snap into your head, and then you can turn your head and when you're doing the work, you think you will know where it is'*.

Relevance to learning to read: Things that help me learn to read/Things that don't help me learn to read

The most frequent associations with situations helping children learn to read were a teacher reading to the class (consistently in the top 20% for all three years); two children reading together (markedly increasing from K to Y1 and Y2); and children reading alone (seeing a sharp increase from K to Y1 and Y2).

Across the three years, there was a strong sense among the children that a teacher reading to the class helps them learn to read. In K, children related this helpfulness to a quiet ambience, being able to see the text that is being read, copying and looking at the pictures. In Y1 and Y2, children put a stronger emphasis on listening and thought processes as well as teacher modelling – for example, *'I can say the words. I can remember the words that the teacher is saying and say them properly'* (Y1 child), *'The teacher has brought special reading for the children and so we can learn how the teacher reads, so we can read better'* (Y2 child) and *'The teacher has the book, then you might have it, and if there's hard words, the teacher will know them'* (Y2 child). For those children who did not relate the teacher reading to the class as something that helps them learn to read, reasons related to being disturbed by others and not having the book in hand.

Associating two children reading together with things children said help them learn to read saw a rise from K to Y1, with a slight drop in Y2. In K, the helpfulness of others featured as a reason, as did *'copying'* from a friend so they could read too. A child's sense of their own functioning as a reader emerged but only slightly in K – for example, one K child was emphatic that this situation doesn't help them learn to read *'because my brain gets cold'*. In Y1 and Y2, reasons shifted more predominantly to what reading involves and what a child does as a reader in this situation that helps – for example, *'You just read'* and *'We look at the words'* – while also acknowledging reciprocal help with a friend nearby.

Aligning reading alone with things children said helped them learn to read almost doubled from K to Y2. The K children who found this situation helpful made links to how or why teaching and learning happen – for example, *'This helps me because you can just say the words and then that teaches you how to read'* and *'This helps because it makes my brain better, because no-one can help me'*. The K children who did not find this situation to be helpful predominantly explained their reasons in terms of their negative sense of their own capabilities as readers – for example, *'It doesn't help me because I can't do it, because some books, you don't know the words'*.

In contrast and once in Y1, the children showed a heightened sense of their own functioning as readers when talking about reading alone – for example, *'It helps me learn to read because you just look at the words and look at the pictures and you have to read it in your mind'*. This sense of reader functioning continued as a prevailing theme in the Y2 data, linked also to knowing how to read, having books with easy words, everyone being silent – and, as one Y2 child put it, *'If you're reading a book and you don't know a word, you try and sound the word out, and that's easier for you to read, to get it into your head'*.

K children connected a teacher giving a decoding lesson to something that helps them learn to read in terms of learning letters, for example, *'The teacher tells us, like, what is that letter and she says "e"'*; being able to listen, for example, *'I can listen to what the teacher says and listen to what to do with the paper and what to write and draw on the paper'* and relating letters and sounds; for example, *'You can just say /g/, "a", "b", "c". You can just say the words and then you can just read it'*. In Y1, children continued with these kinds of reasons and related the helpfulness of this situation to putting letters together to make words. Similar reasons emerged in Y2.

The K children who reported that decoding lessons do not help them learn to read talked about excess in terms of *'the teacher writing too many letters'* and there being *'too much to do'*. Y1 children who expressed similar responses made comments such as *'there needs to be words for you to read'* comparing this situation with other situations in the PSA that have words to read.

When talking about a group of children writing together, children's sense of the reading/writing connection remained quite steady across the three years. Some K children were adamant that writing had nothing to do with reading – for example, one K child rhetorically asked, *'We don't write to read, do we?'* Other K children were clearer about their sense of connecting this situation to reading – for example, *'It helps me learn to read because when you're writing, then you have to read that word'*, Children's reasons in Y1 more consistently focused on the intrinsic relationship between reading and writing, for example, *'It helps me learn to read because you write words and sometimes you might not know what to write and then you remember the right word and you write it and then you remember the word'*, or lack of a reading/writing connection, for example, *'This doesn't help because you aren't reading. You are writing'*. Similar patterns emerged in Y2, with a sense of ambivalence remaining for only a minority of the children.

Discussion

In the pedagogic situations in which reading instruction is embedded at school, the social nature of these situations is closely entwined with their instructional or academic content. For the children in this study, the social content was part and parcel of their academic learning and could be a source of support or contention for them. Together, the social and academic content of children's various classroom reading situations impacted their sense of emotional wellbeing, self-efficacy, perceived difficulty and connections to what they thought helps them learn to read.

Such impact may support instructional objectives, but also can produce unintended consequences that can be best understood by engaging with children's voices and perspectives – as illustrated in previous studies (Hancock & Mansfield, 2002; Lever-Chain, 2002; Levy, 2009), and taken further in this study.

The social and academic content of classroom reading situations emerges, then, as a key consideration when evaluating the relative merits of classroom practices – thereby enriching the research done to date in this regard through children's voices (Certo et al., 2010; Harrett & Benjamin, 2005), framed by a comprehensive sociocultural perspective of reading that takes stock of reading practices *and* the contexts in which they occur.

Children's perspectives documented in this study shed light on the multi-dimensional and variable nature of reading as a social practice in their early classroom lives. The children were clearly aware of the differentiation of their reading experiences according to the kinds of situations in which their reading was embedded. Children were attuned to situational variables such as roles and relationships, content focus and instructional emphasis, which shaped how children in various ways construed and participated in the seven situations explored in this study.

Children revealed how situational variables shaped

their emotional wellbeing, self-efficacy, perceived difficulty and their connections to what helps them learn to read. In particular, children across the three years indicated that their greatest sense of emotional wellbeing resided in reading with a peer or the teacher reading to the class. These same two situations, as well as a child reading alone, also aligned the most strongly with what children perceived helped them learn to read. Two of these three situations saw the presence of others providing give-and-take support and companionship, and they all involved enjoying and engaging with sustained texts, often of the children's own choosing, acknowledging that teachers, too, have enjoyable books they share with the class.

Children's connectedness to others was closely tied to their sense of wellbeing as early readers, especially in their first year of school – a time when figuring out how school worked emerged as a predominant concern mitigated by children's sense of support and, comfort that comes from being with others.

As children progressed from Kindergarten to Year One and Year Two, their concerns with how school works gave way to concerns with their own efficacy as readers. Self-efficacy was closely related to children's agency in their classroom reading situations. Children who saw and exercised their own agency as active, reflective participants commented favourably on their efficacy in terms of reading, listening, thinking and learning in their classroom reading situations. Moreover, if the children favourably perceived their self-efficacy as readers, then the absence of others did not emerge as a deterrent and indeed was often seen to be a positive feature of a situation. The converse held for those children who felt more dependent upon others to be able to cope with reading at school – these children did not perceive themselves as good readers and expressed their preference to read with others who could help them.

Making connections was part of how some children exercised their agency, and was linked to decoding lessons, writing and doing worksheets, and listening to a teacher read to the class. The peak in children connecting a teacher giving a decoding lesson to something that helps them learn to read in Y1 may be attributable to the more consistently personalised and contextualised approach taken by the teacher in her whole class decoding lessons; this was noted specifically in terms of the teacher explicitly and purposefully relating instruction to other aspects of the literacy program and children's text encounters in and out of the classroom. These interpretations are a matter worthy of further investigation from children's points of view.

A further implication for this line of inquiry is continuing to give voice to children in their literacy education space, using means such as the PSA reported in this paper. The PSA proved to be an effective tool for engaging with children in sustained dialogue, and understanding how children construct classroom reading situations and, how in consequence they construct themselves as readers and participants in these situations.

As importantly, such inquiry needs to consider how to establish a systematic presence of children's voices in related realms of policy and practice – voices that are endowed with authenticity and which are taken seriously in subsequent deliberations. There is much we can learn from children to inform our reading policies and practices, for, to quote a child in this study, 'I know about things'.

Acknowledgment

The author gratefully acknowledges Dr Eleni Giannakis for her support in the development of this paper.

References

Certo, J., Moxley, K., Reffitt, K. & Miller, J.A. (2010). 'I learned how to talk about a book': Children's perceptions of literature circles across grade and ability levels. *Literacy Research and Instruction, 49* (3), 243–263.

Comber, B. (2010). Critical literacies in place: teachers who work for just and sustainable communities. In J. Lavia & M. Moore (Eds.), *Cross-cultural perspectives in policy and practice: decolonising community contexts*. London: Routledge.

Glesne, C. (2006). *Becoming qualitative researchers: an introduction*. Boston: Pearson Allyn & Bacon.

Hancock, R. & Mansfield, M. (2002). The literacy hour: a case for listening to children. *The Curriculum Journal, 13* (2), 183–200.

Harrett, J. & Benjamin, T. (2005). What is a real story? Investigating the perceptions of Key Stage One children. *Early Years, 25* (1), 31–42.

Harris, P., Turbill, J., Fitzsimmons, P. & McKenzie, B. (2006). *Reading in the primary school years*. 2nd Edition. Melbourne: Thomson.

Heath, S.B. (1982). What no bedtime story means: Narrative skills at home and school. *Language in Society, 11* (2), 49–76.

Lever-Chain, J. (2008). Turning boys off? Listening to what five-year-olds say about reading. *Literacy, 42* (2), 83–91.

Levy, R. (2008). 'Third spaces' are interesting places: Applying 'third space theory' to nursery-aged children's constructions of themselves as readers. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy, 8* (1), 43–66.

Levy, R. (2009). Children's perceptions of reading and the use of reading scheme texts. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 39* (3), 361–377.

Luke, A. & Freebody, P. (1990). Literacies programs: debate sand demands in cultural context. *Prospect: Australian Journal of TESOL, 5,* 7–16.

Mac Naughton, G., Hughes, P., Smith, K. (Eds.) (2008). Young children as active citizens. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Mayall, B. (2002). *Towards a sociology for childhood: Thinking from children's lives*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Pahl, K. & Allan, C. (2011). 'I don't know what literacy is': Uncovering hidden literacies in a community library using ecological and participatory research methodologies with children. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy, 11* (2), 190–213.

Percy-Smith, B., Thomas, N. (Eds.) (2009). *Handbook of children & young people's participation*. London: Routledge.

Sommer, D., Samuelsson, I.P. & Hundeide, K. (2010). *Child perspectives & children's perspectives in theory and practice*. London: Springer.

Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research – grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

United Nations (1989). *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Retrieved from http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm

Pauline Harris is Professor and the de Lissa Chair, Early Childhood (Research) at the University of South Australia, in partnership with SA Department for Education and Child Development. Pauline's areas of research include socioculturally inclusive literacy pedagogies and practices; voices of children as active citizens and learners; and relationships among research, policy and practice. See http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/staff/Homepage.asp?Name=Pauline.Harris