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Already Reading in Early

Childhood

Issues of identification, accommodation and collaboration

Valerie Margrain

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INTRODUCTION

Children who are "precocious readers", or able to read at an unusually young age without having had "formal instruction", have attracted considerable interest from literacy researchers (Henderson, Jackson & Mukamal, 1993). This is because precocious readers enable researchers to identify children's reading strategies and methods of decoding.

This paper presents data on precocious readers as they transitioned into school from their early childhood education setting (see also Margrain, 1998). Primary questions considered include: 'how do precocious readers emerge?', 'what role do parents play?', and 'what happens when children who can already read go to school?'

A fundamental premise of this study was that parents have valuable observational knowledge of their children. This study explored how the parents' knowledge, including their recognition of their children's dispositions and abilities, as well as their responsiveness to, and advocacy for, their child, was utilized when children went to school already able to read.

A further purpose of this study was to examine whether international findings about precocious readers are pertinent to the New Zealand context. Since New Zealand-based research on examples of precocity is limited, results from other countries, such as the United States, often need to be called upon. It is important therefore to confirm whether findings from overseas are relevant to our own cultural setting.

This study explores a range of issues relating to transition to school including parents' reports of the effects of beginning school on their children's emotional well-being and reading behaviour. It reports on the experience of transition to school for parents, including school consultation and collaboration, and teacher practices.

The findings on precocious readers, including on the role of the parents and issues relating to transition to school, have clear implications for literacy practices, teachers and managers in early childhood education settings. These are discussed in the final sections.

Defining Young Able Readers

The most widely used definition of 'precocious readers' uses the criterion of the child reading before beginning school or 'formal instruction' (Jackson, Donaldson & Cleland, 1988; Henderson, Jackson & Mukamal, 1993). However, there is also a broader definition of 'precocious readers' that includes 'children whose progression through the earliest stages of literacy acquisition is so exceptionally rapid that they merit special attention from researchers and school personnel' (Jackson & Roller, 1993, p. xiii). My study took this more inclusive view of precocity in reading, and the term 'young able readers' was adopted to refer to both those children who were reading before beginning school and those who accelerated rapidly once they began school[1]. In an introductory letter to parents involved in the project, 'young able readers' were defined as being 'above average in reading interest and ability. They are likely to be within 4 and 7 years of age.'

The use of the term also reflects that this is a study about young children who were able to read well, rather than about how precocious the readers were, or what reading strategies were employed. [2]

Early Reading and Giftedness

Precocious reading can be recognised as *gifted behaviour* (Jackson & Butterfield, 1986;) with the child demonstrating *gifted performance* (Jackson & Butterfield, 1989). Jackson and Roller (1993, p. 33) note that 'by definition, any precocious reader has passed a major

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[1] An example is a child who refused to read before beginning school, saying 'kindy kids don't read', but who was assessed by the school as having a ten-year-old reading ability at the age of five years six months.

[2] In New Zealand the term 'precocious' is sometimes used as a derogatory descriptor.

developmental milestone at an unusually young age.'

The Jacob J. Javits Gifted and Talented Student Education Act of 1988 (U.S.) recognises beginning to read early as an instance of high performance capability in a specific academic field (Jackson & Roller, 1993) and Sternberg's (1995) giftedness criterion of *rarity* has clear relevance to precocious reading ability. In Durkin's (1966) sample of 2000 children, only two percent could be classified as precocious readers. Jackson and Lu (1992) estimated readers to be between one and 3.5 percent of the population.

In New Zealand, children with special abilities, talents or giftedness have only recently received national recognition. In 2001, the Minister of Education convened a working party on 'gifted and talented students', which reported to government in November of 2001. A press release, on 9 July 2002, quotes the Minister of Education as saying 'Government policy has taken a major step forward and for the first time is offering substantially more support for gifted and talented students' (Ministry of Education, 2002).

On the 29th November 2002, a further press release announced that 17 programmes would be funded to 'ensure New Zealand's gifted and talented students have the opportunity to reach their full potential as New Zealand's future leaders' (New Zealand Government, 2002). A total of $1.2 million was granted to support the stated initiatives. However, none of the initiatives related to early childhood education.

METHOD

The study from which this paper draws used an approach similar to that used in the widely acknowledged studies by Durkin (1966) and Clark (1976). Both Durkin and Clark used retrospective parents' accounts, including interviews and questionnaires to elicit

information about their children's abilities.

Anbar (1986), Brenna (1995) and Stainthorp and Hughes (1999) used a multiple case study research approach to learning about early readers, while Jackson and colleagues (US) and Thompson and Fletcher-Flinn and colleagues (NZ) used experimental approaches to focus more closely on reading acquisition strategies and phonemic awareness.

Recruiting Participants

Two approaches were made to recruit participants for my study. Firstly, information leaflets about the study, and accompanying questionnaires, were made available at the 1998 Annual General Meeting of the New Zealand Association for Gifted Children (NZAGC). Secondly, an advertisement appeared in the *Apex[3] Journal* 1998 inviting parents to contact me for a questionnaire if they felt their child was a young able reader. Unbeknown to me, a copy of the questionnaire was also passed to parents of children who attended "one-day-schools" at the George Parkyn National Centre for Gifted Education.

Parental nomination of their child as a young able reader was used as the eligibility criterion for inclusion of children in the study on the basis that previous studies have shown that parents do discern reading ability at an early age when this is present (Davis & Rimm, 1994; Holden, 1996). Parents were also invited to provide examples of formal assessment results (and many did); however, these were not used as an eligibility criterion for participation in the study.

These approaches resulted in a total of 44 questionnaires completed according to the nominated criteria; this represented information about a total of 48 children.

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[3] *Apex* is an educational journal for teachers and parents of gifted and talented children.

Questionnaire

The study questionnaire asked parents of young able readers to complete and post back a four-page survey with six sections: Family Characteristics; Adult Readers; Developing Readers; Observing Readers; Transition; Identification of Young Able Readers. Additional comments were also invited.

An introductory section, on the identification of 'young able readers', asked if any agencies or personnel had been involved with identification or support of the child, whether any formal assessments had occurred and why the parent considered the child to be a young able reader.

The section on family characteristics explored biographical data such as cultural affiliation, number of adults in the home, number of siblings, birth order of the young able reader, educational qualifications and employment of adult family members, use of public library and book ownership. Parents were also asked whether any immediate or extended family members were teachers. Geographic location was obtained from an optional contact address section. Gender of the child, where not evident from completed questionnaires, was clarified in a follow-up telephone call.

The adult reading section explored the reading behaviours of parents, investigating whether the parents chose to read for themselves, what types of material were read, how often, and for what purpose. The final question in this section asked if the parents shared or discussed with their children any of the material they read.

Issues of reading acquisition and support were considered within the section on developing readers. Questions explored aspects of reading to children, including the age of beginning or ceasing reading, frequency, rationale and procedures. Parents were also asked to cite some of the activities and games they had provided to support their children learning to read.

Within the section on observing readers, parents described their children's 'milestones', and ages at which these were reached. How children engaged with, and responded to, text was also considered. The final question in this section asked: 'What are some of your child's greatest achievements or accomplishments in reading'.

The section on transition to school was only to be completed by the families whose children had actually started school. In New Zealand this is typically on the child's fifth birthday. The section explored communication between home and school prior to, and since, commencing school, and children's emotional reactions, attitudes and behaviours.

Parents were also asked if the child had enjoyed books provided by school, and how their reading needs had been met. Questions were deliberately worded neutrally or positively, as in the following examples:

> *What are some of the most effective ways in which school has provided for your child's learning needs?'*
>
> *What have been some effective ways the school has communicated with you?*

Follow-up questionnaire

The parents' responses to the first questionnaire indicated a predominance of negative[4] experiences at the point that precocious readers transitioned to school. Since an aim of the study was to understand the experience of transition to school for these precocious readers, and to advocate for effective teaching, a follow-up questionnaire was designed to explore further the strategies noted in the original questionnaire as supporting young able readers. These strategies were categorised into groups as: Individual Learner-focussed Strategies; Teacher-centred Strategies; Teaching Strategies; Literature-based Strategies; Collaborative Strategies; Organisational Strategies; Peer Support Strategies.

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[4] These experiences, based largely on the attitudes of teachers towards children as 'young able readers', will be discussed in the results section.

The follow-up questionnaire was sent to all those parents who had included their addresses in the initial questionnaire (n = 42). Two participants had not included their address on the questionnaire and so could not be followed up. Parents were invited to rank and rate the strategy groups, and to add any further support strategies. Rating of the categories was on a seven-point Likert-type scale, and ranking required parents to order the categories from the most to least valued. A total of 33 replies were received, a 79% return rate.

An edited copy of the results of the follow-up survey is included as Appendix 1: *Positive Strategies reported by parents*.

RESULTS

Over a four-month period, 45 initial questionnaires were received: One questionnaire was eliminated because the child's age was outside the specified criteria. Forty-four questionnaires were analysed.

All sections were completed by 41 of the respondents: Three respondents did not complete the section on transition since their children were still preschoolers. As some families had more than one child meeting the criteria for inclusion, these 44 questionnaires identified 48 children as 'young able readers'. Many questionnaires referred to the fact that siblings outside the age criterion had been, or were showing signs of becoming, able readers at a young age.

Young able readers
Of the 48 young able readers identified by the parents, 29 (60%) were boys and 16 (33%) were girls. The gender of three children was unidentified. The number of children in families varied from one to four. Five children were only children and of the other children, 56% were positioned as the eldest child: Many families, however, made informal references to other siblings having significant reading ability. Of the 44 families, at least 55%

identified all or several children as having significant reading ability.

Dates of birth were made available for 43 of the 48 children identified as young able readers. The ages of children at the time of the survey ranged from 4 years 6 months to 8 years. These ages reflect the children's age at the time the questionnaire was completed. Parents retrospectively reflected on their children's ability at younger ages.

Because NZAGC is a national organisation, questionnaires were returned from many geographic areas of New Zealand. Table One shows the returns by geographic location. It can be seen that although city areas dominate, small town or rural areas are also included.

Geographic area of New Zealand	No. of returns	% of all returns	No. of children in sample	% of all children in sample
Auckland/Pukekohe, Waiuku	21	48	22	46
Hamilton	3	7	3	6
Wellington, Hutt Valley	9	20	11	23
Blenheim	1	2	1	2
Christchurch/ Canterbury	6	14	7	15
Unknown	4	9	4	8
	44	**100**	**48**	**100**

Table One: **Geographic Location of Questionnaire Respondents**

Family and culture

As some of the families identified themselves as belonging to several cultural groups, 51 cultural identifications were made within the 44 completed questionnaires (see Table Two). The dominant culture of respondents was variously described as European, New Zealand European, European Kiwi, Pakeha, or described with reference to Australian, English, Scottish, British or Celtic roots. This group has been collectively described as 'European'.

There were also nine references to New Zealander, Kiwi, Christian NZ and 'Plain old Nzer.' These families are also likely to have been European, but this could not be assumed, therefore were presented as a different category. The family that identified their culture as W.A.S.P did not clarify the abbreviation: this is generally interpreted as meaning 'White Anglo-Saxon Protestant'. The Asian category included Chinese, Indian and Khmer cultures.

Cultural identification	No. of identifications	% of all identifications
European	33	64
New Zealander	9	18
WASP	1	2
Asian	4	8
Maori	1	2
Samoan	1	2
African	1	2
'none really'	1	2
Total	**51**	**100**

Table Two: **Cultural identification of families**

Teachers in the Family

A range of family members was identified as having qualified as a teacher. Teachers within the family included mothers (15), fathers (6), grandparents (23+), aunts, uncles and a great uncle (17). Many families reported that they had several family members who were teachers. One such family cited the mother, an aunt, an uncle and grandparents as

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being teachers. In another family, the father, maternal grandparents and paternal grandparents were all teachers.

Only nine families stated that there were no teachers in their immediate or extended family. Of these families, some may have interpreted 'teacher' as classroom teacher only, as one father was a lecturer.

Library Use

A range of library use was reported: All families reported using the public libraries with 85% of families using these at least monthly, and 31% of families using public libraries weekly or more frequently. Many families stated that library use was an effective support. One parent stated their child 'begs to go to the library.' Of those that used a public library less frequently, several families stated they accessed the school library instead of the public library. Several families who used public libraries also mentioned use of the school library.

Books in the Home

All homes stated that they owned large numbers of books. Many families said they had 'hundreds of books', 'thousand of books', or 'too many to count'. Books were clearly not merely for the children's benefit but valued by all the family. The ratio of children's books compared with all books owned by families ranged from 10% to 67%. The smallest total book ownership cited was 200, and the smallest number of children's books owned was 70.

Parents described giving books as gifts or owning 'awesome' books as effective support strategies. One parent described her deliberate attempt to make sure 'their rooms and all living areas of the house (were) full of books'.

Identification of reading ability

Parents reported that individual differences in literacy acquisition were evident between learners, including between siblings. Some children refused to read until beginning

school, then made exceptionally rapid progress, for example moving to a reading age of nine or ten within the first year.

Eighty-five per cent of the questionnaires described children who were independent and fluent readers while at pre-school age.

Most parents cited competence with reading texts at extended difficulty levels as an indicator of their children's ability. Fluency was also referred to by 45% of the respondents. Examples included five-year-olds often reading chapter books within a day, with one five-year-old reading seven chapter books in one day.

Another five-year-old intrigued her family by competently managing to read five chapter books at once, a chapter of each one every night, yet managing to retain comprehension of the individual stories. An eight-year-old was enjoying Tolkein's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings.*

Other children enjoyed non-fiction investigation, including independent use of *Encyclopaedia Britannica.* Parents noted the ability of their children to understand, absorb and question the material they read.

Assessment information cited by the parents included such examples as a four-year-old with a reading age of 11, several six-year-olds beyond the 12-year reading level and a seven-year-old reading at 14 to 16 years. Other assessments cited included the standardised Progress and Achievement Test (PAT) being at the 99th percentile for reading comprehension in year 4, and an IQ test score 'over 130 range'.

Reading behaviours
Despite individuality, overall interest in reading was demonstrated behaviourally across the group. Many children had directly stated that they enjoyed reading, or that it was a favourite activity. Children were noted choosing reading over other activities, reading

'large volumes ... for hours at night', making verbal exclamations while reading and reading 'at every opportunity'. Parents described numerous examples of passionately motivated reading attitudes and behaviours, for example:

- He lives for reading
- X reads like breathing, if reading didn't exist, X would invent it
- She loves it. She told me - all she wants to do is 'Read, read, read'
- His first words every morning are 'May I read?' It's as natural to him as breathing
- It's all she wants to do
- He sees books as an essential part of his life.

There were also children who 'escaped' into their world of books. Comments describing children's engagement experiences included:

- He loves it and loses himself in books
- Totally absorbed
- Engrossed
- Loves it passionately ... completely absorbed
- Reading for pleasure and escapism
- She reads at every opportunity ... switches off from the rest of the world
- Goes off into his own world.

The role of the parent

Parents reported that they actively modeled reading for pleasure. Examples of statements from parents include 'It's a pleasure for me and I want to pass on the pleasure', 'I can't not read ... reading opens up the world' and self-acknowledged 'passionate interest in reading'.

The time spent reading with children was described in warm, positive terms, with numerous references to snuggles, cuddles, bonding, love, sharing and affection. Links between storybook reading and emotional support were reinforced, with one parent stating that children no longer needed to be read to 'when children are totally independent readers and

don't require the nurturing aspect of being read to e.g. cuddles, hugs.'

Parents often initiated reading to their children during pregnancy and sustained a high commitment to this activity. A mother stated that 'both my husband and I have always read for at least an hour every night to the children.' In at least some families this was a pattern across the extended family. Representative comments include a parent who wrote that 'my mother read to me until I was in my teens'. Another parent noted that 'Any of the family homes that X could find himself in will always have books available.'

Supporting reading acquisition

Positive strategies for engaging children's interest in reading included use of enthusiasm, acting, varied voices, expression, fun, discussion and sharing. Parents described the 'attempt to make stories come to life', giving 'reading clues like a treasure hunt', attempts to 'excite them about the world of books', and the belief that 'it is vital to try and instill a love of books.'

Fifty percent of parents surveyed felt that reading was the most effective support that they could offer their children. Other main supports cited were providing books and giving time, support and encouragement. Only one respondent referred to teaching their child as the main support strategy.

The pervasiveness of the non-directive approach is evident in the following examples of comments in reply to being asked to describe what reading activities were provided:

- 'Simply reading'
- 'Nothing specific'
- 'Just provided lots of books ... read to him/provide books'
- 'Just read. We DON'T point at words ... Just read and answer any questions.'
- 'None specifically'
- 'Invested time'
- 'Not pushing'

- 'Read to her when she wanted ... we didn't teach X to read. She just did it.'

Parents also demonstrated pedagogical knowledge in such comments as: 'showing them the power of the written word' and in their statement about encouraging their children to 'pick up the 'song' of the language.'

Beliefs referred to included the developmental importance of the pre-school years, the naturalness of reading and pre-reading skill development, the effectiveness of positive reinforcement and modeling, reading 'mileage', and knowledge of what in developmental literature is called the 'zone of proximal development' (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2001). A parent described this as having provided 'guided progress, given them as much independence as possible and then helped them move along into the next phase.' Another parent described a philosophy of 'reading to learn [is] emphasised, rather than learning to read.'

'Beginning School' experiences

Within the initial 44 questionnaires returned, 41 described the experiences of children who had recently begun school. A recurrent theme in these responses was the difficulties children experienced with the provision of appropriate material. Books were reported as being at too low a level of challenge for the children, and that there was a minimal level of stimulation experienced in the classroom. Parents also reported that children perceived school as being 'boring'. The following quotes illustrate these repeated experiences.

- 'Withdrawn, unhappy. Reading age [at] school entry 11 years. Left on own with books too hard - now reads rarely.'
- 'Frequently depressed and unhappy. The word boring entered his vocabulary for the first time.'
- 'The word 'boring' entered his vocabulary for the first time. Frequently depressed and frustrated.'
- 'Bored, unhappy, miserable. Spent her time underneath her table. Did not want to go to school. Correspondence started then stopped again. Nothing is happening now.'
- 'Preferred to be at home - books are boring.'
- 'Bored.

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- 'Child: negative and baffled (why are they always telling me things I already know??)'
- 'She wanted to go to standard 4 because she said she wasn't learning enough!! (she wasn't!)'
- 'She is kept back by other children in her group (7 years ahead of age).'
- 'Bored - held back by group - teacher not pleased if he had read something already.'
- 'Bored, boring 'just like kindy.'
- 'Enjoyed school once moved to another school.'
- 'Bored, recovering from a confidence assault by her first teacher.' [The teacher moved her down 3-4 levels due to perceived comprehension errors.] 'She is a divergent thinker and her answers reflected this, also she didn't bother with remembering the number of bottles Fred bought.'
- 'Books banal and repetitive.'
- 'Terrible! 'I hate school... it's boring!' '
- 'Frustrated ... bored ... hated having to 'wait.'
- 'Marked negative ones (attitudes and behaviours) in his first year of school - crisis of his hating first year of school.'

Major difficulties with school were experienced by 24 of the 41 families. Several parents reported their belief that the enormous difficulties at their child's first school could only be resolved by changing to a new school. This option was described as traumatic, and presented as an option only when it was felt there was no support or flexibility from the original school.

Home-School Communication

Most parents described making efforts to liaise with school before their child began school. Some schools showed interest and support, for example, through lending reading materials to a four-year-old.

Many other schools, however, were described as showing diffidence, hostility or suspicion. One parent described how 'I told them X could read well, and write. The teacher told me that children even out when they are 7. She clearly felt (and said) that anything X did was by rote.'

Many schools showed a tendency of reserved caution. Some staff members heard parents' assertions, but were non-committal until they had evaluated the children themselves - even when the families provided full assessment documentation from specialists.

Some families noted that systems of communication formulated at policy level could differ from the reality of partnership and collaboration. A parent stated that 'they seem to pay lip-service'.

Another parent described how, although regular meetings occurred, including the development of an Individual Education Plan, 'some meetings are positive, some not. I'm not always listened to and many ideas are not followed up.'

In 14 of the 41 questionnaires (29%), parents could not state any effective communication strategies regarding children who had begun school. Reasons for this included having received insufficient communication, and all communication having been prompted by the parent.

Examples of these parents' response to the positively framed question inviting examples of effective school communication included:

- 'We chased them'
- 'They haven't - sometimes they answered my questions but mostly they haven't'
- 'On the whole there is NO communication apart from 2 reports a year, which let us know absolutely nothing. I always have to ask for feedback.'
- 'Nil'
- 'None'
- 'I have had to instigate all communication'
- 'I have had to instigate most 'effective' communication apart from usual parent/teacher 10 min. slots etc.'

Although many families expressed a clear tone of overall frustration, two-thirds of the families referred to at least one effective communication strategy employed by schools. Informal interpersonal strategies, such as informal comments, personal contact and parent

class involvement, were most often cited.

The strategies referred to as effective have been grouped in categories as: formal personal; written communication; systems-level communication. These categories and the number of times each example was cited by parents are given in Table Three.

Category	Strategy	No. of times cited
Informal interpersonal	Informal comments, personal contact, questions	16
	Parent involvement in school/class	7
	Teacher actively approachable	5
	Listening, acknowledgment and reassurance	2
	Total	**30**
Formal Interpersonal	Formal parent-teacher interviews	18
	Meetings regarding an 'issue' – 'awesome' or 'intense' meetings	3
	Individual Education Plan (IEP)	3
	Parent education evenings	1
	Total:	**25**
Written communication	Written reports	8
	Portfolios/work samples	5
	General newsletter	2
	Certificates	1
	Comments notebook	1
	Homework	1
	Total:	**18**
Systems-level communication	Open-door policy – parents able to observe	4
	School support for one-day school for gifted students	3
	Principal supportive	1
	Advising parents of child's reading age/level, test results/grades	6
	Total:	**14**

Table Three: **School communication strategies perceived as effective by parents**

Follow-up questionnaire

As I noted earlier, the purpose of the follow-up questionnaire was to focus on the range of positive strategies identified in the initial feedback.

Categories of positive strategies were compiled from the original feedback and respondents were asked to rate them. Results demonstrated that all the support strategies had a high value rating for parents. The strategies rated most highly were 'teacher-centred' and 'individual learner-focused'.

The rating and ranking feedback have been combined here to provide an indication of the strategies most valued overall. 'Individual learner-focused and 'teacher-centred' strategies were similarly strong, followed closely by 'teaching strategies'. The categories are listed below from strongest to least strong:

1. 'Individual learner-focussed strategies'
2. 'Teacher-centred strategies'
3. 'Teaching strategies'
4. 'Literature-based strategies'
5. 'Collaborative strategies'
6. 'Organisational strategies'
7. 'Peer support strategies'

Details of the range of strategies included under each category are given in Appendix 1. *Positive Strategies reported by parents.*

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Clark (1976), like the parents in this research, described precocious readers as voracious and passionate. These two factors, together with fluency, appear to be indicative of the self-motivated young able reader. By understanding the significance of these three factors

- fluency, passionate engagement and voracious reading - and by actively looking out for young able readers, teachers can enhance early identification, rather than relying on the broad implementation of standardised testing measures, which may be inappropriate for young children.

However, it is likely that parents will continue to be the primary identifiers of young able readers and if teachers are to be facilitators of learning, they clearly need to be well-informed and open-minded.

Emergence and development of precocious reading

This study clearly affirmed that parents are positive supporters of their children's reading behaviours. Actions taken by parents included both the provision of appropriate materials and the provision of parents' own time. This responsive approach also included perceptive identification of the children's abilities and needs. These findings affirm parents as knowledgeable experts about their children, and thus align the New Zealand experience of young able readers with that of other western countries.

Of particular significance was the affective dimension of reading support: Parents established reading to their children as part of a warm, nurturing experience. There was no evidence of 'hot-housing'; in fact the engagement and enjoyment evident in parents' descriptions of their children as 'passionate' and 'voracious' readers, would affirm that children were not coerced into reading behaviours.

The results of this study highlight the importance of book ownership and library access, as was reported in Clark's (1976) study. Positive support and environmental conditions are certainly critical sociocultural elements: Few people would contest the importance of a print-rich environment. However, important though these factors are, they are not sufficient for the emergence of precocious reading ability. Many parents provide support similar to that described within this research, but do not have children who read at an early age.

Recognition of children's innate abilities and dispositions is an important aspect of the bioecological perspective of children's learning, and extends our sociocultural understandings (Roskos, 2000). In the bioecological perspective, provision of support and opportunity are seen to facilitate the emergence of innate ability, while unfavourable conditions simply make it more difficult (although not impossible) for abilities to develop.

Who is the teacher?

Parents repeatedly asserted that they did not teach their children to read. This reflects the stance of parents in research by Bus and van IJzendoorn (1988). No mention was made of grandparents, early childhood teachers or siblings as having taught the children to read. While these groups of people were responsive to children, what parents referred to was children's spontaneous acquisition of reading. Clark (1976) suggests that, for precocious readers, the identity of a word 'just clicks'. Baghban (1984) and Jackson and Klein (1997) report observations of similar expressions.

Case studies have described spontaneous learning, not only for reading, but also for other areas of learning. In their description of 'Maxine', Fletcher-Flinn and Thompson (2000, p. 26) note that 'when she was 28 months she suddenly started reading some of the stories from the *Ready to Read* series and other books fluently. This coincided with accurate one-to-one counting, which appeared at the same time.

However, although spontaneous learning certainly appears to be supported by numerous sources, it is not necessarily in opposition to teaching. The perhaps-traditional perspective of 'directive' teaching versus 'responsive' support implies that parents who teach their children do so in a 'top-down' approach. Fowler (1981), reviewing studies of highly precocious children, referred to these two parenting styles as responsive and instructional parenting. However, Fowler also noted that ***both*** sets of parents provided an approach that was stimulating, playful and child-centred, with new concepts introduced sensitively.

Parents may often be inadvertently teaching in response to their child's interests or requests. Certainly it would appear that children's abilities and interests shape the behaviour of parents, as much as parents lead their children (Henderson, Jackson & Mukamal, 1993; Jackson & Roller, 1993). The emphasis placed by parents on spontaneous learning also negates the idea that the children were 'self-taught'. Parents did not mention systematic strategies and metacognitive processing, but natural, unplanned, unexpected and unprompted discoveries were observed.

The presence of a teacher within the family occurred more frequently in this research than in previous research. In Jackson, Donaldson and Cleland's (1988) research, a family member with educational background was evident in 21% of cases. In this research, 78% of the families could cite a teacher in the family. Teachers were evident in some of the remaining nine families also, for example, the lecturing father.

It is intriguing that, while teachers are skilled at identifying, nurturing and responding to talent in home settings, it is also teachers who are unable to apply these skills in school settings.

Transition issues
Parents repeatedly reported the experience of beginning school as unhappy, frustrating and even depressing. There is no reason to believe that information reported in a confidential written questionnaire would report anything other than parents' perceptions of reality. Therefore, accepting the results leads to a number of intriguing reflections.

One reflection is that while there have been significant advances in inclusive teaching for other students with special learning needs, there still seems to be little recognition that children who present at school already able to read, are equally deserving of having their special needs included in the educational experiences that schools offer. It may be that while educationalists may have become more willing to acknowledge the special needs of children with disabilities, the same cannot be said for children who are more able in

specific ways. It is concerning, for instance, that despite the positive wording of the questions in the follow-up questionnaires, 29% of parents could not cite *any* effective ways in which school had provided for their child's learning.

Given the number of children in this study who had teachers in their families, it would seem reasonable to assume that parents and teachers would share similar pedagogical philosophies. And clearly, teachers would not consciously plan to make the experience of school a miserable one for any child. Nonetheless, this study suggests that the transition to school was miserable for many of the able young readers. This indicates that there may be a difference between the private and the professional philosophy that teachers may espouse, perhaps influenced by the perceived need for each child to be accommodated within an existing social group where they have to 'fit in' or 'adjust'.

This research aimed to report not only the negative experiences, but, also, to encourage positive ways of enhancing the educational experience of precocious readers on entry to school. Parents recognised there were numerous ways in which children could be supported, and acknowledged these approaches. Many of the strategies cited by parents are obvious elements of effective teaching. The ranking and rating exercise in the follow-up questionnaire highlighted the categories of 'individual student-focused', and 'teacher centred' strategies as particularly valued by parents. Elements of these categories reflect the espoused philosophy of teaching in New Zealand, so should be able to be evidenced in the everyday experience of classrooms.

Every year the Ministry of Education publishes documents including rhetoric of meeting children's needs, working with children as individuals and accommodating diversity. For example, in 2000 it was stated that 'New Zealand teachers are attuned to the needs of individual students and skilled in student-centred strategies. In addition, the national curriculum enables students to work at levels matching their abilities. The combination of these two elements has the potential to create an effective learning environment for the gifted and talented' (Ministry of Education, 2000, p. 7). However, my study suggests that

there appears to be an enormous disparity between policy rhetoric and professional practice.

Collaborative issues

The difference between rhetoric and reality was also apparent with regard to collaborative practice. New Zealand teachers espouse a philosophy of partnership, communication, consultation and collaboration, yet many parents in this research could provide no examples of effective ways the school had communicated with them. This finding is consonant with Fraser's (1996) conclusion that, despite school charters and policies stating otherwise, attempts by parents to collaborate with teachers 'are not always met with alacrity' (p. 444). Parents have been encouraged to 'stop rocking the boat and to refrain from insisting on appropriate education for their child' (Fraser, p. 444). This is particularly unfortunate given the knowledge parents had of their child. A positive extension of collaborative practice would include accepting the ability of parents to identify and nominate their children as precocious readers (Margrain, 1999).

The most effective method of communication between home and school identified by parents, was informal interpersonal communication. Examples of this approach would be teachers who allow time to informally chat to parents. The early childhood sector has a strong philosophy of partnership (Ministry of Education, 1996), and many schools claim to have an 'open-door' philosophy.

Limitations of my study

It is important to note that while this study has opened up intriguing reflections about the experiences of precocious readers as they transition into the school system, the results have to be viewed within the limitations of the study design. For example, the research sample was strongly biased toward European and European/Pakeha New Zealand cultures. The range of occupations suggests that the respondents were at least of middle class socio-economic status. It may be that membership of NZAGC is also similarly biased. Potential inclusion of Maori and Pacific Island families in such research may necessitate alternative

recruitment approaches.

Mothers completed the majority of questionnaires. This suggests that it is likely mothers were most often the primary caregivers. Interestingly, however, more boys than girls were nominated as precocious readers. Further research examining potential gender differences in perspective and nomination would be useful.

Although both urban and rural settings were represented, no analysis was carried out to establish whether there were differences in responses along this dimension. It may have been useful to note whether living in a large city, like Auckland, with access to extension centres, positively affected the experience of transition and collaborative practices.

Finally, and most importantly, the research relied on parents to report their children's perspectives. Ecologically sound research requires that all groups of people involved in a context be directly consulted. Future research is needed to extend the findings through consultation of children and teachers. In particular, ways in which early childhood teachers accommodate early readers is a critical avenue that needs exploration.

ISSUES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The children described in the data used in this paper demonstrated effective learning in their early childhood years. The key issues of identification, collaboration, teaching, learning, support for transition and advocacy that have emerged from this research have much relevance for the early childhood sector.

In particular the findings highlight the importance of effective support strategies during the transition to school. They also indicate a key role for early childhood teachers as advocates for families and children within their communities.

Effective support strategies

The strategies most valued by parents in this study were 'individual learner-focussed', 'teacher-centred' and 'teaching' strategies. These parental views are clearly in alignment with early childhood perspectives of learning which emphasise strategies which are responsive to children's individual learning potential. There is also a close alignment with Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach, which places the learner firmly at the centre (Papalia et al, 2001), and the Maori view of 'Ako', as including aspects of both learning and teaching (Pere, 1997). These strategies provide the core of quality teaching and collaborative learning in the early childhood setting.

From a parental perspective effective strategies in school-based settings include the provision of access to reading material that utilises advanced concepts and content if a child is thirsting to receive it. Within an early childhood context this would involve consideration of the environment in which the early childhood setting operates, for if the 'walls' of a setting are limited to the physical construction of the building and site, then, to put not too fine a point upon it, there may as well be bars on the windows! In exploring ways to support a child with 'precocious' abilities, an early childhood setting could consider the wider community: The young able learner may find others with similar interests or dispositions in other centres, in schools, workplaces and organisations. At the planning level, this would involve making links with the community to develop ways in which children from a range of settings could be brought together for particular projects, to learn alongside others.

Furthermore, the support strategies listed in Appendix 1 are not limited in their applicability to young able readers. Other precocious abilities in music, mathematics, science, problem-solving, languages, art and drama are just a few of the possibilities: Teachers should expect multi-categorical and multicultural abilities to surface.

In my view, quality early childhood settings should be actively exploring diverse ways to provide access to support, where required, through mentors, targeted resources,

enrichment programmes, programme differentiation and 'excellent teaching'.

Preparing for Transition

It is intriguing that the difficulties accommodating children's needs only occurred in school-based settings and that these disappeared in instances where parents resolved the problem by 'resorting to home-schooling'. This raises at least the following possibilities:

- It may be that practices in early childhood settings ensure responsiveness, flexibility and effective collaboration more strongly than most formal school settings. While the study data did not highlight any conflict between parental and early childhood centre perspectives about responding to children's individuality, the data did suggest that schools appeared to need reminding of the requirement that 'Curriculum developments, particularly at the junior primary level, take account of the national curriculum guidelines for early childhood education in New Zealand' (Ministry of Education, 1993).

- In this study it was clear that transition processes did not adequately prepare parents and children to understand the ways in which schools operate. Early childhood teachers, parents and children have philosophies that differ from schools and it may be that the 'hidden' school curriculum of socialisation and normalisation is more dominant than the documented learning curriculum: Children learn to read (and behave and sit still on the mat and wait patiently) rather than read to learn. Could it be that in this context, accuracy percentage; and comprehension scores have become more important than the early childhood curriculum goals of exploration and contribution?

- It could be that the ways in which schools operate are less responsive to diversity amongst children and families than they claim to be, and schools are particularly unprepared for the needs of able children.

There are some interesting points for reflection here for early childhood educators. Firstly, it seems essential that early childhood teachers reflect on their role in a child's transition to school. Most would agree that children's well-being is as important the day

after they turn five as it is the day before; similarly their ability to contribute, communicate and explore does not change overnight and children need opportunities to develop a sense of belonging to both new and old settings.

Critical reflection on teaching practices and genuine partnership between home, school and early childhood were the two key approaches to successful transition that were missing for many families in this study.

The early childhood teacher as advocate

The issues of identification, support and collaboration within this research are broadly applicable in early childhood education. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child asserts that education should be "directed to the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential" (Unicef, 1989, Article 29). The New Zealand Government and the teaching profession likewise affirm that every child has potential and deserves support.

However, it is important to acknowledge specifically the needs of able children. Research has shown that without identification and support, very able children tend to underachieve, have higher rates of depression and, eventually, suicide (Moltzen, 1996). Teachers work hard to ensure that other groups of children have support and resources to reach their potential; it therefore follows that they should also advocate for equity if this one group is neglected.

Key documents support New Zealand teachers in providing advocacy for very able children. The Revised Statement of Desirable Objectives and Practices (DOPs) for Chartered Early Childhood Services in New Zealand has two guiding principles, each of which supports the learning extension for all children:

- Management and educators of chartered early childhood services, in partnership with parents/guardians and whanau, will promote and extend the learning and development of each child …

- Educators will develop and implement curriculum which assists all children to grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society (Ministry of Education, 1998).

Emphasis within the DOPs is again on the individual child and the enhancement of the individual's learning and development. Simonson (2000) highlights the particular relevance of DOPs 1, 3, 4a, 4d, 5c, 7, 8, and 10 (Ministry of Education, 1998) and the founding principles of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) which stress the importance of four key areas: Holistic development; Empowerment; Relationships (with people, places and things); Family and Community.

It is interesting that the Ministry of Education has established some initiatives to support gifted learners in schools, but continues to neglect the early childhood sector, despite the mandatory requirement of DOPs. As cited in *APEX* (Margrain, 2001) 'The needs of young gifted and talented students are as important as those of older students … it is concerning that the Ministry of Education continues to affect barriers for young gifted and talented students' (p.19). Teachers need to continue to advocate for young learners and for the visibility of the early childhood sector.

CONCLUSION

A critical component of consultation and collaboration is the act of listening. This research has highlighted the ability of parents to listen to their children. It also highlights the need for increased listening to occur between groups: teachers and parents, teachers and children, teachers, community and policy makers.

Most would agree that school is not intended to be a place of despair and misery, yet this study suggests that despair and misery are part of the experience of many young able readers. If we are to address this critical issue, and also provide appropriate programme

adaptation for our children, we must begin by listening to their needs. Actively consulting parents is an important part of this process.

Teachers, administrators, policy-makers and evaluators also need to listen more carefully to themselves. Disparity between professional philosophy and practice is important to acknowledge. By recognising the 'spaces between' rhetoric and reality we may be able to collaboratively 'close some of the gaps' in teaching and enhance children's learning and well-being.

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Appendix 1: Positive strategies reported by parents for support of young able readers

Organisational strategies	Collaborative strategies	Literature-based strategies	Individual learner-focussed strategies
Acceleration of class level	Individual education plans	Open-ended levels, extension	Individual programming, e.g.
Early entry to school (age 4)	Open door policy	Exploring humour in texts	spelling, writing, reading
Portfolio presentations	Comments in home notebook	Self-selection of books from	One-to-one support
Computer programmes	Dual enrolment with The	library	Advanced material
Performance opportunities, e.g.	Correspondence School	Attractive and interesting reading	Extra reading
Assembly	Release for One Day School or	material	New languages
Composite (multi-level) classes	other gifted support	Library-based programmes	George Parkyn Centre for the
Cross-grouping between classes	programmes	Varied genre: poetry, plays,	Gifted
Assessment	Programmes which utilize parent	articles, tapes, newspaper,	Music and musical composition
School philosophy	help	science, non-fiction, classics	Ensure assignment/topic based
Policy development	Mentoring	Wide reading 'from junk novels to	homework is fun, interesting
Avoid labeling or focusing on	Including parent/family voice in	philosophy, from comics to	and challenging
differences	decisions	encyclopaedias'	Reading to learn rather than
Time-tabling to ensure children	Help and ideas for how to keep		learning to read
have time with others who are	the child stimulated at home.	**Teaching strategies**	Emphasis on the child's emotional
working at same level.		Independent work box	development and associated
	Teacher-centred strategies	Extra activity sheets	programmes
Peer support strategies	Teacher motivating	Teacher reading to class	Encourage other talents, e.g. art,
Cluster group of gifted students	'Excellent teaching'	Diary projects	mathematics, music
Withdrawal to special ability	Answering the child's questions	Development bank/ 'sideways'	Special self-selected research
group	Providing feedback to students	enrichment	topics, e.g. Ancient Egypt,
Finding a similar reader to discuss	Teacher training in gifted	Oral, group reading e.g., for plays	rocks and fossils.
emotional responses with	education	An age-level reading group for	
Extension groups in specific	Ensure there is follow-up and	social support/discussion, plus	
curriculum areas – reading,	discussion – not just giving	parallel individual programme	
writing, spelling	work	with more challenging	
	Provide wide variety of resources/	material.	
	support		