

**'When You're Five, Things Are Not Always Easy' –  
What Children Say About their Classroom Literacy Experiences**

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**Abstract**

Crossing the boundary between adult and child perspectives of literacy at school, this paper presents findings of research that engaged children's voices about their classroom reading experiences in the early school years. The purpose of this research was to explore how children construed a common set of classroom reading situations from the standpoint of their differential experiences with these situations in their respective reading groups. For this purpose, the researcher developed a photo-sorting activity based on the use of photographs of classroom reading experiences. This protocol was framed by the view of children as active constructors of and key informants about their realities. From this viewpoint it was assumed that multiple realities would emerge, not only between adult and child perspectives, but indeed among the children themselves. Children were individually invited to engage with the researcher in conversations about these photos. As part of these conversations, children were invited to sort the experiences depicted in the photos according to criteria related to their sense of learning, engagement and wellbeing. Data were triangulated with classroom observations of children engaged in literacy experiences. The efficacy and benefits of this protocol are carefully discussed in the context of eliciting children's authentic voices and documenting these voices in legitimate ways. Key findings include how children construe classroom reading experiences and their own sense of identity and wellbeing as reader and classroom participant in these experiences. The value of engaging children's voices is highlighted in terms not of only crossing boundaries between adult and child perspectives, but also in terms of elucidating boundaries between children and their classroom reading tasks.

## Introduction

At a time in the nexus of research, policy and practice when early years literacy educators' deliberations on research to inform policy and guide practice is intensifying, children's perspectives and voices about their classroom literacy experiences remains a missing piece of the nexus puzzle. With a specific focus on reading, this paper reports on a study whose purpose was twofold: to explore how children in an early grade classroom construed a common set of classroom reading situations from the standpoint of their differential experiences with these situations in their respective reading groups; and to examine the efficacy of a photo-sorting technique that the researcher designed for eliciting children's voices about these experiences.

## Conceptual Framework and Related Research

Seeking children's input by eliciting their voices about the early years literacy programs in which they engage, reflect key aspects of how childhood has come to be viewed – that is, children are active constructors of meaning with capacity to express their views with wisdom and insight (Moloney, 2003). Children are viewed as key informants (McNaughton, 2002) who have a voice to be heard (Hallet & Prout, 2000) and indeed, are a key source of advice for matters affecting them (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2007).

Research has shown that, given the appropriate circumstances, young children can and do express their views effectively and powerfully (Christensen & James, 2000; MacNaughton *et al*, 2004). Engagement of children's voices is important to informing what in their literacy programs is working and what could be improved from their point of view. In turn, such engagement can nurture children's sense of wellbeing, place, identity and involvement in their literacy programs – all of which are integral to the five outcomes of Australia's *Early Years Learning Framework*:

- Children have a strong sense of identity
- Children are connected with and contribute to their world
- Children have a strong sense of wellbeing
- Children are confident and involved learners

- Children are effective communicators. (DEEWR, 2009, emphasis added)

## Reading at school

A sociocultural perspective of reading frames this study of children's views of reading at school in their own words. Reading is seen to consist of four key practices as identified by Luke and Freebody (1990) – making meaning making (text participant), decoding text (text code-breaker), using different text types for different purposes (text user), and critically analysing and reflecting on texts (text analyst). These reading practices may be deployed across a range of texts of different media and modes, in situations that are embedded in broader sociocultural settings made up of shared values, beliefs, world views and predispositions that shape what we do as readers (Harris, Turbill, Fitzsimmons & McKenzie, 2006).

There are key recurring messages around which there is strong consensus on early years literacy pedagogy and the situations in which we embed reading at school, as evidenced in extensive literature reviews (Allington, 2005; Bennett, 2010; Freebody, 2007; Harris, 2010; Pearson, 2007). Key points of consensus include:

1. Physical and social organisation of the teaching/learning space that accommodates whole class, small group and one-to-one situations, with a balance across these situations.
2. Relationships that support and foster children's effective engagement in early years literacy programs. These relationships include teacher/child relationships and peer relations in classrooms, as well as relationships with children and their families.
3. Literacy learning environments that engage high levels of children's authentic participation and provide choice amongst texts and experiences; collaboration amongst learners and between educators and learners; texts that are enjoyable and relevant to children's day-to-day lives, education and aspirations; and clear and explicit connections across different aspects of literacy.

4. Pedagogic approaches that are holistic, integrated, explicit and balanced across aspects of reading and literacy, and foster children's understanding of and direct engagement with reading/writing connections.
5. Differentiation of instruction and curriculum that cater to learner needs. Effective instructional practices involve drawing on a principled repertoire of strategies that include teacher-directed, mediating and learner-centred approaches, well informed by research and used as appropriate to learner needs and intended outcomes. Consistency does not mean sameness for all children, and there is recognised need for expert tutoring support for those who struggle.

These points expand the 'five pillars' of reading success (phonological awareness, vocabulary, fluency, accuracy, comprehension), as explicated in the *Teaching Reading Report*, DEST, 2005); and more recently re-worked as 'the Big Six' in reading that includes oral language and a refocus on phonological and phonemic awareness and letter/sound and word knowledge (Konza, 2010).

In this early years reading research/policy/practice nexus, this paper inserts children's perspectives, as it explores what children's voices have to tell us about what works for them in reading at school.

## **Research Design**

This paper documents a small-scale study of children in their second year of school – Year 1 in New South Wales. The study involved 12 children in two different reading ability groups in their classroom at a suburban school whose community was predominantly Anglo-Saxon middle class.

The study deliberately focused on the kinds of reading experiences that were common to both reading ability groups but had different content and instructional emphases for each group. This focus served this study's purpose to explore how children construed a common set of classroom reading situations from the standpoint of their differential experiences with these situations in their respective reading groups.

The researcher spent three months in the classroom, once a week documenting observational field notes of the class reading program. The class comprised 28 children who were organised into five reading ability groups, based on teacher assessment procedures related to school practices and children's reading performance documented in running records. The school implemented a benchmarking kit that saw the teacher use levelled readers in ability-based reading groups. As a practice across the school's early grades, the children were organised into five such groups. These groups were a core component of the class reading program, running in the first morning before Recess (morning tea), five times a week.

For this study, children in two groups with designated contrastive abilities, as indicated by the teacher's formal assessments, were purposively chosen – there were six children in each group. One group, the Yellow group, was described by the teacher as having high levels of reading ability, while the Green group was described as having low levels.

Beyond shared and modelled reading and decoding lessons with the whole class, the class reading program was differentiated for each reading ability group. The experiences afforded the Yellow group encompassed a range of the four reading practices identified by Luke and Freebody (1990) and previously described. These children engaged with small group activities that were structured and completed in independent situations. These activities included comprehension worksheets and comprehension activities related directly to what these children were reading, such as 'read and retell', which ranged from literal to higher order levels of thinking (after Bloom's taxonomy, 1956); decoding skills worksheets and games (such as acrostics, crosswords, cloze); and writing activities related to what the children were reading (such as writing a sequel to a story they had read, or rewriting a text from a different point of view; and working with various text genres). These structured activities were completed on a daily basis. Yellow group children also engaged in teacher-led small group situations, most notably guided reading in which children read their levelled readers to and with the teacher. These experiences occurred three times a week. On a daily basis, Yellow group children also had opportunity to initiate and independently engage in individual reading activities, such as reading alone and engaging with a range of various text types, reading with a peer, going to the library for research

and project work, and independent writing. Reading games were also a part of their daily reading instructional diet.

Children in the Green group were chiefly provided with experiences that focused on code-breaker practices. These children engaged daily in structured small group activities. These activities all had a decoding focus and included commercially produced phonics programs as well as teacher-designed worksheets. These activities included word and sound bingo, sight word activities such as flashcards and memory or concentration word games; playing with alphabet magnets and puzzles to manipulate letters to create words and sentences; and completing worksheets that involved sounds of the week, cloze passages, word/picture matching, sentence matching and sequencing exercises. In teacher-led situations, these children engaged in guided reading with their levelled readers three times a week. These children also engaged with reading alone, but this opportunity arose for this group less frequently than the Yellow group, no more than once a week (aside from whole class silent reading time). Independent individual activities for the Green group also included reading games with a code-breaking focus.

Given these differential experiences, and consequences for the reading practices that were and were not made available to children, this study sought to engage children's perspectives on their classroom reading experiences and reading more generally, to understand classroom reading from their point of view and discern what, if any, differences in perspectives might emerge between the two groups.

### ***Engaging children in conversations about reading at school***

Towards the end of the study's classroom observations, children were invited to engage in individual conversations that focused on their perspectives and experiences of reading at school. Three conversations took place over three days, the first two lasting 20-30 minutes, and the last one lasting about 40 minutes. Children were encouraged to bring a favourite text along to share in this conversation, with occasion for shared reading and enjoyment as well as opportunity for the child to read at least part of the text themselves. So doing provided a means for developing rapport and trust

with the child (building upon the researcher's familiarity with the children from being in their classroom for three months) and help create the context for the conversation.

Following this sharing, I explained to the child that I wanted to chat with them about what they do as a reader. With the assurance they would like to engage with this conversation, probing questions included, 'I'd like to know how you know what that [pointing to the text] says. Can you tell me?' and 'What do you do if you don't know what a word says?' From that point, and with the willing continuance of engagement of the child, children's understandings and metalanguage for talking about aspects of language were explored:

- 'Would you like to show me a word?'
- 'What do you think a word is?'
- 'Would you like to show me a letter?' 'What do you think its name is?' 'What sound do you think it might make?'

The conversation continued another day only with the assurance that children were happy to continue after I explained what the focus would be and made it clear they didn't have to engage. I monitored children's engagement and continued to develop shared understanding about our focus and why this conversation was helpful for understanding their classroom realities as readers. This next conversation focused on reading at school, with the prompt, 'Would you like to tell me about the kinds of reading you do in your classroom?'

The third part of the conversation continued on another day, again under similar terms of mutual agreement and willingness as before. This conversation involved a photo-sorting activity and related to the study's second purpose to explore the efficacy of this technique designed for eliciting children's voices about their classroom reading experiences. This activity was specifically designed for the purpose of eliciting children's voices through what they say and what they do during the activity designed (Harris, 2004). The activity was adapted from Kelly's Personal Construct theory and repertory grid technique (summarised in Fransella & Bannister, 1977). The activity is based on the view of the child as an active constructor of knowledge, one who observes, interacts with, interprets and transforms their learning environment. This view leads to the belief that in classrooms, multiple realities abound – what one child perceives a situation to be may well differ from another child's

perceptions and that of the teacher. It is quite necessary, therefore, to understand children's perspectives, so as teachers we can examine our own beliefs and assumptions about what we make available to children in the name of reading and reading instruction at school.

To begin the photo-sorting activity, each child was shown six photos that depicted reading situations found in their classroom and common between the two groups, as previously described in this paper:

1. A teacher giving a reading lesson to the class, with a focus on phonics
2. Two children reading together in the classroom
3. A child silently reading alone in the classroom.
4. A teacher reading to the class
5. A child doing a reading worksheet
6. A group of children doing a reading game in the classroom

After carefully talking about these photos to negotiate and establish shared understanding of what each photo depicted, the child was asked to sort the six photos five different times, each time according to a given pair of constructs as sorting criteria:

- Times I feel happy / times I feel sad
- Things I like doing / things I don't like doing
- Things that I'm good at doing / things that I'm not good at doing
- Times I do easy work / times I do hard work
- Times when I'm bored / times when I'm not bored

It was made clear that the child did not have to place each photo in the 'either/or' category; and if the child was unsure or ambivalent about some situations in terms of the sorting criteria, s/he could leave those photos out or place them in a third group. After each sort, the child was asked to explain why s/he had placed the photos where s/he did. Across all questions, projection techniques such as 'What do you think...?' were used to initiate and sustain conversation.

The photos provided effective mediators and a shared and familiar focus, given they depicted situations in the children's classrooms in which they frequently engaged. In this sense, the photos and the conversational strategies that surrounded them created a zone of proximal



development (Vygotsky, 1978) through scaffolding (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976). Strategies for clarifying, extending, elaborating and re-formulating children's ideas were all used to develop shared understanding and sustain conversation, showing genuine interest in the child (Coleborne, 2009).

Developing this shared understanding extended to ensuring children understood how and why they were being invited to take part in these conversations. Clarifying and negotiating what was or would be happening during the conversations were ongoing processes. Feedback was given to each child after the photo-sorting activity was completed, and the importance of their contributions to understanding how reading at school worked for them was highlighted and explicitly valued.

To ensure accurate representation and trustworthy interpretation of what children expressed, each conversation was audiotaped and transcribed, annotated by field notes that noted children's non-verbal responses understood through active listening (Stephenson, 2010). In addition to audiotaping, a grid was used to record each child's photo-sorting activity in terms of how they grouped each situation according to each pair of constructs, as shown in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 here]

The annotated transcripts were thematised, using open coding processes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to analyse children's perspectives of reading, themselves as readers, and the reading situations with which they engage at school. The individual photo-sorting grids were collated as a single table, as seen in Table 2, to synthesise these data for each group and highlight trends in the data such as instances of divergence and similarity between the two groups.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

Given the small numbers of children involved, this study does not set out to make judgments about statistical significance. However, the trends that are revealed do lend some key insights through children's eyes and in their words, which find resonance in the research literature and warrant further investigation, as discussed at the end of this paper.

## Findings

The Findings below begin with a description of what the children say and do as readers about reading and the kinds of reading they do at school. This description is followed by a more specific description of children's perspectives of each reading situation that emerged in the photo-sorting activity. In this description, links are made to the observational data that documented the class reading program for these two groups, as previously described in this paper.

### Exploring what children say and do about reading

Across the initial conversations with each child, differences between the two groups became apparent. Highlighting these differences here is not intended to cast the Green group children in a deficit light. For, as will be seen later in this paper, these insights provide a basis for more deeply understanding the outcomes of children's photo-sorting activities; and reflect the relationship between each group's differential experiences with reading instruction in their classrooms and what they were coming to say and do as readers.

When asked to talk about how they knew what the text said, Yellow group children talked about looking at words, for example, *'I look at the words and I see what the story's all about'* and *'I look at words so I know what they say'*. In explaining their reading strategies, Yellow group children identified several strategies and showed they understood the connection between their text decoder and participant practices (unlocking the text to make sense). For example, a Yellow group child, pointing to an encyclopaedia volume on nearby shelves, said,

*'Like that book, I'll get stuck on lots of words... You try and read it and then you say it. You sound the letters out and I look at the pictures to help me too. If you don't know a word like "x-ray vision" or something like that, you might sound it out but if that doesn't work, well, you might cover a word up and read that part and then put your finger on the word and try to read the other part.'*

Three Green group children also talked about their decoding strategies, in terms of sounding out words – for example *'I sound it out'*. The other three Green group children said

they did not know how they knew what the text said. These children did not make explicit links between decoding and meaning.

These differences continued to be revealed when children were invited to share what they do when they come upon words they do not recognise. Four Yellow and two Green group children explained that they sound out a word that they don't know. The other two Yellow group children reported on using context clues:

- *'If I don't know a word, I go back to the beginning and read it again.'*
- *'I see what the word says, and if I don't know, I go back and see what the story's about.'*

No child in the Green group gave this kind of explanation. Two explained they sound out the word, while the four children who did not mention sounding out a word said that they ask for help – for example,

- *'If I don't know a word, I ask someone to tell me.'*
- *'I ask the teacher.'*
- *'Tell the teacher.'*
- *'Tell a friend.'*

Exploring what these children might do if there was no-one around to ask, one child replied, *'Then there's nothing else you can do.'* Another child said, *'I don't know any other way.'*

When further and more explicitly exploring what the term 'word' signified for each child, Green group children either said *'I don't know'* or did not say anything at all; and did not wish to pursue it further. Yellow group children explained the term through examples of words that they showed in the text they had brought along with them, as well as explaining the term thus:

- *'Words are in a story. If there were no words in a story, then you would have made it up.'*
- *'Words are what a story has in them.'*

All children from both groups indicated what a letter is through pointing out examples in the texts they brought with them. All Green group children accurately associated the letters they showed with sounds they are likely to make; and two Green group children accurately named the letters they showed, while the others said they did not know their names or repeated their

sounds instead. All Yellow group children accurately identified the names and likely sounds of the letters they indicated.

Moving on, our conversations explored the nature of reading. It became apparent in these conversations that the children's differential classroom experiences, as previously described, were quite relevant to their perspectives of what reading is. Children in the Yellow group linked reading to making meaning – and making meaning was something these children had ample opportunity to do in their class reading experiences. For example:

- *'Reading is seeing what the words say so you know what the story's about.'*
- *'Reading is looking at words and seeing what they say.'*

Five of the six Green group children did not attempt to describe reading, and the sixth child said:

- *'Reading is when you learn to read. You start at Kindergarten and the books get harder.'*

#### Children's perspectives of classroom reading situations

While the researcher's observations independently documented the class reading program and the differential instructional experiences of these two groups, it was important that these experiences be explored through the eyes and words of the children who engaged in these experiences. To that end, children were invited to talk about the kinds of reading they do in their classroom.

Green group children spoke about reading games and reading levelled readers aloud to the teacher individually and in their reading groups. Notably they did not mention silent reading or completing worksheets that they did independently (and which were documented in this study's observations) – they instead focused on activities with the teacher and their reading group peers. All Yellow group children identified the range of reading situations in which they were observed in their classroom, referring to the texts they read, including both levelled readers and non-instructional texts such as literary texts and factual texts; wall print in the classroom; and reading alone and with peers, their teacher or a parent helper.

The children's perspectives of specific classroom reading situations were further explored in the photo-sorting activities. For the purposes of this paper, a balance is struck between indicating trends in the data and giving space for children's actual words. Outcomes of the photo-sorting activity are overviewed in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

This table reveals trends in the data in terms of how children associated each situation with particular constructs, as well as revealing patterns of similarity and difference between the two groups – the occasions of greatest similarity and difference being highlighted in colour.

Situation of teaching giving a reading lesson to a class, with a focus on phonics.

This situation elicited the greatest similarity between the two groups. The majority of children in both groups associated this situation with positive constructs across all photo sorts. Some difference occurred for the criteria 'things I'm good/not good at doing'. All children in the Yellow group reported they were 'good at' phonics, while three of the six children in the Green group reported likewise.

While children in both groups associated quite similar constructs with this situation, their reasons varied. Children in the Yellow group described phonics as '*fun*' and '*easy to do*'; associated feeling positive about these lessons with their own sense of achievement as readers, for example, '*I like doing the alphabet and that's why I'm good at reading*'; and made links between phonics lessons and learning to read – for example:

- '*It lets someone learn sounds and words so he can read*'
- '*That's what the teacher tells you to learn, and I learn those words and then I can read them on my own.*'
- '*I can look and join some words together, because I know lots of words.*'
- '*You learn the words when the teacher gives you this kind of lesson*

These comments align with the observations that children's instructional experiences with decoding were anchored in reading texts as well as activities that directly followed and grew out of the teacher's instructional input that preceded them.

On the other hand, decoding instruction for children in the Green group – as previously described in this paper – was not directly embedded in texts, and tended to occur as discrete activities that did not obviously or explicitly connect with reading, meaningful texts or other classroom experiences. Similarly, Green group children gave reasons for their positive constructs of the phonics lesson that did not connect with reading. However, their comments did relate to writing and drawing activities – for example, *'we can draw pictures'* and *'I like writing'*. One child, seeing a picture of a tree in this photo, explained that he feels happy in this situation because *'I learn things, like I learn about trees.'* Another child in the Green group talked about what the teacher was doing, and felt good in this situation because *'I like that the teacher is doing the work.'*

Five children in the Green group and four children in the Yellow group construed phonics lessons as *'easy work'*. At first glance, this may appear as a contradiction with the finding that three Green group children and all six children in the Yellow group described themselves as *'good at'* phonics. However, on closer scrutiny, the children's perceptions of what is involved in a phonics lesson varied between the two groups. Children in the Green group equated this kind of experience with drawing pictures and writing that they enjoyed, as well as seeing the teacher doing the work in this situation. However, two of these children also talked about getting distracted – one child said, *'If I don't watch and talk to somebody, I won't know what to do'*, while another commented, *'Sometimes I'm not looking, I'm looking out the window with birds out there.'* On the other hand, children in the Yellow group related phonics lessons explicitly to reading and learning. As one Yellow group child said, *'It's hard work because I have to say the letters, the teacher tells me to sound the letters, and that way I can learn more words.'* In making such connections, Yellow group children displayed the metalinguistic awareness they previously showed when talking about reading and what they do as readers.

#### Situation of teacher reading to the class.

As can be seen in Table 2, children across both groups sorted this situation in quite similar ways. For Yellow children, this was a positive situation because they enjoyed listening to stories – as one child noted, *'Teachers always have good stories'* and *'Teachers like to read books to us kids'*. For

Green group children, not only did this situation mean enjoying stories but it also seemed a relief from not having to read or perform themselves. These children's comments included:

- *'You just sit there and look and listen to the teacher'*
- *'You don't have to do anything'*
- *'The teacher teaches us and lets us have a rest'*
- *'Reading is the teacher's business'*

Any negative constructs from children in either group stemmed from class members who did not co-operate in this situation – as one child put it, *'some kids muck around and you can't hear'*. A child in the Yellow group added further insight when saying, *'Some children mess up but they shouldn't. It helps you read, like if you are reading the book that time, that word might go into your head and if you see that word on a book, you can know what it is.'*

#### Situation of a child reading with another child.

This situation evoked divergent responses between the two groups. As can be seen in Table 2, most Yellow group children placed positive constructs on this situation, whereas Green group children showed a little more ambivalence. While all but one child in the Green group said they *'feel happy'* in this situation, mixed responses became apparent in their talk about the other sets of constructs for sorting the photos that are seen in Table 2. Reasons behind their use of negative constructs consistently related to their self-perceived lack of reading ability and the absence of adult assistance – for example:

- *'I can't read well'*
- *'The words are too hard'*
- *'I don't learn here'*
- *'I don't get help'*

For the Yellow group children who also placed negative constructs on this situation, their reasons were quite different from those of the Green group children. Their main concern was that the children with whom they read did not always listen or co-operate – for example, *'The other person mucks around'* or *'There might be too much noise and you can't hear properly'*. Otherwise, Yellow

group children viewed this situation favourably, saying they *'like reading'*, *'I'm good at reading'* and *'Believe me, I'm a good reader!'*

Situation of a child silently reading alone.

This situation, along with doing worksheets, evoked the greatest divergence between the two groups, as seen in Table 2. For all but one set of constructs, the Yellow group children associated this situation with positive constructs. However, there was some ambivalence for 'times I'm doing easy work/times I'm doing hard work', with three Yellow group children describing reading alone as 'easy work' and three as 'hard work'. In either event, the presence or absence of hard work did not deter these children from viewing this situation in a positive way for the other constructs. Indeed, these children offered hard work as being a reason for viewing this situation favourably – for example, *'Reading is a very hard thing to do...you look at the words to know what they say, and then you can enjoy what you're reading'*.

Green group children viewed reading alone in a negative light, relating to their own sense of themselves as readers who struggle, as also reflected when they talked about reading with another child:

- *'I get stuck on words'*
- *'You can't find out what the words are'*
- *'I can't read sometimes'*
- *'It's hard work'*

Green group children also commented about their own sense of wellbeing when reading alone in the classroom:

- *'I get cold'*
- *'I get tired here'*
- *'I get sore'*
- *'I get headaches'*

Of note in these responses is the apparent lack of applying what these children were doing in their reading group work to reading on their own, corroborated by observations in their classroom. It



appeared that children's transfer of decoding skills that were the focus of much of their instructional experiences to actual reading was all but missing. Instead, they related their phonics work to drawing pictures and writing letters.

#### Situation of a child completing a reading worksheet.

As with reading alone, this situation evoked the greatest difference in photo sorts between the two groups. Green group children's concerns with reading alone were echoed in their comments about doing reading worksheets in their classroom – for example, *'I don't know how to do it'* and *'I don't remember what to do'*. These children also reported that doing worksheets *'is hard work'* and did not connect this kind of work to learning – as one child said, *'You don't learn anything'*. Children also commented on their sense of wellbeing when doing worksheets – for example, *'I get sore and tired'* and *'I get headaches'*. Green group children who viewed reading worksheets more favourably reprised their comments about their enjoyment of and ease with drawing and writing, but as before, volunteered no apparent connections to reading.

The Yellow group children who also viewed reading worksheets favourably made connections to their own reading as well as writing. One child commented, *'I like writing here. I can write a story about the holidays or when I went to Uncle Pete's toy shop, or when I went to the zoo and fed the dolphins.'* Another child noted, *'It helps me learn to read because I write words. Sometimes I might not know what to write and then I remember, and then I know that word.'*

These different responses might be further understood in terms of the different kinds of worksheets that children in each group did. As described earlier in this paper, Green group worksheets and other structured activities specifically for this group all had a decoding focus and included commercially produced phonics programs as well as teacher-designed worksheets. Worksheets and activity cards for the Yellow group involved opportunities for more sustained engagement with meaningful texts, both as readers and as composers of meaning through writing and drawing.

#### Situation of children doing a reading game in the classroom.

Most Yellow group children placed positive constructs on this situation across all sets of sorting criteria. Their reasons were related directly to reading – for example, *'I like reading'* and *'You learn things, like how to read'*. Some Yellow group children felt that reading games were *'too easy'* and *'boring'*, which gave rise to some unfavourable views of this situation. This finding confirms the earlier finding that hard work is not a deterrent for these children, and often a reason for viewing classroom reading situations in a positive light.

Green group children showed ambivalence towards doing reading games in the classroom. Most of these children felt they were *'good at'* doing reading games; as far as classroom work goes, games were *'easy work'*; and they enjoyed themselves because *'games are easy to do'*, *'you can play here'* and *'the words are fun'*. However, these children did not make explicit links between reading games and reading. Three children found these games *'boring'* if they are alone; and two children reported feeling *'happy'* while three said they feel *'sad'* in this situation, with one child unsure whether he felt happy or sad in this situation. While four children said they *'like doing'* reading games, one child was unsure and another did not like reading games, saying *'I get hot then.'*

## Discussion

This study set out to explore how children in a Year One classroom construed a common set of classroom reading situations from the standpoint of their differential experiences with these situations in their respective reading groups. While interpretation of findings must be tempered by the small-scale nature of this study, it did emerge that children's differential experiences with these reading situations aligned with how they viewed these situations in terms of themselves as readers, their self-perceived capability as readers, and their sense of engagement and wellbeing.

This finding is not so very different from a body of research instigated several decades ago –as Allington write as the title of a paper, *'poor readers don't get to read much in their reading groups'* (Allington, 1980), a phenomenon more recently revisited in the context of a resurgence of advocacy for reading skills instruction that decontextualises decoding practices (Allington, 2009).

While children in the Yellow group were afforded opportunities to develop a range of reading practices in the context of meaningful experiences and real texts, the Green group children's

opportunities were more limited to structured activities that focused on developing their decoding skills, with little provision made for connecting these skill to real texts and actual reading – authentic transfer of skills being the ultimate goal of reading instruction (Pearson, 2007).

This study's scale is too small to clearly say that it was this lack of provision that accounts for children's failure to connect decoding skills to reading, but it raises the question of whether or not these instructional practices may have exacerbated rather than ameliorate their difficulties. Therein lies a significant issue that warrants larger investigation from children's perspectives and in their own words.

The imperative for such study is further underscored by an increasing focus on decoding instruction disconnected from making meaning with authentic texts in purposeful situations. Research cited in this paper indicates points of consensus about reading instruction, and yet the push for more decoding skills instruction threatens to undermine what we have come to know and understand constitutes effective reading instruction in the early years. Not that basic skills such as decoding practices are considered here to be unimportant – indeed they are critical to functioning as competent readers. The issue at stake is how and in what kinds of contexts decoding instruction is delivered in class reading programs and how children make sense of this instruction and connect it to what they do as readers – as children's constructs of their classroom reading in light of their differential experiences have indicated.

This issue warrants further investigation on a larger scale, and lends import to what Luke and Freebody and (1990) wrote some years ago when describing their four sets of reading practices as a framework for considering what is and is not being made available to children in their class reading programs. Not only is such mapping important to considering in what reading practices teachers are providing opportunity for children to become competent. In light of this study, the question to be raised is, what are the implications of what teachers put in and leave out for children's sense of who they are and who they are becoming as readers?

This question resonates with Australia's *Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR, 2009) in terms of their core themes of being – who children are in the here-and-now – and becoming – who and what children are becoming in terms of changes in their learning and development. The third 'B' of the *EYLF* – belonging – is also implicated. If children are for whatever reason feeling alienated in their

classroom reading situations – as some children in this study felt – then their sense of place and identity as readers in those situation is undermined – a matter also warranting further investigation.

Further research along the lines initiated in this study would do well to enlarge investigative parameters to include greater numbers of children and a wider range of classroom and school settings. In such research, the use and edification of the photo-sorting activity would be productive. This activity provided an effective way of engaging children's voices through their words and activity. The photographs effectively mediated these conversations and provided a common focus between researcher and child around which to develop shared understanding and revealing conversations.

Some adjustments to the photo-sorting activity, however, are indicated. Given that some Yellow group children volunteered links between the situations in the photos and learning to read, this connection would be interesting to more explicitly explore with children in the photo-sorting activity. This could be done by including a construct pair such as 'Things that help/don't help me learn to read'. It would also be worth considering adding a construct pair to further explore children's sense of connection to reading outside of school – for example, 'things that are like/not like reading at home'. It would also be useful to broaden the lens of the activity to include other reading and literacy situations in the classroom and across the curriculum; and invite children to take their own photographs of their classroom reading situations for such discussion as explored in this paper..

Children's voices were not only heard in what they said in the photo-sorting activity and the conversations that preceded it. Their voices were also heard in children's sorting actions to place the photos where they did and give their reasons why. Children's words and actions conveyed their sense of engagement and wellbeing in particular reading situations that they commonly encountered at school – especially important when dealing with an abstract phenomenon like reading. Children's voices were also heard in the words they left out, requiring the attentive observer to watch as well as listen. Equally important was being able to contextualise children's comments and actions by observing them engage in the experiences that were included in the photo-sorting activity. Such contextualisation was found to be critical to interpreting what children did and did not say about these experiences – for children's voices are not only heard in the words they say but also in the spaces between their words, and even sometimes, in the words they leave out.

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- Note. There are missing references that are on my office computer. As I am working away from my office, I can forward these on once back in my office over the next couple of days. I apologise for this inconvenience.

Table 1. Recording grid for photo-sorting activity

Child's Pseudonym:			Date:			
	Phonics lesson	Reading with a peer	Reading alone	Teacher reading to class	Child doing a worksheet	Child doing a reading game
+Times I feel +happy / -Times I feel sad						
+Things I like doing / - Things I don't like doing						
+Things I'm good at / - Things I'm not good at						
+Times I'm doing easy work / - Hard work						
+Times I'm bored / - Times I'm not bored -						

Table 2. Overview of findings of the Photo-Sorting Activity

	Phonics lesson		Reading with a peer		Reading alone		Teacher reading to class		Child doing a worksheet		Child doing a reading game	
	YG	GG	YG	GG	YG	GG	YG	GG	YG	GG	YG	GG
+Times I feel happy / -Times I feel sad	+5 -1	+6 -0	+5 -1	+5 -1	+5 -1	+1 -5	+5 -1	+5 -1	+4 -2	+2 -4	+4 -2	+2 -3 x 1
+ Things I like doing / - Things I don't like doing	+6 -0	+5 -1	+5 -1	+4 -2	+5 -1	+1 -5	+5 -1	+4 -1 x 0	+6 -0	+3 -3	+5 -1	+4 -1 x 1
+Things I'm good / - Things I'm not good at	+6 -0	+3 -3	+5 -1	+2 -4	+5 -1	+2 -4	+4 -2	+2 -3 x 1	+5 -1	+4 -2	+6 -0	+6 -0
+Times I'm doing easy work / - Hard work	+4 -2	+5 -1	+2 -4	+3 -3	+3 -3	+2 -4	+4 -2	+4 -2	+2 -4	+3 -3	+6 -0	+5 -1
+Times I'm bored / - Times I'm not bored	+4 -2	+4 -2	+6 -0	+3 -3	+6 -0	+3 -3	+6 -0	+4 -2	+5 -1	+2 -4	+5 -1	+3 -3

Key.

Greatest divergence between the 2 groups

Greatest similarity between the 2 groups