

Exploring the effect of age of entry to school on boys' attitude towards reading

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Contextualisation

According to statutory requirements children in Great Britain should commence school in the term following their fifth birthday. In reality, most pupils are attending school well before, two to three years earlier than most of their European counterparts. Local Education Authority (LEA) policy has shown a steady trend towards earlier admission (Daniels, 1995) with annual or bi-annual intakes of pupils into Reception classes. Summer-born children are at a particular disadvantage in cases where an annual admission policy applies as these children are entering school having just turned four.

The early encounter with a formal "school-type" environment has engendered much debate entering the public domain via the media. A Channel 4 Dispatches programme, "The Early Years", broadcast in January 1998 and in October 1998 a Panorama documentary, both addressed the question of when children should start school. The pages of the "Times Educational Supplement" frequently offer a platform for the most emotive aspects of the debate. On October 17th 1998 a headline read: "The jury is still out on early years" while by the following month, November 6th we read: "Formality damages under-fives". Evidence of widespread professional concern was reported to the House of Commons Education Sub-committee and reflected in their first report "Early Years": "Many professionals expressed concern that overly formal instruction in the Reception class would impede the learning of young children especially boys" (Education and Employment Committee, 2000 p.15).

This paper presents data from a two-year longitudinal project set within the context of this debate. It examines the implications of age of entry to school on boys' reading development and in particular the attitudinal dimensions of this development.

Abstract: *British children enter school younger than their European counterparts. Research suggests that this disadvantages boys who may be unready for formal literacy instruction. This longitudinal study explores the effect of age of entry to school on boys' reading development, focussing on attitudes and beliefs. Data from 60 summer-born boys, divided into two cohorts, was collected on three occasions: before entry to Year One, end of Year One and end of Year Two. Comparisons were drawn between 31 boys with part-time nursery education before Year One, and 29 with full-time Reception class experience. This paper presents data collected at Time One. Employing both quantitative and qualitative methodologies the study explores how beliefs about and attitudes towards reading emerge in the context of these contrasting early years settings. Implications of the findings are considered in the context of policies and trends in age of entry to school.*

Introduction: Background to the study

This research project originated from informal observation of children's early encounters with school while working as a Key Stage One (KS1) teacher. A highly structured environment and an inappropriately formal curriculum appeared to yield a variety of detrimental outcomes. Learning to read, an objective propelled primarily by the parent body, dominated all other targets creating a high degree of anxiety among the parents themselves and their children. Obsessive concern with the technical skills of reading contrasted with a striking neglect of its purpose. Many children seemed to develop poor attitudes towards reading and met with difficulties which could perhaps have been avoided, had they been older. These concerns guided the formulation of the research questions which lie at the heart of the study, the first two of which are addressed in the present paper.

- What types of beliefs about and attitudes towards reading do boys develop between the ages of five and seven?
- Is there a systematic difference in beliefs and attitudes between boys who begin school at different ages?
- Do boys who begin school earlier achieve a higher standard in reading?

- Does attitude to reading at the age of five have any predictive value for attitude toward reading at the age of seven?
- How are the demands of compulsory schooling reflected in parental attitudes towards and expectations of their children's literacy?
- What implications do the findings have for government policies on compulsory school-entry ages?

Measuring and understanding young children's attitude towards reading

Attitudinal studies have generally played a small role in research concerned with the acquisition and process of reading. Teaching strategies and assessments have reflected the same trend, paying scant attention to the attitudinal dimension of reading. Nevertheless, as argued by Athey: "There is probably little disagreement today, even among the most fervent advocates of a cognitive-linguistic view of reading, that affective factors play a role both in reading achievement and reading behaviour" (Athey, 1985 p.527). This has been recognised in a number of large-scale studies which have raised the status of research in this field (Bunbury, 1995; McKenna, 1995). "For members of the research team, a literate person (child, adolescent or adult,) is not only one who can read but one who chooses to read and who has established a habit of reading..." (Bunbury, 1995 p.7).

Research in this field has been hindered by technical problems associated with measuring children's attitudes and the recognised instability of attitudes among young children. A number of published reading attitude tests were used during the course of the study, appropriate to the changing age group of the sample (see Tables 1 and 2).

In addition, a new test, the Photographic Reading Attitude Instrument (PRAI) was developed for use with the entire age span. This test, developed in a pilot study, reflected the combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies adopted in the study. The final version of the PRAI consisted of sixteen colour photographs and four line drawings reflecting a wide variety of reading and three non-reading situations (drawing/painting, playing with a computer and outdoor

play). These photographs and drawings were selected from a larger pool, after the pilot study with 90 children suggested they best represented reading situations most frequently encountered by children of this age group. These were compiled from the analysis of numerous other attitudinal measures and early literacy research literature, supported by knowledge derived from extensive first-hand professional experience in the teaching of reading. The drawings and the majority of the photographs were commissioned for the purpose of this research. Both photographer and artist were given clear guidelines to help them identify the targeted reading situations. The photographs which reflected a range of reading situations likely to be familiar to children within the nearly five to seven age range included home and school settings and families from different ethnic backgrounds. They also attempted to encapsulate significant relationships in the reading process: reading with peer group, parents, teachers, siblings etc. Five of these situations are illustrated below (Figures 1 to 5).

<i>Reading test</i>	Acronym	Reference	Time of use
Pre-school Reading Attitude Test	PRAS	(Saracho, 1988)	Time One ³
<i>Photographic Reading Attitude Instrument</i>	PRAI	Unpublished (see pilot study)	Times One, Two and Three
Reading Self-Concept Scale	RSCS	(Chapman, 1995)	Times Two and Three
Elementary Reading Attitude Scale	ERAS	(McKenna & Kear, 1990)	Time Three

Table 1: Summary of reading attitude tests used during the study

TIME ONE	The term prior to entry to Year One
TIME TWO	Final term of Year One
TIME THREE	Final term of Year Two

Table 2: Times of data collection

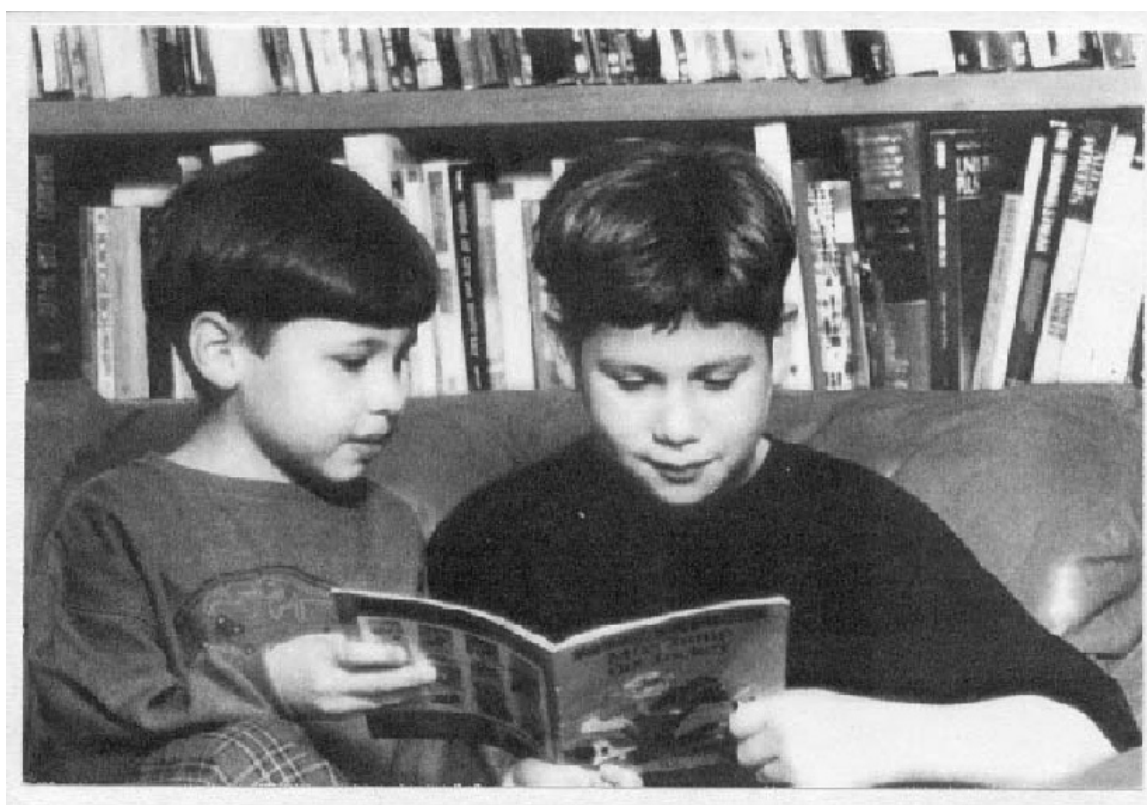


Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

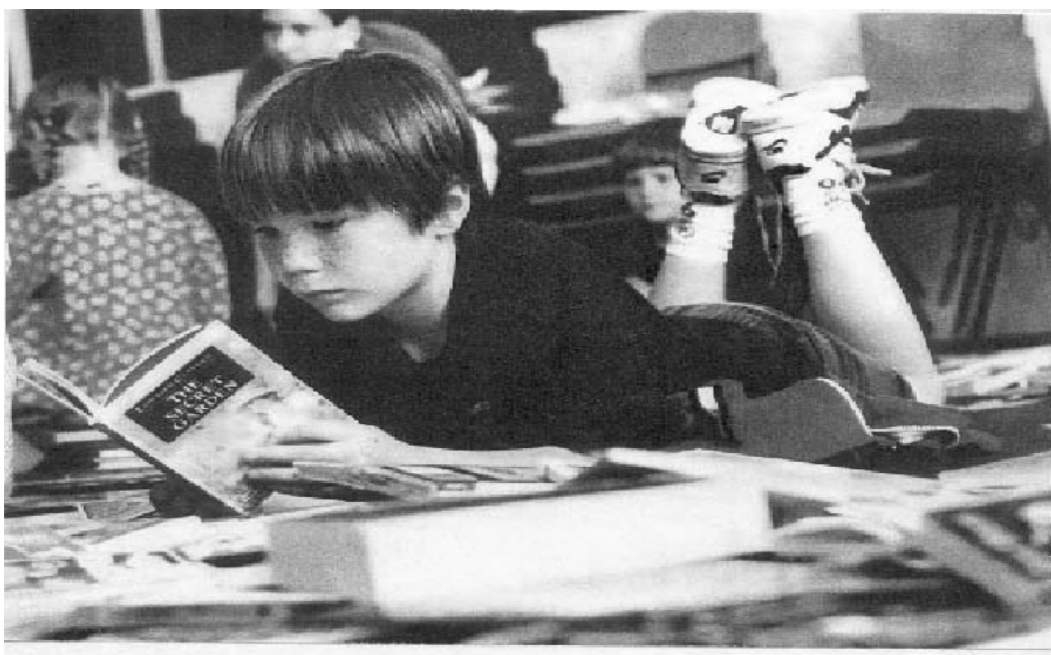


Figure 5

Children were asked to respond to these with a choice of three “smiley face” stickers. These represented their feelings about the particular activity as: “I like”, “I don’t mind” and “I don’t like”. Using data from the pilot study an item analysis reliability test yielded an Alpha value of 0.82 and test re-test ranged from Pearson values of 0.60 ($p=0.001$) in Year 2 to 0.79 ($p=0.03$) in Reception. Content validity was established through a collection of tape-recordings made with the children across the sample, in which children were asked to “tell a story” about the pictures. These “stories” were in fact almost entirely descriptive and indicated that the children understood and interpreted the contexts illustrated by the photographs in the manner they were designed to portray. This methodology was also used to collect qualitative data aimed at deeper interpretation of the attitudinal test scores. The photographs were used as a stimulus for exploring children’s beliefs and feelings about reading. The children were told that the photographs they would be shown all had something to do with children and reading. Each photograph was presented in turn and children were asked to “tell a story” about it. If children offered no response the following prompts were used:

- I want you to tell me about the children in the photograph:
 - a. Who do you think they might be?
 - b. What do you think they might be doing / thinking / feeling?”.

Every effort was made to avoid direct questioning which might lead children to offer expected answers, as phrased by Holmes: “The key is to avoid misleading questions or getting the children to say what you want to hear” (Holmes, 1998).

The value of eliciting attitudes through stories has been identified in other research. “Story telling allows children to express themselves more honestly because they are not asked to talk about themselves” (Davis, 1998). Moreover, they elicited a picture of “the child’s reality, to the extent that a person cannot write outside of either their experience or imagination” (Davis, 1998). The stories constituted valuable data to gain insight into the children’s attitudes and beliefs. The sessions, which lasted between 10 and 15 minutes each were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed and analysed.

This paper focuses exclusively on attitudinal data collected from the sample of boys at Time One. It seeks to illustrate a qualitative methodology which has enabled the study to look at the impact of a system through the eyes of its key participants. “The voices of the most significant stake-holders, the children, are rarely heard” (Anning, 1998 p.301). This methodology offered a useful tool for listening.

Sample and time-framework

The lack of consistency among LEAs in terms of their admission policies results in very varied and arbitrary experiences for four-year-olds. Depending on their geographical location children may not begin school until they are five years and four months or alternatively they may be in school by the month following their fourth birthday. While for some the initial experience at four or four and a half is part-time for others there is no alternative on offer but full-time education.

The main study collected data from a sample of 60 boys, drawn from 18 schools in six LEAs (see Table 3). These boys were allocated evenly to one of two groups, according to the age at which they first entered school. Group A consisted of those boys who experienced a minimum of one but more often two or three terms of Reception class. Group B was made up of boys who entered

school after their fifth birthday and had no experience of the Reception class. These boys attended nursery for two and a half hours per day and first entered school in Year One. Due to some unforeseen problems in the involvement of two families, the final sample was not quite evenly distributed with 28 boys in Group A and 32 boys in group B.

To aid statistical comparison, homogeneity of the two groups was increased by the control of certain variables:

- the sample consisted only of boys;
- the boys were all summer-born, with birthdays falling between May and August;
- boys identified as having special needs prior to KS1 were excluded from the study;
- all boys were required to speak English as their first language.

These sampling criteria, summarised in Table 3, were selected on the basis of extensive research highlighting boys' under-achievement in literacy (Millard, 1997) and the particularly vulnerable position of summer-born boys who remain throughout school, the youngest in their cohort (Sharp, 1994). All the boys communicated with their mothers in English even if other languages were spoken in the home. In some cases mother's first tongue was not English.

Levels	Criteria for inclusion	Number
LEAS	admission policy, accessibility	06
SCHOOLS	admission policy	18
CHILDREN	month of birth, language spoken in the home, no identified special needs	60

Table 3: Levels for stratified random sampling

Data was collected annually from both parents and boys over a three-year period. Parental interviews took place at Time One and questionnaires were collected at Times Two and Three.

For practical reasons the sample was divided into two cohorts. The first cohort entered Year One in September 1998, the second in September 1999. This coincided with the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy so that the experience of the boys' early school encounter with literacy was likely to have been quite uniform across the sample allowing the two cohorts to be viewed as a single population. Data of the two cohorts has been combined throughout.

Before entry to Year One: the emergence of negative reading attitudes

Scores on the two attitudinal measures at Time One, the Pre-school Reading Attitude Test (PRAS) (Saracho, 1988) and the PRAI (unpublished) yielded a correlation of $r = 0.58$ ($p < 0.01$).

No significant between-group differences were found on these measures (Figures 6 and 7, below). However, boys in the most negative quartile on both instruments were slightly more likely to be those with Reception class experience. The only outlier, reflecting an extreme negative attitude, was also a Reception class child; both instruments recorded a very low score for this boy.

Analysis of the transcripts reflected these scores. The "outlier", child AB, had already developed an extremely hostile attitude towards reading as illustrated by the child's comments elicited in response to the photograph reproduced in figure 4. This child thought that the stories read by his teacher were "silly" and he hated "sitting on the carpet", presumably a reference to his school story-time routine. He viewed reading as a compulsory activity which he was unable to explain so reading, as he saw it, was purposeless as well as unpleasant. He claimed never to read with his parents though this claim was not substantiated by the parental interview. The explanation for his hostile attitude seemed to lie purely in the compulsory nature of the activity, demanded of him as much by home as by school. AB was not a special needs child and was able to become a good reader. The process of learning however, created marked resistance to the activity.

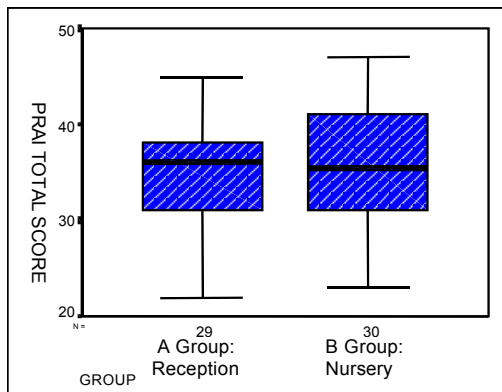


Figure 6: Boxplot comparing reading attitude scores of children with No Reception or Reception class experience as measured on PRAI

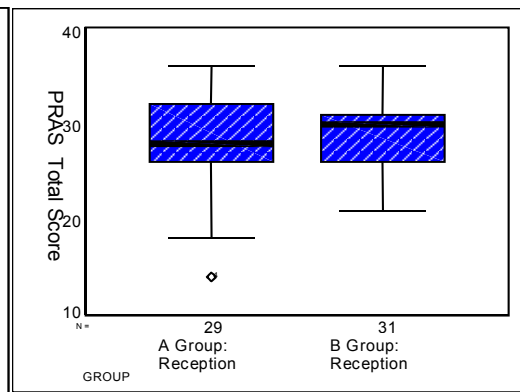


Figure 7: Boxplot comparing reading attitude scores of children with No Reception or Reception class experience as measured on PRAS

JP, also a Reception class child, had similar scores on the attitude scales, but expressed his dislike less vehemently, hinting at its school-based source. JP was reluctant to read himself but was able to enjoy stories. “I’d feel happy if my mum was reading it to me,” and “I only like it when my mum reads my own books to me”. His enthusiasm for the illustrations contrasted sharply with his reluctance to read, (“I **have** to learn to read”) and all school reading situations. Visits to the library were viewed as a school routine but not one which was much enjoyed and his response to listening to teachers read was half-hearted, “It feels OK”.

On the basis of the PRAI and PRAS scores at Time One these two boys represented the most negative end of the attitude spectrum. Scores also pointed to the existence of a group whose attitude toward reading was not intensely negative but nevertheless somewhat indifferent. Four No-Reception boys all scored less than 30 on the PRAI where the mean was 35, and a maximum of 24 on the PRAS where the mean was 29. Yet none of these boys expressed explicit ideas about their dislikes. This was partly a reflection of the difficulty these boys had in responding verbally to the pictures but the transcripts also suggested lack of familiarity with books and reading. Two boys were unable to recall the title of any story. Of these four boys, two retained a negative attitude score at Time Two.

The emergence of negative attitudes was not confined to low-scoring boys and at times sat side by side with the positive. At Time One, AG, a Reception class child, had scored 29 on the PRAI (mean score 35) and 32 on the PRAS (mean score 29). The more positive strand in his attitude towards reading was corroborated by comments such as "I like books", "I like it when I look at books", "I like it when my teacher reads me a story". He talked enthusiastically about "The Very Hungry Caterpillar", "The Lion King" and was also keen, and somewhat of an expert, on comics. He showed an interest in non-fiction books for their subject matter. Like the child in the picture (figure 5) who enjoys the book because "he likes sea-animals", AG liked the book shown in the picture "because in the sea I like great white sharks". At the same time AG had already formed a clear idea that he did not like reading himself. AG resented being told to read and recognised this situation in several of the pictures he was shown: "He's looking at a book and his dad was telling him to read it and I don't like reading books". In this case the father had adopted the teacher's role and was there to make sure the child read correctly: "looking if he's doing all the words right". In this child's experience the mother too, adopted a teacher-type role. AG did not like "when my mum tells me to read the books". Elsewhere he referred again to his dislike of compulsory reading activities. In relation to one of the photographs presented he explained this further: "she's making him do reading and because he made a book for himself and he wrote all the words and he can't read all the words that he wrote". In contrast AG enjoyed being read to by his teacher, an activity in which no expectations were placed upon him as a pupil. He commented: "I like it when people look at a story with me".

Clearly, there was some friction between the child's natural enjoyment of all kinds of books, both narrative and pictures, and the demands placed upon him to acquire the skills to become an independent reader. His environment placed firm priority on the latter so that even though AG had not yet reached the statutory age for starting school, reading had already become a school-like task. Independent reading was a compulsory activity bringing with it expectations of performance of which AG was very aware. Concern for the acquisition of reading skills remained of paramount concern to him, a friction that a year later remained unresolved.

AB's negative feelings about listening to teachers reading stories were shared by HB who was also a Reception class boy. Instead of representing cosy, relaxing periods, these reading sessions seemed to be associated with general

discomfort. HB found the activity uncomfortable and saw no purpose to it: “when I sit down I get very hot”. Like AG, he struggled with the technicalities of reading. Spelling things out was a dominating and “hard” process demanded both in the school setting and by his parents at home. Similarly, mother played a teacher role in reading: “She has to look at the book to see if it’s the right word”. Like AG both the physical context of reading and the demands placed by teachers and parents on the child for correct reading, engendered negative feelings. HB had certainly not rejected reading in the same way as AB. However, the comments, supported by fairly low attitude test scores, suggested a paucity of motivation to read and little detailed knowledge about books. Most reading situations were engineered by others: the teacher tells the children to go to the library, his parents choose the books he reads and in fact given a choice of book he responded: “I don’t know”. Like the other boys in the No-Reception class group mentioned earlier, HB did not seem able to recall specific stories by their title. He could talk in general terms about their subject matter and referred to “scary stories”, “animal stories”, and “Jesus stories”.

The level of difficulty of books was also a re-current theme. Several boys mentioned their preference for short and easy books. LA from the No-Reception class group liked most reading situations but “If they’re too small letters I can’t read” and MB, another Reception class child, felt his reading was restricted to school books: “I can’t read. Only school books”. TO on the other hand preferred his school books: “Our school books haven’t got any writing”. Clearly he was able to enjoy a narrative without the expectation which often accompanied the reading of the text. WJ, an able Reception class child, predicted he “would feel sad” if he were “stuck” with a difficult passage to read.

Before entry to Year One: the emergence of positive reading attitudes

Boys with positive reading attitudes at Time One were identified as those scoring above the mean on both the PRAS and the PRAI scales. Scores on the PRAS had a positive skew within a possible range of 12 to 36 and a mean of 29. Boys defined as having positive attitudes scored above 30 on this scale and between 40 and 48 on the PRAI where the mean was 35. There were nine boys in this category, three from the Reception group and six from the No-Reception group,

The positive attitude group illustrates the reverse picture to the negative attitude group. More boys from the No-Reception group formed part of this category than from the Reception group.

Qualitative analysis of these positive attitudes painted a more complicated picture than is suggested by these scores. In the majority of cases, these apparently "positive" attitudes were not driven by particular positive experiences with books but rather the absence, as yet, of negative ones. GH was typical of this group in conveying no enthusiasm about books in spite of his high attitude scores. His very limited discourse about books suggested a somewhat limited exposure confirmed by parental questionnaire and interview data. His home book ownership was low in terms of the sample: somewhere between 10 and 50 children's books compared to a large majority claiming to own over 50 children's books. Weinberger suggests that the favourite book was a way of "gauging children's level of experience and interest" (Weinberger, 1996 p.46). GH was unable to name a favourite book although he described one that suggested some sort of encyclopaedia/information book. He did enjoy his father reading to him but was indifferent to stories he heard at school. When asked whether he enjoyed his teacher's stories he replied "not so much". GH seemed to view reading as a compulsory task. Talking about the boy in one of the photographs GH commented that he "has to read" to the teacher because "he'll learn from books". EK had a similar profile. EK mentioned no books by name although he was familiar with the comic, "Sonic". RD was also unable to talk about specific books and like GH, saw reading as a compulsory activity.

It is interesting note that by Time Two none of these boys were in the positive attitude group and indeed RD had become part of the negative attitude group. The high attitudinal scores of these three boys seemed to reflect a generally positive outlook, more than a particular attraction towards books. Certainly the data did not provide confirmatory evidence for these scores.

In contrast JM (Reception group), OL, JS and JW (No-Reception group) all mentioned a favourite title. JM was a regular library visitor and familiar with a range of titles including traditional fairy tales and children's favourites such as "Thomas the Tank Engine". OL also mentioned traditional fairy tales, including "Goldilocks" and "Little Red Riding Hood". JS did not elaborate in great detail on his experience with books but was quite clear that "Elmer", a colourful picture

book about an elephant, was his firm favourite. CF mentioned pictures as an important part of his enjoyment and although he could not cite a favourite book by name explained that he liked a crocodile book because of his “snappy teeth”.

Unlike negative attitudes which remained fairly entrenched, positive attitudes towards reading proved to be quite volatile. Just three of these boys remained in the positive attitude group a year later.

Implications of findings

Although useful as indicators, the scores derived through the PRAS and the PRAI harboured a rich diversity of thoughts and feelings among this group of young boys. Group comparisons did not, at this stage, yield significant differences, but examples of the negative were generated almost exclusively by Reception class boys. This was not coincidental: the themes which characterised the negative attitudes were mainly related to the more formal school setting of the Reception class and for the most part not relevant to those boys whose only experience so far was in part-time nursery education. This was corroborated by the boys in the No-Reception group whose inherently positive attitudes appeared to remain untarnished by a school environment rather than fostered by nursery or home.

It was predominantly Reception class boys who were concerned with “getting it right” and were already well aware of the importance attached to the task of decoding print and the difficulties associated with it. These concerns had not at this stage affected the No-Reception class group who had far less direct experience of the process of learning to read. To what extent attitudes had hardened or changed by the end of Key Stage One will be the subject of another paper. Whether these anxieties can be entirely avoided or just delayed, remains an open question. Nevertheless these themes seem to have some important implications for the introduction of reading in the early years and question the assumptions that guide present policies.

Early entry into school, the formality of the Reception class encouraged by the Office for Standards in Education and the pressure of Standard Attainment Tasks at Key Stage One have led to a strong emphasis on the early acquisition of “literacy skills” ignoring the wider impact of this process. The data gives

evidence of young boys' awareness of parents' and teachers' expectations and ample warning signs of the negative feelings which emerge at this very early stage. Such data challenges the almost universal LEA policy promoting acceptance of children into school prior to statutory age, a policy which certainly accelerates boys' confrontation with the obstacles of reading acquisition.

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