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Becoming a reader in a digital age

Chapter Overview

Issues surrounding the teaching of reading are complex. Part of this complexity arises from the fact that definitions of the terms 'reading' and 'being a reader' are becoming increasingly open to debate. As highlighted in the Introduction, children's exposure to texts are changing in the light of developing technologies and advancements in multimedia and with this change comes a demand for readers to learn how to employ a variety of reading skills in order to access both paper and screen-based texts. However, if these skills are not recognised within the school system, then the issue does indeed become one of contention. If teachers are to help young children develop confidence in themselves as readers, then there is much to gain from understanding how young children are making sense of the terms 'reading' and 'being a reader' themselves. In particular it is important that early years educators recognise how the settings of home and school influence the ways in which young children come to define reading and the impact this has upon their confidence in themselves as readers and their motivations to read. These issues are examined in detail in the chapters to follow. The purpose of this chapter is therefore to provide a foundation for this discussion. To begin, the chapter presents a brief reflection on the different ways in which definitions of reading have been perceived and documented in the literature. This provides a useful backdrop for the rest of the book which invites the children's voices into the debate. This is largely achieved through reference to a case study that was conducted with twelve children who were in their early years of

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schooling. As this study has played a pivotal role in the formation of this book, this chapter also describes how the research was developed. In particular, given that the research was specifically designed to access the voices of these young children, this chapter explains how various play-centred techniques were developed and implemented in order to acquire reliable and valid data from these young children.

Definitions of 'reading'

This following section explores some of the theoretical perspectives within the field of reading education which offer definitions of the terms 'reading' and 'being a reader'. Though many definitions are in existence, for reasons of clarity these have been classified under four broad headings using the work of Hall (2003) to structure the discussion. In her insightful publication *Listening to Stephen Read: Multiple perspectives on literacy*, Hall invites the reader to consider a variety of perspectives on reading through direct consultation with well-known reading scholars. While it must be stressed that these perspectives rarely operate in isolation from one another, a point emphasised by Hall herself, and that many teachers and early years professionals have drawn implicitly and eclectically from them over the years, these perspectives allow us to reflect on some of the specific ways in which young children may be influenced by the discourse on reading.

The cognitive-psychological perspective

This perspective on reading relates to the somewhat traditional phonetic approach, whereby children are taught to decode words by building an awareness of the segmental structure of language. This emphasis on the systematic teaching of word recognition and response to print is described as 'the hallmark of a cognitive-psychological perspective' on the teaching and learning of reading' (Hall, 2003: 77).

One particular assumption behind this approach is that children learn how to read in stages. For example, Gough and Hillinger (1980) argue that the first stage is one of 'paired-associate learning', where children initially begin to associate spoken words with particularly salient visual clues, often within their local environment. For this reason Gough and Hillinger maintain that this stage often involves the reading of environmental print. Stanovich and Stanovich (1999: 21) argue

that this is a 'natural' stage. However, they go on to claim that 'normal progress in reading dictates that the child makes the transition to the next stage of acquisition, which requires some degree of visual and speech analysis'. They stress, however, that this stage is not 'natural' and argue that some degree of intervention is almost always required from an outsider.

This intervention is associated with the structured teaching of phonics. Many researchers argue that children need to be able to tackle words using their phonetic knowledge, especially when faced with unfamiliar words or when contextual clues fail to be of use (Nicholson, 1993; Gough and Hillinger 1980; Stanovich, 1980). It has also been argued that children who are reading 'well' by the age of 6 are those who have developed phonological recoding processes (Stuart et al., 1999). The structured teaching of phonics currently occupies a substantial component of the Primary National Strategy[1], especially within Key Stage 1. The government document *Progression in Phonics* (DfES, 1998) was used widely in schools as a means of teaching young children phonetic knowledge before being adapted (*Playing with Sounds,* DfES, 2004) to 'take account of more recent research on the pace and sequence of phonic teaching' (UKLA, 2006: 3.21). Both documents have now been replaced with a new scheme entitled *Letters and Sounds* (DfES, 2007).

Given that such national strategies for the teaching of literacy encourage teachers to employ a range of techniques to promote reading at the level of the letter, word, sentence and whole text, structured phonetic knowledge has generally been taught alongside other skills to acquire meaning from texts. Indeed the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) recommends that 'the existing pace of phonics teaching … is retained' (2006: 3.23). However, there is substantial concern that the government's recommendation to base early reading instruction on synthetic phonics[2] (Rose, 2006) is inappropriate and unjustified by research.

Firstly, it has been documented by the US National Reading Panel (NRP) that while 'specific systematic phonic programs are all significantly more effective than non-phonic programs … they do not appear to differ significantly from each other in their effectiveness' (National Institute

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[1]The Primary National Strategy (2003) was developed to build upon the Literacy and Numeracy strategies, placing them in a wider whole-school framework.

[2]Synthetic Phonics programmes emphasise the conversion of letters (graphemes) into sounds (phonemes) and then blending sounds to form words. This differs from Analytic Phonics programmes which introduce children to whole words before moving towards relevant phonic generalisations.

of Child Health and Human Development, 2000: 93). Subsequently, similar findings have also been reported within UK (Torgerson et al., 2006) and Australian (Australian Government Department of Education Science and Training, 2005) contexts. Secondly, the Rose Report (2006: 29) claims that it is 'highly worthwhile and appropriate to *begin* a systematic programme of phonic work by the age of five, if not before for some children'. While it has now been reported that the government will not proceed with the proposed curriculum, based upon the Rose Review, it is clear that the suggestion raised serious, justified and on-going concerns amongst early years educators (Wyse and Styles, 2007). Wyse and Styles argue that it is highly inappropriate to impose such a curriculum on young children, especially given the fact that 'the majority of evidence in favour of systematic phonics teaching refers to children age 6 and older' (2007: 37). Finally, there is concern that the context within which the Rose Report suggests phonics teaching should be implemented contradicts much previous evidence generated from research in reading over the last few decades. In particular the approach has been criticised for being 'over-prescriptive' (UKLA, 2006: 9.1) and disconnected from whole text work (Wyse and Styles, 2007).

The psycho-linguistic perspective

Much of the writing on the psycho-linguistic perspective on learning to read is derived from the belief that 'all language is used for authentic purposes' (Hall, 2003: 41). This commitment to 'authenticity' resulted in one particular movement in the teaching of reading, known as the 'real book approach' (Waterland, 1985). In brief this involved the use of 'real books' in the teaching of reading, rather than using structured reading scheme material.

Yet as highlighted by Campbell (1992: 1), the term 'real books' relates not just to the actual books children are given to read, but to 'the methods to be used and … the teaching and learning environment to be provided'. In other words, the real book approach is a philosophy of teaching and learning that centres on the book, child, teacher and the whole interaction with the book, to ensure that the task is meaningful for the child. With specific reference to the Australian context, Turbill describes 'the age of reading as meaning-making' as the time in which readers were seen to 'bring meaning to print' as well as 'take meaning from print' (2002: 4). In the USA, Goodman (1986) defined a similar philosophy to the teaching and learning of reading as the 'whole-language' approach, where again the focus was on understanding the meaning of language as a whole, rather than on simply decoding the minutiae of print.

This approach has also been described as a 'top-down conceptualization' (Smith, 1971). This largely means placing emphasis on the contextual clues within a text, encouraging the reader to make full use of syntactic and semantic information available. Stanovich and Stanovich (1999: 14) point out that this strategy, whereby children are encouraged to guess at words based on the context of a previous passage, is still regarded as an 'efficacious way of reading and of learning to read' by many advocates of 'whole-language' approaches today. Yet, as exemplified in the work of Waterland (1985), this approach to the teaching of reading was never divorced, by most advocates, from the teaching of phonics or whole-word recognition skills.

However, both of the approaches so far discussed fail to acknowledge the complexity of issues surrounding the ways in which children learn to read and become readers of a variety of different texts. The next two sections examine some of the broader perspectives on reading which look beyond the 'primacy of mind' (Hall, 2003: 134) and recognise that learning to read is a complex process, rooted in social, cultural and political practice.

The socio-political perspective

The socio-political perspective regards literacy as being 'embedded within discourses of power' (Hall, 2003: 153). This notion of literacy as a powerful discourse has been raised by many; for example, Crowther et al.'s (2001) *Powerful Literacies* aims to promote literacy as a potent tool for challenging existing inequalities and dependencies. Similarly, Luke and Freebody (1999–2000: 4) also postulate that the social practice of literacy is 'necessarily tied up with political, cultural and social power and capital', and stress the importance of context within the construction of meaning in texts.

Certainly schools appear to have much power in determining what is meant by terms such as 'literacy' and 'reading'. Indeed, studies have demonstrated, for example, that many parents feel insecure about the ways in which they can support their young children in literacy development, as they fear they are not using 'correct' methods of instruction (Hannon and James, 1990; Oritz and Stile, 1996). Yet it must be recognised that schools themselves are governed by the requirements of a curriculum such as that set out in the National Literacy Strategy. Many would agree with Hall that the emergence and rationale of this strategy, with the 'highly prescriptive nature of its content and pedagogy'

(2003: 189), makes it difficult for teachers to incorporate critical literacy practices into their delivery of the curriculum.

The ways in which children's and parents' views of literacy are influenced by governmental power is one aspect for consideration within a socio-political perspective on reading. But to return to Hall's definition of this perspective, she argues that this connection between literacy and power is also related to the ability to 'determine underlying assumptions and hidden biases in texts' (2003: 176). Jones also refers to the power within texts in his elaborate portrayal of the reader–writer–text relationship. He argues that reading is a highly complex process, through which the reader is actively involved in a cycle of interpretation and response. Rather than such 'response' being necessarily reflective, he argues that the term 'points to the pragmatic force of reading [and] its power to prompt changes of thought or action' (1990: 163).

Hall argues that this approach to reading means that one 'sees literacy not as neutral but as bound up with ethnicity, gender, social class, disability and so on' (2003: 189). While all of these issues are relevant to children's interactions with texts, the relationship between gender and reading has received particular attention from researchers. For example, the quest to understand gender differences in the schooling of literacy has been documented in publications such as Millard's (1997) *Differently Literate.* However, as others have pointed out, such debates have been criticised for being too simplistic in their binary positionings of gender (Weaver-Hightower, 2003; MacNaughton, 2000), with Millard herself now arguing that the debate needs to move towards 'more subtle and nuanced approaches' (2003: 29). In particular, many now agree that while gender does influence children's achievements in literacy, other factors, such as social class, have a far greater impact on attitude and attainment in literacy activity (Moss, 2007; Smith, 2003). This suggests that in order to understand children's engagement with reading, we must look towards the whole social and cultural context within which reading is seated.

The socio-cultural perspective

A socio-cultural perspective is defined as shifting emphasis from the individual to 'the social and cultural context in which literacy occurs' (Hall, 2003: 134). In other words, a socio-cultural perspective will not separate learning to read and write from the context in which it happens. This is vividly portrayed in the work of Heath (1983) whose ethnographic

study of two communities in south-eastern USA revealed that children's language development is embedded in a deep cultural context and is profoundly influenced by the community discourse within which the child is immersed. Moreover, much further study has demonstrated the importance of a child's home environment upon all aspects of language acquisition (Tizard and Hughes, 1984; Compton-Lilly, 2006). For example, in her ethnographic study of three families, Pahl (2002) concluded that children's meaning making is a complex process, shaped by family structure and family narratives, while Minns (1997) raised awareness of the social and cultural influences upon children's early understanding of reading and writing in her study of five pre-school children.

Yet many have stressed their concern that children's home literacy practices are not valued within the school system. This issue has been explored in detail by Marsh (2003a; 2003b), who argues that a dissonance exists between 'out-of-school and schooled literacy practices' (2003b: 369). She states that children's out-of-school communicative practices need to be integrated into the school setting, having found 'more evidence of nursery practices infiltrating the home than visa versa' (2003b: 369). Marsh argues that recognition of the home literacy practices of young children is now a 'standard and routinely practised discourse' (2003b: 369), yet she makes the point that multimodal forms of meaning making experienced by children in their home settings do not penetrate early years educational settings. What is more, Marsh has also demonstrated the ways in which popular culture and media texts shape children's identities, yet she argues that further extensive analysis of children's multimodal text making and text responses in the home is needed so that early years educators can 'build on the extensive expertise that children already have as media consumers and users of new technologies' (2003b: 46).

Much of this work recognises that the ways in which children interact with texts in the home differs from 'schooled' constructs. This has been explored in detail in relation to children's interactions with visual texts and images (Kress, 2000; Arizpe and Styles, 2003; Walsh, 2003). Moreover, Anning challenges what she describes as 'the narrow versions of literacy' in schools, arguing that we:

> need to broaden our understanding of literacy to include young children's representations in graphic and narrative versions, influenced by the media and everyday exchanges with siblings and significant adults, that characterize their journeys towards literacy in home settings. (2003: 5)

Kress also forcibly asserts that young children's own representations need to be awarded greater recognition. He claims that children see the complexity 'of the meaningful cultural world with absolute clarity, and in their making of meaning they construct elaborate complex representations of the world' (1997: 97). Much of this work is urging schools to place greater value upon children's reading and indeed creation of visual and multimodal images during their early years. Yet as raised by Pahl, what is missing is a rigorous theoretical framework 'in which to set children's communicative practices, visual, textual and artefactual … one that both attends to the way the home is structured and the cultural resources the home draws upon' (2002: 145).

Clearly more work needs to be focused on the role of children's 'out-of-school' literacy experiences if children's home literacy practices are to be valued appropriately in schools. However, Tudge et al.'s (2003) study of 20 pre-school children warns that such issues of value may be especially problematic for children from certain social groups. They concluded that middle-class pre-schoolers engaged in more 'school-relevant activities' (2003: 42–3) in the home than working-class children. Moreover, as these children were also reported to be more likely to initiate and engage in conversation, they 'were subsequently perceived by their teachers as being more competent'. Tudge et al. are here suggesting that children from middle-class families are more likely to present skills and abilities that are valued in the schooling system in comparison with children from working-class homes. In addition, this study goes on to suggest that children may have to learn to transfer their own representations of the world into a form that concurs more closely with the representations expected by a school environment in order to experience success within the school system.

This issue was also raised by Brooker (2002) who explored pre-schoolers' engagement with 'school-relevant activity' in relation to cultural privilege. Her book charts the fascinating journey of sixteen 4-year-old children – half of them from Bangladeshi families – as they began formal education. She discovered that many aspects of cultural background provided advantage for the 'Anglo' children and disadvantage for the Bangladeshi children, despite the 'good intentions' of teachers. Even though the children in Brooker's study were all from a poor inner-urban neighbourhood, she discovered that the Anglo children began school with a far greater understanding of what was expected from them in the school setting. Moreover, she concluded that the

Anglo children's home learning activities concurred more closely with that of the school's aims, compared with the Bangladeshi children.

Work such as this recognises not only the importance of the child's home practices in relation to literacy development, but also the impact of factors affecting transition from one setting into another. This relates to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory of the ecology of human development. Bronfenbrenner addresses the concept of transition as children transfer from one system into another, identifying the enormous complexities that face young children as they move within and across *microsystems*[3] and *mesosystems*[4]. Intrinsic to this is the child's ability, or attempt, to transfer knowledge from one system into another (such as from home into school). Yet one must recognise that the child is continually exposed to new rules or 'codes' (Bernstein, 1971) that govern how they should operate within certain systematic structures, such as the school environment.

This is a particularly salient issue for this book which is concerned with the ways in which children perceive reading at the time of entry into the formal education system. As emphasised in the above literature, children develop their own representations of literacy practice in the home before entry into the formal school environment. Yet it appears that children must not only learn the new 'codes' of a schooled discourse when they enter the school system, but must also find a way to cope with the impact of transition from one setting into another. This issue is explored in detail through the context of the case study data upon which this book is based. The study, which shall be referred to as 'The Oakfield Study', is now described. The next section explains how the study was designed so that the voices of the young children participating in the research could be accessed.

The study

Given the need to gain an in-depth understanding of young children's perceptions, this research used a case study approach, following two cohorts of children all from the same primary school. The first cohort were in Nursery (aged 3–4 years) when the study began, while the second group were in Reception (aged 4–5 years). Data were collected

[3]Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes this as 'a pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics'.

[4]This is the interconnection of two or more microsystems.

Table 1.1 Children's details

Name*	Class	Birthday	Place in family	First language
Malcolm	Reception	August	2nd of 2	English
Toby	Reception	November	1st of 2	English
Simona	Reception	February	1st of 2	Spanish
Imogen	Reception	October	2nd of 2	English
Annie	Reception	June	1st and only	English
Joseph	Reception	February	1st and only	English
Kelly	Nursery (morning)	December	1st of 2	English
David	Nursery (morning)	November	2nd of 2	English
Huda	Nursery (afternoon)	July	1st and only	Arabic/English
Caitlyn	Nursery (afternoon)	November	3rd of 3	English
Shaun	Nursery (morning)	September	2nd of 2	English
Ibrihim	Nursery (afternoon)	October	4th of 4	Bengali

*Pseudonyms have been used for reasons of confidentiality

over the course of one complete academic year, with the children being followed into a new year during the course of the study. As Table 1.1 illustrates, the sample contained equal numbers of boys and girls and some children for whom English is a second language. The children were also selected on the basis of age so that the sample included children whose birthdays spread throughout the year.

The school was selected partly on the basis of its multicultural and diverse social catchment. It has its own Nursery which is situated within the same building as the two Reception classes. Positioned close to the centre of the city, the school attracts children from a wide range of social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. It is a large, popular school of 414 pupils, of whom a quarter travel from outside the catchment area. The 12 per cent of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals matches the national average. The number of pupils speaking English as a second language is high at 24 per cent. The number of children on the register of Special Educational Needs is below average

at 17 per cent. In a recent OFSTED inspection, the teaching of pupils aged up to 5 years was assessed as 'very good', whereas teaching was reported to be 'good' within the rest of the school.

Ethical considerations

Using the BERA (2004) Ethical Guidelines as a guide, the ethical considerations described below were integrated into the project. Once the sample had been selected, a letter was sent to the parents of each child explaining the aims and structure of the study and stressing the longitudinal nature of the work. The parents all subsequently provided written consent for their children to participate in the study and to be interviewed themselves in their home environment.

In addition to receiving consent from the parents, it was also regarded as extremely important that consent should be obtained from the children. Yet given the age of the children, it was recognised that issues of informed consent could be problematic. France argues that in order to achieve informed consent from children, we must 'enter into a dialogue with them about the aims and objectives of the research and about our practice' (2004: 183). But it was clear that the children in this study (aged between 3 and 5 years) were really too young to be expected to comprehend the exact purposes of research such as this.

In their study of 5-year-old children, Nutbrown and Hannon (2003) provide an excellent example of ways in which consideration can be shown towards the ethical issue of informed consent from young children. Having secured parental permission in their study, interviewing protocols were drawn up so that all members of the interviewing team would offer a clear explanation to the children about the interview, ensuring that the children understood that they did not have to participate if they did not wish to. The researchers also stressed to the children that the interview could be stopped at any time. What is more, the interview schedule was piloted with a number of children, who were asked to comment on how they felt when being interviewed. This included being asked if they 'liked it' and if they 'minded' being interviewed.

Using these ideas as a guide, many steps were taken to ensure that the children were comfortable with the research situation. For example, time was built into the schedule for the researcher to get to know the children before the process of data collection began. The research activities themselves were all designed to be as much fun as possible for

the children and allowed time for the children to play with any artefacts to be used in the research situation.

The research methods: designing the tools

Very little research into aspects of literacy development has attempted to include young children as research participants. In fact the younger the child the fewer attempts seem to have been made to access views directly (Nutbrown and Hannon, 2003). Yet it is becoming increasingly recognised that reliable consultation with young children is indeed possible, but new methods to facilitate their participation must be developed and more widely used (Cremin and Slatter, 2004). Speaking of research into various aspects of literacy in particular, Nutbrown and Hannon draw our attention to the fact that researchers over the years have tended to rely on observational methods in order to understand children's learning, and stress that 'far less attention has been given to listening to children and soliciting their views on matters of daily life and learning' (2003: 117–18).

For this reason, the activities selected for this study were all based around the concept of 'interview'. However, the use of traditional interview techniques was clearly inappropriate for children of this age. This point was raised by Kellett and Ding who stated that it has been common for:

> researchers to consider children below the age of seven or eight years as not viable as interviewees, partly because of their young age … But many writers and professional associations are now challenging this notion, maintaining that poor data are not necessarily a product of the young age of the child but of inappropriate interview techniques. (2004: 167)

This study is grounded in the belief that young children are in no way inherently 'less reliable' as respondents than adults (Scott, 2000). Yet as Greig and Taylor (1999) point out, participatory research with young children is 'special' and does make specific demands upon research design in order to secure reliable and valid data. Therefore, one challenge for this study was to design interview-based tools that would facilitate the acquisition of valid and reliable data from children as young as 3 years old. Nutbrown and Hannon (2003: 118) have identified two specific concerns that researchers have raised in relation to the acquisition of valid and reliable data from very young children. They stressed firstly that researchers feared that children 'may give you the

answers that they think you want' and secondly that children 'may not understand the question', even though Nutbrown and Hannon go on to stress that 'these are exactly the same concerns that need to be addressed when interviewing adults' (2003: 106).

Given these concerns, several steps were taken during the design of the research to ensure that the data acquired could indeed be defended. Firstly, it was recognised that a play-orientated structure would increase the face validity of the interview data, as this would be a familiar context for the children. Secondly, it has commonly been acknowledged that young children will often provide answers to questions even if they do not actually know the answer (Scott, 2000; Kellett and Ding, 2004), rather that provide a 'don't know' response. This specific issue was explored in a study by Waterman et al. (2001) who deliberately asked nonsensical questions to young children. They discovered that when children were offered a nonsensical closed question, a response was given, but when offered a nonsensical open question the children were more likely to say that they did not understand the question, or did not know the answer. With this in mind, this study attempted to structure activities around the use of open-ended questions wherever possible and care was taken to ensure that terminology used was familiar to the children. Finally, the role of the researcher was given particular consideration as discussed below.

The role of the researcher

One main issue for this study was the concern that the children could view the researcher as a teacher, as this could influence the responses of the children. As Kellett and Ding highlight, 'if a researcher's role becomes blurred with that of a teaching role children may expect more guidance and direction in their responses, and not be as forthcoming' (2004: 166). For this reason, a major challenge for the project was to create distance between the researcher and the actual process of data collection. This was largely achieved through the use of props. In particular the use of a glove puppet (Charlie Chick) was piloted and then used throughout all three phases of the main study. While the use of such props has been seen to encourage children's engagement and interest (Brenna, 1995) it also meant that the entire interview could be conducted through the medium of a 'third party'. As the children were told that Charlie Chick knew very little about school but really wanted to learn some things from the children, they were offered the role of 'expert' within the school context.

Figure 1.1 Small World Play

Another prop used to create distance in the study was Small World Play equipment (see Figure 1.1). Essentially a 'home scenario' was set up using a variety of play equipment such as home furniture and small character dolls. Again the use of the role-play situation allowed questions to be centred on the characters in the scenario, rather than on the children themselves. In further activities the children were asked to talk about other children appearing in pictures and photographs. These activities all helped to create distance between the researcher and the child. This subsequently helped to increase the validity of the data as potential expectations created by the child–researcher relationship itself were reduced.

Data collection

Data were collected during three phases as illustrated in Table 1.2. As the research was concerned with understanding changes in the children's perceptions, some activities were repeated throughout all three phases of the study so that comparisons could be drawn between phases. The activities were also designed in a way that allowed certain themes to be continually revisited both within phases and across phases. This was important for reasons of validity as it meant that findings could be defended as they were drawn from a whole variety of related data.

Table 1.2 Overview of data collection

Phase	Data collection	Year groups
1 Summer 2005 (May–July)	Children – Charlie Chick interview (school) Small World Play activity (school) Unstructured interview (home) Teachers – Interview Parents – Interview in home	Nursery and Reception
2 Spring 2006 (January–April)	Children – Charlie Chick interview (school) Small World Play – Computer-assisted activity (school) Observation (school) Teachers – Interview (new teacher)	Nursery → Reception Reception → Year 1
3 Summer 2006 (May–July)	Children – Charlie Chick interview (school) Small World Play activity (school) Unstructured interview (home) Parents – Interview in home	Reception and Year 1

Research Activities

Most of the school-based data were collected through the context of two main activities: the Charlie Chick interview and the Small World Play research conversation. Over the course of the year, these broad activities often included a variety of 'branch activities' which have been called:

- Learning Skills

- 'Exit'

- Book and Screen

- Popular Culture

- Computer-assisted

- Smiley Face

- Home and School Reading

- Book-bag.

In addition to these activities, interviews were also conducted with the children and their parents in their homes during the first and third phases of the study. The children's teachers were also interviewed in the first and second phases. Although most of the activities were designed to invite responses directly from the children, observation techniques were also employed in the second phase of the research. This next section now provides a brief explanation of all the tools used to collect data in this study.

Charlie Chick interview

Much of the data were collected through the context of school-based interviews, which used a glove puppet (Charlie Chick) to mediate a conversation between researcher and child. Having been told that Charlie Chick has 'a bad memory' and struggles to remember all that he is told, the children were asked if they minded having the session recorded to help Charlie Chick 'remember' what they had said. All of the children agreed to have the sessions recorded. Through the context of these interviews, the children were engaged in conversations with the puppet about many different aspects of reading. For example, Charlie Chick asked to have terms such as 'reading' and 'being a reader' explained. Moreover, through the context of these interviews the children were invited to *show* the puppet what reading is, as well as describe how they felt about the activity.

Small World Play research conversation

This activity took the form of role play, using Small World Play equipment including a family of dolls (mother, father, younger sister, younger brother and an older sister), lounge furniture (including chairs, television, video and table), study furniture (including a desk, chair, computer and printer) and bedroom furniture. This activity investigated the children's perceptions of screen and paper-based reading, particularly in relation to the home environment. Through the context of play, the children were encouraged to talk about the ways in which various character dolls would use certain texts (television, computer, books, etc). In particular the children were encouraged to talk about the younger siblings in the family, describing, for example, what they did when they came home from school and their attitude towards reading the books in their book-bag. Questions relating to the children's perceptions of gendered choices were also embedded into this aspect of the investigation.

These research conversations were also designed to investigate the children's specific perceptions of multidimensional text use in the home and perceptions of print reading within multidimensional forms. This involved, for example, placing the dolls in front of the television and the computer and asking the children to comment on the use of such media and the dolls' 'abilities' to use such equipment. The children's perceptions of the dolls' attitudes towards print within multimodal contexts were given particular attention.

As stated, these main research activities were supplemented with a variety of branch-activities. These were essentially a range of short games and activities each designed to investigate how the children perceived aspects of print reading within a variety of multimodal contexts. Table 1.3 demonstrates how these branch activities were built into the overall research design.

Table 1.3   Overview of school-based activities with children

Phase	Activity	Name	Method	Main aim	Branch activities included
Phase 1	1 (Part 1)	Charlie Chick Part 1	Interview	To explore understandings of terms 'easy' and 'hard'	Learning Skills
	1 (Part 2)	Charlie Chick Part 2	Interview	To explore perceptions of print literacy within different contexts	'Exit' Book and Screen (A) Popular Culture Computer-assisted
	2	Small World Play	Research conversation	To explore children's perceptions of reading in the home	
Phase 2	3	Charlie Chick	Interview	To explore changing perceptions of reading	Learning Skills Popular Culture Book and Screen (B)

(Continued)

Table 1.3 (Continued)

Phase	Activity	Name	Method	Main aim	Branch activities included
	4	Small World Play	Interview/ Observation	To explore perceptions and uses of multi-dimensional texts	Computer-assisted (*Sebastian Swan*) (*Bob the Builder)*
Phase 3	5	Charlie Chick	Interview	To consolidate perceptions of reading To explore perceptions of proficiency judgement	Smiley Face Home and School Reading Learning Skills

Activity: Learning Skills

Having already been asked some general questions by Charlie Chick about things that were 'easy' or 'hard' to do at home and at school, the Learning Skills activity was introduced to specifically explore the children's perceptions of reading in terms of difficulty in relation to other activities. This involved Charlie Chick 'showing' the children a set of photographs, each presenting a child (the same child) engaged in an activity. The children were told that the child in the picture was *learning* to perform the various skills demonstrated in Figure 1.2. The children were then asked to decide whether it was 'easy' or 'hard' to learn to do the activity, and to place the photograph in a corresponding pile. Some children chose to include a 'middle' pile when performing this activity, so they could choose from three groupings rather than just the two.

Skills shown in picture
Riding a bike Reading a book Running Tying shoelaces Reading words on a computer screen Painting a picture Writing words with a pencil Writing words on a computer

Figure 1.2 Pictures of skills used in the Learning Skills activity

Activity: 'Exit'

The children were shown a variety of cards each containing the word 'exit' in various forms. This included a Fire Exit sign, a picture of a door with the word 'Exit' above, the 'main menu' page of a computer game displaying the options *Load game, Play, Exit* and a card with the word 'Exit' printed in plain font. The children were asked to talk about the pictures and explain how they knew what the print said in each case. This activity helped to understand how the children were responding to print in a variety of multimodal forms.

Activity: Book and Screen

This activity used a picture of a child reading a book and a second picture of a different child (but of the same gender) reading from a computer screen. Through the medium of Charlie Chick, the children were then asked a series of questions to investigate their perceptions of reading paper and screen-based texts. For example, they were asked questions such as, 'Which child is having the most fun?' and 'How does this child understand what is happening on the computer/ in the book?'

Activity: Popular Culture

In this activity Charlie Chick introduced the children to two sets of cards. Set 1 displayed the names of a variety of popular culture characters (such as Scooby Doo) written in a plain font text. The corresponding set of cards (Set 2) also displayed the names of the popular culture characters but this time written in their iconic/ logo form. The popular culture characters used in this activity are presented in Figure 1.3.

Popular Culture characters
Barney
Bob the Builder
Scooby Doo
Tweenies
CBeebies
Barbie
Thomas the Tank Engine

Figure 1.3   Popular Culture cards

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The children were firstly given the cards from Set 1 and asked if they recognised anything on them. It was of course anticipated that many of the children, especially those in the Nursery cohort, would not identify the printed text. The children were then given the set of iconic cards and again asked if they recognised anything on these cards. Throughout this stage the children were also asked to explain how they knew what was written on the cards. Finally, through the context of a game with Charlie Chick, the children were asked to try and 'match' the two sets of cards. This helped to identify the strategies the children were using to make meaning from printed and iconic symbols.

Activity: Computer-assisted

The computer was used in the first and second phases of the study to further explore aspects of the children's interactions with screen texts and perceptions of print reading within this context. In the first phase of the study the children were initially shown a laptop computer and asked if they could show Charlie Chick what they could do with it. While this activity provided an opportunity to investigate the strategies each child used to make sense of computer texts, it was recognised that the extent to which each child was able to use the computer with independence would clearly depend on the individual child and previous experience in handling such texts. While the children were all offered a choice about how they used the computer during the activity, most chose to download a *Humpty Dumpty* game which appeared as an icon on the desktop. In order to play the game, the children had to create a nursery rhyme-type story by making selections from various options available. For example, having selected a character from a choice of six options, the children had to decide where the character was going to go for an adventure, what treasure would be found and so on. At each subsequent stage the children were offered a choice of about three options from which to make a selection. The game offered the children a range of visual and auditory clues in order to guide their progress.

In the second phase of the data collection, the children were encouraged to play some specified games on the computer. All of the children were given the games *Sebastian Swan* and *Bob the Builder*. However, in some cases the children also chose to download a further game from the internet which was familiar to them.

Computer Text 1: *Sebastian Swan*. This game featured a series of 'big books' resembling those found in an infant classroom. The children were simply encouraged to read the books from the screen in any way they chose and were observed doing so. As the game featured 'books' which were very similar to paper-based books, this activity provided an opportunity to examine whether the physical medium of the computer in

any way encouraged the children to read the books differently from the ways in which they read paper-based books.

Computer Text 2: *Bob the Builder*. A series of four games were downloaded from the *Bob the Builder* website. Although it was recognised that *Bob the Builder* could in itself be regarded as a highly gendered facet of popular culture, the games all displayed features that were extremely useful for the purposes of this activity. Subsequently, analysis of this activity focused solely on understanding the strategies used by the children to access, use and make sense of the texts and not on the children's attitudes towards the subject content. Table 1.4 provides some information about the four games and the demands made upon the reader in each case.

Table 1.4   Using the Bob the Builder games

Name of game	Objective	Keyboard tools used	Moving image	Auditory cues	Examples of iconic symbols	Examples of print
Muck's Maze	To steer a truck through a maze	Arrow keys	Controlled by player	No	'Home' symbol, 'Muck's Maze' icon	Back, Start, Finish, Play again?, Yes, No
Slider puzzle	To reassemble a jumbled picture	Mouse	Controlled by player	No	'Home' symbol, 'Slider puzzle' icon	Show hints, easy, medium, difficult, back
Spud and Pickle	To play a game of 'noughts and crosses', but with characters	Mouse	Controlled by player	No	'Home' symbol, 'Spud and Pickle' icon, character icons	You win, You lose, Play again?, Select a level
Scrambler's Ramble	To race a truck and collect 'sunflowers'	Arrow keys	Yes	Yes	Truck, 'Home' symbol, 'Scrambler's Ramble' icon	Help, Play Back, Ready, Steady Go, number scores

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Activity: Smiley Face

Issues related to the home and school reading of paper texts were further investigated during the Smiley Face activity. The children were presented with a series of photographs each illustrating an aspect of home or school paper-text reading. These activities are presented in Table 1.5. The children were then given a scale of 'faces' to represent how they felt about each activity (Figure 1.4) and were asked to choose a face to describe each picture. They were told that the pictures meant *I like it, I don't like or dislike it* (or *I don't mind it or I don't know*) and *I don't like it* respectively.

Table 1.5   Pictures used during the Smiley Face activity

School reading activity	Home reading activity
Guided reading	Reading schoolbook to parent/adult
Looking at Big Book on carpet	Looking at schoolbook alone
Quiet/individual reading time	Looking at own books alone at home
Reading to teacher/adult in school	Parent/adult sharing child's own books
Teacher reading to whole class	Parent/adult reading child a story
Reading words on wall/displays	Listening to audio book*

*Although an audio book is not a 'paper text' as such, it was included in this section as several of the children had previously spoken of listening to audio books – and many are indeed accompanied by a paper text.

Figure 1.4   Sliding scale of Smiley Faces

Activity: Home and School Reading

This final branch activity involved the children being given large pictures of a school and a home as well as a series of smaller pictures showing a computer and various paper texts. These props were used

to initiate a discussion about the kinds of activities the children enjoyed and/or expected to do at home and at school and what they believed to be involved in performing these activities. The purpose of this activity was to identify any differences in perception according to setting.

Activity: Book-bag

This activity took place during the final Charlie Chick interview. The children were told that Charlie Chick had now begun Nursery and had brought his book-bag (containing a reading scheme book) in to show the children. This allowed for the children to talk about their perceptions of reading scheme books and the role they play in the process of 'learning to read'. As well as the reading scheme book, Charlie Chick also brought a picture book and a non-fiction book to show the children. Through the medium of the puppet, the children were then asked a series of questions designed to explore their thoughts on the affordances of books in general. For example, they were asked which of the books they thought their parents and teachers would want them to read and why.

Teacher and parent interviews

In addition to the activities so far described, home visits took place during the first and third phases of the study. As well as providing an opportunity to observe the child in their own home environment, it was also useful to see how the child interacted with people and artefacts within their own home environment. This also proved to be useful in drawing comparisons between home and school discourses.

As well as observing the child, questions were also asked of the parents within the context of a semi-structured interview. Examples of questions asked to parents are presented in Figure 1.5. Some questions were also asked directly to the children depending on individual circumstance and the interest of the child on the day.

Teachers were also interviewed during the first and second phases of the study (bearing in mind that the children would all have moved into a new class during the year of data collection). This interview was designed to fulfil two main aims. Firstly, it provided an opportunity to learn more about the general day-to-day running of the classroom and thus give context to the study. Secondly, these interviews contributed towards the development of the children's case profiles through the provision

Sample questions asked to parents
General What does your child like doing when s/he is at home? Does s/he have favourite toys/games/activities? *Specific* Does s/he like to watch television? Which programmes? Does the family have/use a computer? Does your child use it? What does s/he do on it? How would you describe your child's attitude to school life? What is your child's response to the process of learning to read? Does s/he enjoy using books?

Figure 1.5   Examples of questions asked to parents

Sample questions asked to teachers
General Can you tell me a little about the daily routine in the Nursery/class? What activities do the children particularly enjoy/find easy/find hard? *Child-specific* How would you describe her/his attitude towards school life? What does s/he particularly enjoy doing/dislike doing? Does s/he show an interest in learning to read? Does s/he elect to use the computer? What does s/he do on it?

Figure 1.6   Examples of questions asked to teachers

of background information from the perspectives of the teacher. Examples of questions asked to teachers are presented in Figure 1.6.

Developing the case studies

The activities described above deliberately 'overlapped' so that central themes were explored repeatedly within a variety of different contexts during the research. For example, Figure 1.7 demonstrates how the children's perceptions of reading computer texts were explored from a variety of different perspectives and within different contexts over the course of the year. What is more, certain activities such as *Learning Skills* were conducted at each stage of the data collection, so that specific findings could be traced and compared over the course of the year for each child in the study.

All of the interviews were transcribed and grouped together for each child in the study. This meant that by the end of the first phase, profiles could be drawn up for each child on the basis of four broad themes.
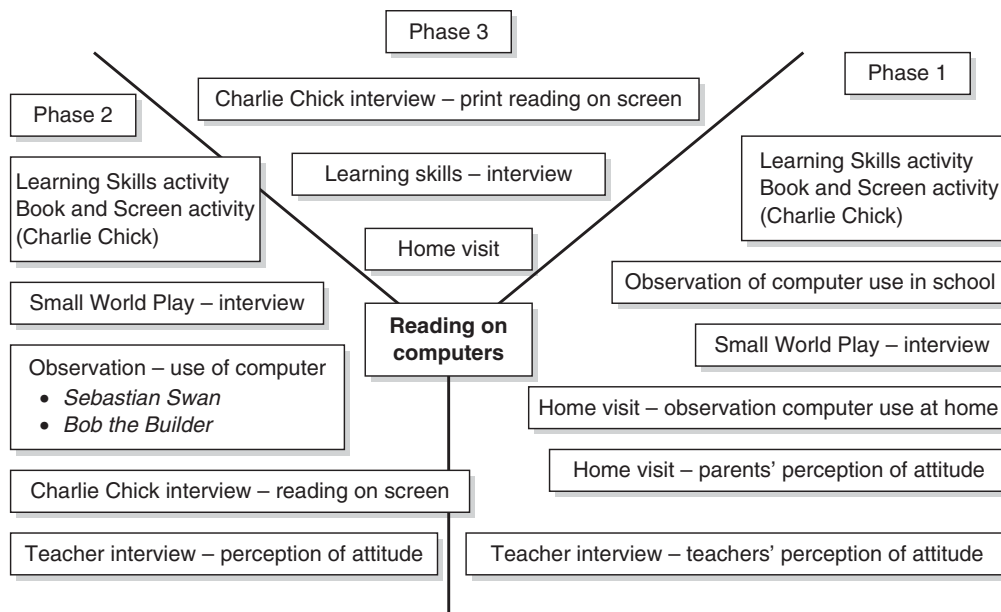
Figure 1.7   Example of thematic strand within data collection

These themes were: attitude towards school, perceptions of reading, reading on the computer and reading print in multidimensional forms. As the study progressed, these themes were broadened to also include specific reference to children's definitions of reading and being a reader, issues of attainment and enjoyment, print reading on screen and in books, and home and school constructions of reading. The profiles themselves underwent a further stage of analysis so that patterns and themes could be identified between the profiles as well as within the individual cases. This meant that conclusions were reached on the basis of findings drawn from a synthesis across the cases as well as an in-depth exploration of each individual journey over the course of the year.

Summary

This chapter has looked at some of the ways in which the terms 'reading' and 'learning to read' have been defined in the literature. Using the work of Hall (2003) as a guide, various perspectives on reading have been discussed; these have included the decoding of print and the acquisition of meaning from

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paper-based media, as well as an exploration of the broader social, cultural and political factors that influence children as they become readers in modern society. Given these issues, it has been further argued that definitions of reading must now include children's interactions with multimedia and digital technology in order for educators to help children to become competent and confident readers of text in the twenty-first century.

This chapter has also presented an account of the research upon which this book is based. This has included a detailed description of the research design which was created and implemented to access the voices of young children. Issues of ethical consideration and concern for reliability and validity of data have also been discussed within the context of this participatory research. By means of conclusion, it is hoped that the methods described in this chapter can be adapted by others wishing to access the voices of young children in research. The following questions invite practitioners and researchers to consider some salient factors in the design of research with young child respondents.

Key questions 🔑

- What research activities can I design in order to collect useful data from young children?
- How can I ensure that the activities will invite valid responses?
- Are the activities set within a meaningful context and do they reflect the age and experience of the respondents?
- Where is the researcher positioned within the research and how will this influence the quality of the data collected?
- Could the activities lead to misunderstandings between the conceptualisations of researcher and child?
- Are there any specific aspects of language or terminology that could cause ambiguity?
- What are the ethical implications of conducting this research?