CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS ABOUT PRINT

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ABSTRACT

Maltese children's perceptions about print were investigated through a structured interview made up of fourteen questions. One hundred and eight six-year-old children attending three state schools and a private school were individually interviewed at the beginning of their first year of formal school instruction. The children' responses were analyzed (a) generally, according to whether the entire interview was code-oriented, non-code oriented or had a code+ orientation; (b) specifically, by calculating the frequency of yes/no responses; (c) by calculating the frequency of object, mechanically or practice-related responses; valuative responses, expectation responses, cognitive responses or vague/ambiguous responses. About 34 percent of the subjects had a code-oriented perception whereas 18.5 percent of the interviews were unclassifiable. Although 68.5 percent of the children give a meaningful definition of reading, 67.6 percent of the children do not know what has to be done if they want to become better readers. The implications of these results are discussed within an emergent literacy framework.

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INTRODUCTION

Much of the research about the beginning stages of reading development, which is conducted within an emergent literacy framework concludes that young children come to school with a substantial knowledge about reading and the world of print. Depending on the availability of print in the home environment as well as children's interactions with it, some children come to school as fluent readers (Durkin, 1966; Clark, 1976), some are significantly better in book and code knowledge and print awareness (Sollars, 1990). Children are at a literacy advantage when they are included in all sorts of family activities (Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984). Within homes where children are surrounded by literacy activities, they develop concepts about reading and print early in life, prior to entry into Grade 1 (Brown & Briggs, 1986; Haussler, 1985; Johns, 1980; Lomax & McGee, 1987; Mason & McCormick, 1981).

In spite of these encouraging findings, research into children's perceptions about reading do not present such an optimistic picture. From the results of a loosely structured interview with 12 Scottish five-year-olds, Reid (1966) concluded that young children see reading as a mysterious activity. Downing's (1969; 1970) replica of Reid's study, conducted with 13 British five-year-olds led to the conclusion that beginning readers have difficulty in understanding the purpose of written language. Moreover, they just have a vague idea of how people read and have difficulties in understanding abstract terms. Weintraub & Denny's (1965) analyses of 108 American first-graders' responses to the question, "What is reading?" indicate that 27 percent of the children interviewed could not give a response or were ambiguous. From the remaining 73 percent of the responses, the researchers conclude that young children have greatly disparate views of the reading process.

The results of a later study (Johns & Ellis, 1976) supported these findings in that of the 182 Grade 1 children interviewed, 57 percent of the responses given to the question "What is reading?" were vague or of the 'I don't know type'. It is interesting to note that in the Johns & Ellis study, over 1,600 children from grades 1 through 8 were interviewed and 69 percent of the entire sample gave meaningless responses. The researchers conclude that there seems to be little or no understanding of the reading process; children have restricted views of reading and it is often described as a class activity. Most children defined reading as a decoding process and only 5 percent of the sample (mainly 7th and 8th graders) consider reading as a process involving both word recognition and meaning.

Further data from the Johns & Ellis' (1976) study indicate that 24.7 percent of the first graders' interviewed, did not know what an individual needs to learn to become a reader. The majority (41.8 percent) associate the task to classroom procedures or educational value whereas 32.4 percent suggest word recognition (decoding) as the solution. These results appear to follow the findings of previous work (Denny & Weintraub, 1966). In this study in response to "what must you do to learn how to read in first grade?", 34 percent of 111 American children failed to give any coherent reply; 27 percent of the sample suggested that the solution is obedience-related; 14.4 percent suggested that some adult or the teacher has to be actively involved in teaching whereas 27.3 percent assume some form of responsibility.

Among the general conclusions of these studies, as evaluated by Johns (1984; 1986) it is noted that beginning readers in various

countries are confused about the reading process. Indeed, the format of the interview as well as the number of questions asked may have a bearing on the amount of information obtained. In addition, the classification and analyses of responses, as decided upon by the various researchers may not always be a precise reflection of what children really know about reading. However, using the interview format still remains a means of obtaining information about children's views about reading which do not become apparent through formal or informal assessment.

The purpose of this study was to find out what Maltese children's perceptions of print are as assessed through a structured interview. Knowing what children know about reading before formal school instruction can be a useful guide (a) to find out how the out-of-school environment impinges on children's perceptions and (b) how teachers in the infant classroom can plan the reading programme to suit the needs and experiences of the children for whom they are responsible.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The study was carried out with Maltese children from three state schools and one private school. In all, the sample was made up of 108 Year 1 (six year-old) children. Forty children came from the private school whereas 68 children attended state schools. Table 1 shows the distribution of children by school, class and sex. With the exception of one of the classes, the children in the state schools were the eldest in their age group. The children from the private school were the eldest two groups of the four available classes.

School	Boys	Girls	Total
State School A	08	11	19
State School B	17	08	25
State School C	14	10	24
Private School Class A	10	09	19
Private School Class B	10	11	21
TOTAL	59	49	108

Table 1: Distribution of participants by sex and school

Measures and procedures

A structured interview, consisting of a set of fourteen questions was used.The questions were selected from previous research (Reid, 1966; Denny & Weintraub, 1966; Tovey, 1976; Johns & Ellis, 1976; Goodman & Altwerger, 1981; Sollars, 1990). When needed, probe questions were asked to clarify the information provided by the children.

The interviews were carried out at the beginning of the scholastic year (in October and November) before formal school instruction had time to influence the children's perceptions. Each child was interviewed individually in a room adjacent to the classroom, where there were no distractions. A friendly conversation was struck up with the children before commencing the interview to ensure that they were comfortable with the researcher.

Design

Through the constant-comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1980) and as used in previous research (Sollars, 1990), each interview was classified according to whether it was code-oriented, non-code oriented or had a code + orientation.

A code oriented perception is one where there is a concern with letters, sounding out, spelling. In a non-code oriented perception, children refer to situations, content and/or meaning. Children may specify where reading is done (for example, at bedtime, "before I go to sleep"), refer to stories, title of stories or other forms of reading material or refer to reading as a means of learning, to acquire information. Responses to the questions which gave equal importance to aspects related to the code and features which fall within a non-code domain, were classified as code+. To arrive at these results, the general trend of answers given throughout the questionnaire, were taken into consideration.

In addition to this classification, where possible, children's responses were quantified by calculating the frequencies of yes/no answers. Thirdly, a modified version of Weintraub & Denny's (1965) categories was used to classify the responses given to four of the questions asked. Where children had to provide more elaborate answers about what they think reading is (question 14), or how one can become a more efficient reader (question 10 and 13), or why some children have difficulties in reading (question 12), the responses were classified as follows:

> Category 1: Vague, ambiguous, or "I don't know" type.
> Category 2a: Cognitive responses (for example, you learn, you become clever).
> 2b: Developmentally-related responses (for question 12: for example, because they're still small).
> Category 3: Object-related (for example, you read a book).
> Category 4a: Valuative responses (for question 14: for example, it's a good thing to do).

4b: Practice-related (for question 10,12,13: for example, you have to read, you have to practice).

Category 5: Mechanical responses (for example, sound out words).

Category 6: Expectation responses (for example, you have to learn how to read).

In all instances, the interviews and questions were assessed by the researcher and an independent person. Inter-rater reliability was established around .98.

RESULTS

Table 2 indicates the results of children's perceptions when classified according to the prevalent emphasis. It is interesting to note that even at this early stage of the academic year, when formal instruction had only been introduced for a month, 34.3 percent of the children had already focused their attention on aspects related to the code. On the other hand, 18.5 percent of the children were consistent in giving vague responses. Throughout the interview, they responded to questions by, "I don't know", "I still cannot read".

Orientation of interview	Percentage	Number of children
Code oriented	34.3%	37
Non-code oriented	25.9%	27
Code + oriented	21.3%	23
Unclassifiable	18.5%	20

Table 2: Overall classification of children's interviews

As indicated in Table 3, most children (82.4 percent - 89 children) report that there are things which they like about reading and only

34.3 percent (37 children) believe that there are things which they do not like about reading. It is interesting to note that although half the children in the study (49.1 percent - 53 children) claim that reading is hard for them (refer to Table 4), an overwhelming 70.4 percent (76 children) believe that they are good readers. Almost an equal number of children (68.5 percent - 74 children) believe that everyone is a good reader.

Are there some things you like about reading?		
Yes:	82.4%	89
No:	8.3%	9
Don't know how to read:	9.3%	10
Are there some things you do not like about reading?		
Yes:	34.3%	37
No:	59.3%	64
Don't know/Ambiguous:	6.5%	7

Table 3: Children's perceptions about their likes and dislikes

Is reading hard for you?		
Yes:	49.1%	53
No:	38.9%	42
Don't know/Not much:	12.0%	13
Do you think you're a good reader?		
Yes:	70.4%	76
No:	20.4%	22
Don't know/Not much:	9.3%	10
Is everyone a good reader?		
Yes:	68.5%	74
No:	28.7%	31
Don't know	2.8%	3

Table 4: Children's beliefs about being a good reader

The children's responses to a further three questions indicate that the majority of the children participating in this study have experiences of seeing their parents read, are themselves read to or even read themselves. These results would suggest that children have role models in their immediate environment and they too interact with print.

Do you see mummy and daddy reading at home?		
Yes:	82.4%	89
No:	17.6%	19
Do mummy and daddy read to you?		
Yes:	85.2%	92
No:	14.8%	16
Do you read at home?		
Yes:	80.6%	87
No:	18.5%	20
No answer:	0.9%	1

Table 5: Children's perceptions about their role models and their personal interactions with print

During the interview, it also became apparent that most children (88.0 percent - 95 children) believe that, "you have to have a book to read" whereas 76.9 percent (83 children) claim that reading is important, although not everyone could give a meaningful response as to why they think it is important.

In addition to yes/no answers, the children were asked to give reasons or mention examples to support their answers. These will be elaborated on in the discussion section. However, as mentioned earlier in the methodology section, the responses to the last four questions in the interview, were also categorised.

Do you have to have a book to read?		
Yes:	88.0%	95
No:	9.3%	10
No answer:	2.8%	3
Do you think reading is important?		
Yes:	76.9%	83
No:	21.3%	23
Don't know:	1.9%	2

Table 6: Children's perceptions about reading material and the importance of reading

In response to, "What must be done if someone wants to become a reader?", 59.3 percent (64) children gave a vague response or replied that they do not know (Category 1); 16 children (14.8 percent) gave an object-related response, suggesting that: "You have to read a book". The remaining responses were classified under other categories as shown in Table 7.

What must be done if someone wants to be a reader?			
Category 1	(don't know, vague)	59.3%	64
Category 2	(cognitive response)	2.8%	3
Category 3	(object-related)	14.8%	16
Category 4	(practice-related)	8.3%	9
Category 5	(mechanical response)	10.2%	11
Category 6	(expectation response)	1.9%	2
Response bridged over 2 categories		2.8%	3

Table 7: Children's perceptions about what is needed for individuals to become readers

It is interesting to note that children seem to be in a better position to identify what others must do to become better readers rather than to direct themselves towards improving their reading skills. When children were asked what they themselves must do to become better readers, 67.6 percent (73 children) did not know or gave vague and ambiguous responses. The next most plausible solution children appear to think about is either object-related (9.3 percent - 10 children) or a mechanical response (8.33 percent - 9 children).

What must you do to become a better reader?		
Category 1 (don't know/vague)	67.6%	73
Category 2 (cognitive response)	0.9%	1
Category 3 (object-related)	9.3%	10
Category 4 (practice-related)	4.6%	5
Category 5 (mechanical response)	8.3%	9
Category 6 (expectation response)	5.6%	6
Response bridged over 2 categories	3.7%	4

Table 8: Children's beliefs about ways of improving their own reading skills

Another question required children to identify why children may have difficulties with reading. Almost half the children (43.5 percent - 47 children) did not give a coherent reply or do not know why difficulties may be encountered. However, among the difficulties identified, children mention factors related to their development or else problems arise with reading because, "It's difficult", "They haven't yet learned", or "They don't know how to read yet".

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Why do some children find reading hard?			
Category 1	(don't know/vague)	43.5%	47
Category 2	(developmentally-related)	13.0%	14
Category 3	(object-related)	9.3%	10
Category 4	(practice-related)	0.9%	1
Category 5	(mechanical response)	13.0%	14
Category 6	(expectation response)	20.4%	22

Table 9: Children's explanations for possible sources of difficulties encountered while reading

Finally, children were asked to give their own definition of reading. Of the children who thought about a meaningful response, most of them (25.9 percent - 28 children) associate reading to materials like books or papers. Others (14.8 percent - 16 children) defined reading in a way which could fit under two of the previously identified categories. For example, a child defined reading as, "You see the books, you learn the letters . . . we have books of witches, it's very scary" or, "I look at the book to read. . . . It has things written, are, has, a, o, l". Just under a third of the children interviewed (31.5 percent - 34 children) were unable to give a definition for reading.

What is reading?			
Category 1	(don't know/ambiguous)	31.5%	34
Category 2	(cognitive response)	13.0%	14
Category 3	(object-related)	25.9%	28
Category 4	(valuative response)	2.8%	3
Category 5	(mechanical response)	7.4%	8
Category 6	(expectation response)	3.7%	4
Response bridged over 2 categories		14.8%	16

Table 10: Children's definition of reading

DISCUSSION

By looking at the percentage results, one may easily be misled into concluding that there is a lot which children are not yet aware of. However, it is interesting to examine the reasons and logical arguments children use in their attempts to make sense out of reading.

Among the things which children liked about reading, they mentioned fairy tales. *Jack and the Beanstalk, Goldilocks, Snow White, Little Red Riding Hood and The three little pigs* were the titles mentioned by various children. Others seemed to have a more limited exposure to books and mentioned the text-books which the teacher had given them a few weeks earlier. Some children claim they like reading because it is fun and they like the pictures. A few children mentioned letters in isolation. One child mentioned letters and corresponding words in English which, he claims, he is learning when he goes for private tuition.

Among things which children dislike about reading, scary stories and books with monsters were mentioned by several children. Others reported that they get bored because reading is a time-consuming process whereas some children claim that reading is still difficult for them. One child gets annoyed because: "The words are complicated sometimes and when I get a word wrong, I have to listen to what my mummy tells me".

Similar responses were given by children to explain why they think they are or are not good readers as well as whether reading is difficult for them. Children who believe reading is difficult or admit that they are not good readers claim that they don't know how to read; they are still too young; words and letters are too difficult; books are difficult because there are too many pages. On the other hand,

children who claim that reading is easy suggest that this is so because they like reading or because they read easy books or even because the books they read are not as difficult as those of adults. These responses imply that children have already been through experiences where they saw themselves as failing or succeeding at the task of reading. They already had experiences which enabled them to make comparisons between texts which are suitable for children or beginning readers and others which are more appropriate for proficient and experienced readers.

Two of the children interviewed, acknowledged that they are good readers because they imitate their teacher. In explaining why they are good readers, both of them referred to the classroom processes adopted by their teacher. One child claims that she is a good reader because, "The teacher tells [reads] us and we repeat after her"; whereas another child explicitly states, "We do what the teacher does. What she does on the blackboard she tells us, 'You have to write those!'".

Most children believe that reading is something which can be done only if books are available. However, children who suggested reading material apart from books, referred to the questionnaire which the researcher had sent to parents; a file consisting of papers with letters; and a fish chart with small words printed on it. Similarly, children claim that they see their parents reading. Although books were generally mentioned once again, some children reported that their parents read letters brought by the postman. From the examples quoted by the children, they are also aware that the content of the letters varies - one child mentioned being informed by the school about registration for Year 1; another child referred to the information which her parents receive in connection with her brother's football training sessions and even information about doctrine classes after school. Other examples of reading material

referred to included medical certificates written by the doctor to be taken to school; newspapers, to know the news and to find out who died; TV guides; recipe books; woman's books: "because mummy wants a new kitchen"; and even word games such as 'Junior Scrabble'. These results suggest that some children are already becoming aware of the widespread availability of printed material.

Adult assistance, as well as going to school, were among the reasons given by children to explain what must be done if they themselves or other people want to become good readers. However, these responses were rather vague because children did not quite indicate how the adults could help them get on with the reading process. For example, one boy claimed: "I listen to my mother and then I speak in the same way she does"; another child reported that: "I look at the teacher and then I learn".

Whereas a good number of children failed to identify what can be done to become a good reader, others had various ideas about how to tackle the situation. Some believe it is related to practice: "You have to stay reading a lot of times, they have to work a lot and they have to try and read from the papers". Others gave a mechanical response, suggesting that to become a good or better reader, one has to "read the words", "look at what is written in the book. I have one which I use for spelling" or even, read "big words first and then small [ones]". Some children associated improvement in reading directly to books. To improve one's reading skills, you have to "learn a lot of books . . . I'm learning Peter and Jane", "read the school book", "read hard books". A few children take it for granted that reading is a skill they expect to learn. The next examples illustrate this:
- "They have to learn to read, to write nice, to sit quiet."
- "I'm not really good in books. I have to learn because you always read in books."

- "You have to read, you have to study, you have to do a lot of work. . . you have to do a lot of things but I can't becauseI'm still a little girl."

When asked to identify why some children may have difficulty with reading, just under 44 percent of the children could not think of a response or were vague in their answers. Other children argued that the books may be too difficult or thick, the words are too difficult, the children have not yet learned, they do not know how to read or there is too much reading to be done. Other reasons suggested for causing difficulties with reading referred to the children's age or short attention span: "They get tired", "They get bored", "They are still babies", "They don't know how because they're small".

Although 76.9 percent of the children think that reading is important, few of them seem to have a clear idea why this is so. Many of them believe that reading is important because: "I'll be clever", "I'll learn", "When we grow up we must know how to read otherwise we will be ignorant". Only two children made a link with some long-term purpose for reading. One child suggested that reading is important: "Because if you want to teach your children how to read, they could learn". Another child argued that: "If you're going to be a teacher you'll have to read your children some stories".

Finally, the children were asked for their definition of reading. About 69 percent of the children gave some response which could be classified under one or more of the categories identified earlier. The diversity of responses included object-oriented perceptions: "[reading is] looking at the book", or "you see books, pictures and letters", or "reading you have to read a book". One child even referred to silent reading by stating that:

"Reading is when you have a copybook and you start reading. My sister, when she reads, she doesn't talk. She stays like this (boy stares). I can read of Peter and Jane and Hansel and Gretel."

Some children gave a cognitive response by suggesting that you have to read and learn to do things. For example, one child argued that: "Reading you learn, you learn things. When you grow up, you're able to think and do everything". The mechanics of reading is another factor which influences children's perceptions of reading: "I read what the letters say. I guess what they begin with. I know what the letters say". Very few children gave definitions which suggest that reading is a good thing to do or that it is something you have to learn to do. One child argued that: "Reading is important. We can read stories but if we don't know how to read you can't read stories to your mummy and daddy. Reading is fun . . . " Another child believes that reading is "important because if you don't know how to read and then . . . trouble!!"

A number of responses given by the children indicate a wider perception of reading as they refer to more than one aspect of the skill. For example, one child defines reading as something that:
"You must . . . because then if you read you become more clever. Reading is like reading a book, seeing a book. But seeing it doesn't mean that you're reading a book. You must learn words and you must be good to read."

It is worth noting that in only one instance did a child refer to reading as a meaning-making process. This came about when the child replied that in order to become a better reader than he currently is, he said:
"I have to learn all the letters first very well, and I have to know what it means. If our teacher tells us, 'we're going to read', I'll know what it means."

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Comprehension is an essential component of the reading task and this result suggests that teachers ought to foster in the children an awareness that barking at print in books or other reading material is not the main reason for engaging in reading. Eliciting information and responding to the author's messages are of considerable importance in the activity.

CONCLUSIONS

In spite of the fact that several responses given to various questions were vague, one cannot deny that before starting formal school instruction, children start trying to make sense of the reading process and its purpose. Some children come to school with some idea about reading - what it is about, the functions of various sources of print and what they expect to achieve from the activity as well as how to improve their reading skills.

Children's perceptions appear to be influenced by what goes on at home. Children could report whether or not they see their parents reading. They were also in a position to mention some things which the adults in their environment read. However, even at this early stage of the first year of formal schooling, some children appear to be influenced by what the teacher says and does. Evidence for this is found in the responses where children mentioned their text books or even the classroom procedures which the teacher uses during reading lessons. This implies that Year 1 teachers' shoulder a great responsibility in helping children widen their perceptions about print.

Part of children's reading education should incorporate extensive and varied sources of printed material to assist children consider

reading as a meaning-making process which fulfils various purposes. In so doing, the school serves to reinforce children's perceptions which they develop from their home environment as well as enrich the perceptions of those children who do not have rich-in-print environments with which to interact. Parents and teachers ought to find out what prior knowledge children have in order to assist young, developing readers capitalise on this knowledge and improve their understanding of the activity as they become mature readers.

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