

Article

Child-Centred Teaching: Helping Each Child to Reach Their Full Potential

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Abstract: Research has shown that schoolteachers often prepare children for success in standardized reading assessments by ‘teaching to the test.’ Concurrently, research exploring children’s emergent literacies and ‘school readiness’ has shown that early childhood teachers often feel pressured to ‘prepare’ children for school and may do so by focusing on print-related literacies, to the detriment of earlier stages of the oral-to-print continuum. This raises the concern that teaching children as a group, preparing them for the next ‘stage of education,’ will disadvantage children who are working below or above expected levels of development. Our study explores the teaching approaches used with a group of foundation-year children who achieved more advanced reading outcomes than children from four adjacent classrooms in their first year of schooling. We collected the reading and letter-identification outcomes of 16 children in the teacher’s foundation-year class and interviewed her about her practices. Findings showed that the teacher used her knowledge of what the children should achieve in standardized assessments as a minimum expectation and moved beyond the content of such assessments when warranted, as determined by informal assessments. As a result, every child in the class met, and many exceeded, minimum reading standards by year’s end. We conclude that using an individualized, child-centred pedagogy, informed by a combination of standardized and informal assessments, allowed the teacher to support her students to develop a range of reading abilities and to reach their full potential.

Keywords: early childhood; primary school; elementary school; school readiness; reading education; learning and development; standardized assessments; informal assessments; child-centred learning; child-centred teaching



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1. Introduction

Access to high-quality early childhood learning experiences has a long-term impact on children’s intellectual and social development, and well-being [1]. However, a growing discourse surrounding early years education positions quality early childhood programs to be viewed from a human capital perspective, placing quality outcomes within an economic perspective that focuses on what education is supposed to produce [2]. Biesta [3] argues that contemporary measures of quality education focus on academic achievement across a controversially small and selective number of domains and subject areas, often privileging literacy and numeracy over children’s social and emotional wellbeing. Within the domain of literacy, the focus on academic achievement has also led to problematic repercussions for children’s early reading development, narrowly defining ‘reading’ as the ability to achieve the expected outcomes that are assessed via standardized tests [4], for younger and younger age groups [5]. Framed within this problematic discourse, our study sought to investigate how a teacher may circumvent such narrow and limiting expectations—expectations that would fail to address the diverse needs and potential of every child and ensure equity and access for all children.

In this paper, we explore how a foundation-year (The first year of compulsory schooling in Victorian primary schools in Australia) teacher’s child-centred approach worked

to countermand the tensions and challenges that testing regimes can invite in early years classrooms. The study (a follow-up to Nicholas and Paatsch [6]), interrogated the practices that the teacher, Mandy, adopted that may have resulted in her class of foundation-year children achieving, on average, more advanced reading outcomes than the other four foundation-year classrooms at her school, by year's end. We argue that using an individualized, child-centred pedagogy, informed by a combination of standardized and informal assessments, allowed the teacher to focus on the needs of each child and what each child *could* achieve with support, rather than narrowly focusing on what each child *should* achieve in standardized assessments. Such practices, in turn, allowed the teacher to support her students to develop a range of reading abilities, with every child meeting, many exceeding and some far exceeding, minimum standards in their very first year of compulsory schooling.

1.1. Standardised Assessments in Australia

Standardized testing in schools has created an environment where learner performance and teacher effectiveness are being measured by children's achievements on standardized tests. In Australia, where the current study was undertaken, all children are assessed in years three, five, seven, and nine on their literacy and numeracy abilities using the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) to determine whether children are underperforming, meeting, or exceeding expected educational benchmarks. Such assessments are considered “high-stakes” given that school performance and comparisons between schools are publicly accessible via the *MySchool* website [5] (p. 301). As a result, literacy and numeracy are often taught in structured ways that closely align with the test, to maximize child performance, including a “pushdown of accountability” that seeks to ensure that early years children are “ready to perform well” in the tests they will encounter in later grades [5] (p. 311). The practice of teaching to the test, readying children for academic performance, has been found to be detrimental to children's education, resulting in a narrowing of the curriculum, and the enactment of restrictive early years pedagogy that seeks to ensure children succeed within specific testing regimes that interpret literacy and numeracy in very particular ways [4,5]. The “pushdown of accountability” [5] (p. 311) has likewise impacted on the pedagogies of early childhood educators [7], with some educators seeking to teach two- to three-year-old children to identify alphabetic letter symbols, with little to no intention of teaching the emergent literacy skills, knowledges and capabilities that come with an awareness of syllables, rhyme and phonemes in spoken words [8].

1.2. School Readiness

As children transition into the first year of compulsory school education (CSE), they are often assessed to determine the extent to which they are developmentally and academically ‘ready’ to adapt to the classroom. While there are varying views of what it means to be ready for school, readiness is often controversially defined in terms of children's cognitive and academic abilities, including a focus on discrete skills such as the ability to name letters and numbers, or knowledge of vocabulary [9]. The issues surrounding academic readiness is shared by early childhood and compulsory schooling educators, with a recent study by Rouse, Nicholas and Garner [7] finding that both early childhood and CSE teachers listed *academic* readiness as a key challenge for young children when transitioning into their first year of schooling. These reported challenges may in some part be due to the CSE system that teachers work within, given that in the first months of formal schooling in Victoria, Australia, children are assessed on their reading, writing, speaking and listening competencies, including their ability to recognize letters of the alphabet. Children's results from these assessments are then used to generate an overview of their school entry achievements, providing diagnostic information to inform program planning and resource allocation [10].

The assumption that children are to be ‘prepared’ to achieve particular outcomes for reading at specific stages of their schooling also appears to have had the adverse effect of

compartmentalizing the teaching of skills needed for early reading success. For example, ‘preparing’ children to perform well (1) upon school entry (*English Online Interview* [10]) and (2) by the end of the foundation-year, when assessed on their ability to “recognise the letters of the English alphabet, in upper and lower case and know and use the most common sounds represented by most letters” [11], has led to a compartmentalized focus on letter recognition for pre-school aged children [7,8]. This compartmentalized focus exists despite a government-commissioned inquiry into the teaching of literacy [12] (p. 31) finding that “the basic building blocks of reading” are a combination of four “*integrated sub-skills*” (emphasis added), which include “whole-word recognition; and the ability to derive meaning from written text” in addition to “letter-symbol recognition” and “letter-sound” knowledge.

There is no question that assessments are useful tools for teachers when planning for teaching and learning [6]. However, in light of research that has found that some teachers teach to the test [4,5], with some early childhood educators targeting specific reading-related outcomes in isolation [7], there is concern that pressure to ensure that children (and schools) will perform well in national literacy tests may devolve the teaching and learning of reading into a narrow objective to meet particular reading outcomes, ‘readying’ children from a younger and younger age to meet expected outcomes in their future schooling. We argue that such an objective is one that adopts a narrow, grade-age-centric approach to teaching that fails to account for and address the diverse needs and potential of every child, which may also lead to an increase in the achievement and equity gaps that are present in current K-12 education.

1.3. A Child-Centred Approach

In Australia, a child-centred approach to teaching and learning is promoted in Early Childhood Education and Care, and in schools [13,14]. Child-centred education takes a “strengths-based” view [13,15]; identifying a child’s current “skills, capacities, dispositions, interests and motivations” [15] (p. 7) and the strategies that work for that child, and uses that knowledge to plan for teaching and learning. A child-centred approach requires that a teacher shifts their focus from “how best to teach or how to cover the curriculum”, to understanding and supporting student learning [13] (p. 17). To garner such knowledge, child-centred education is based upon the understanding that “assessment is central to developing, sustaining and delivering student-centred learning” [13] (p. 18).

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership stresses that adopting a child-centred approach to teaching and learning must go beyond high-stakes, standardized assessments. They state that a child-centred approach must be based on the understanding that assessment

is not about the high-stakes examination and comparison of student performance. Rather, it is about effectively using assessment tasks to identify areas of need and develop strategies for the improvement of student learning . . . implementing and analysing results from a range of assessment tools. [13] (p. 18)

However, research that has pointed to a tendency for some teachers to teach to the test, including readying children for school, highlights concern that, in practice, a narrowed approach to the teaching and learning of reading often exists in early years education. As such, these practices could potentially inhibit children from gaining access to learning experiences that will help them to reach their full potential.

In this paper, we explore the practices of an early years teacher to investigate whether the more advanced reading outcomes that her students achieved by year’s end was due to her adopting a child-centred approach to teaching. Mandy’s class of children did not appear to be high achievers upon school entry (further detailed in Section 1.4). Indeed, a quarter of the children were the lowest performing compared with the other four foundation-level classes, raising the possibility that some may have been working below expected levels of development. However, while many of the children in the other four foundation-level classes achieved reading outcomes that were above the minimum standard by year’s end,

Mandy’s class achieved the most advanced outcomes across the five groups. This study investigates how those outcomes may have been facilitated by exploring whether Mandy planned for teaching that would take the children beyond what may have been possible, had she simply planned that they meet foundation-level outcomes.

1.4. The Study Context

The concept of readying early years children for academic success, basing educational practice on the *content* that children will encounter in assessments rather than on children’s assessment *results*, was a practice that was evidenced in Nicholas and Paatsch [6]—the study that preceded this paper. The teachers of the five foundation-year classrooms that featured in Nicholas and Paatsch [6] used school-mandated standardized letter-identification assessments at the end of each child’s first year of schooling. Results from the year that preceded the study showed that only 54 percent of foundation-year children were able to name each upper- and lower-case letter of the alphabet (52 letter symbols) and give a common sound for each (52 letter sounds) [6]. Consequently, at the beginning of the following year (the year of the study), the teachers agreed to adopt a ‘letter-a-week’ focus that would take more than three quarters of the year to realize, and held fast to that plan irrespective of children’s outcomes when tested periodically throughout the year. While it can be argued that this approach appeared to be successful, given that 75% of children in Groups (classes) B–E learned all letter names and common sounds by the end of the year (see Figure 1), it remained unclear how and why the children from Group A (Mandy’s class) were the only group to all receive a full score. This was especially intriguing given that none of the children from Group A appeared to demonstrate greater skill at recognizing letters of the alphabet upon school entry compared to the other four classrooms, with Group A’s 1st quartile of children providing the lowest performance of the five groups (Figure 2).

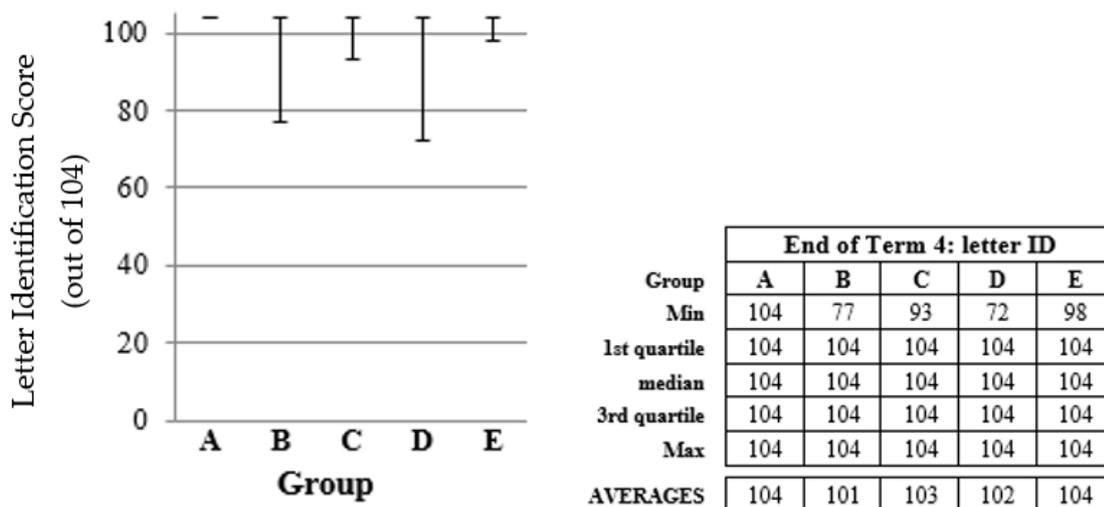


Figure 1. Letter identification data—comparing all five classes: end of year.

1.5. Theoretical Framework—A Vygotskian Perspective

This study made use of Vygotskian theories of child development [16,17] to investigate whether Mandy (an early years teacher) had adopted a child-centred pedagogy when planning for the teaching and learning of reading in her foundation-year classroom. As such, the analytical framework was designed with an aim to explore whether the teacher used an approach in which children’s existing strengths, capabilities and understandings were the starting point for extending their learning rather than focusing on what children needed to know to meet external literacy benchmarks. In the following sections, we outline the Vygotskian theories that framed the study.

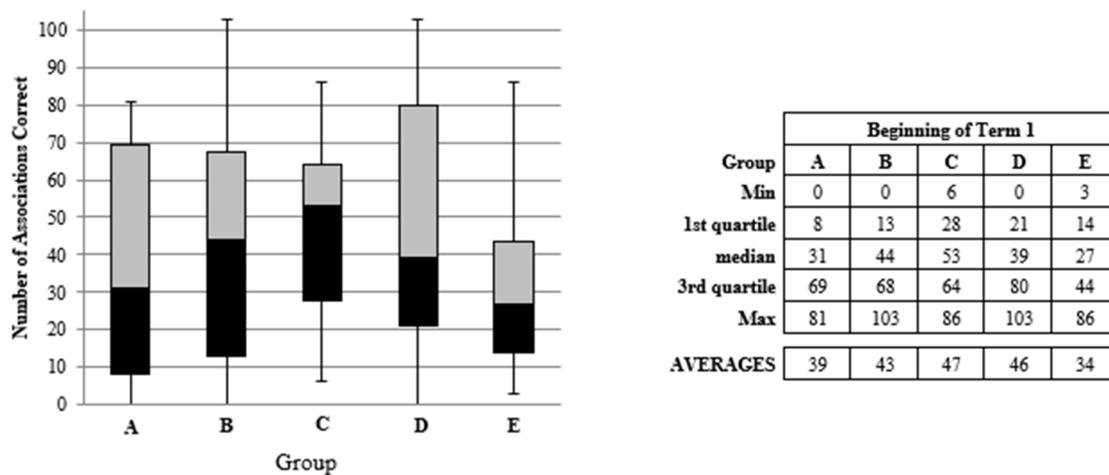


Figure 2. Letter identification data—comparing all five classes: beginning of year [6] (p. 141).

1.5.1. Teaching to the Child, Not the Grade

Teaching to a grade level or to a test, whether motivated by such incentives as to ‘ready children for school’ or simply to improve school-state-national outcomes, treats education and learning as discrete stages of development that are characteristic of a given age-group; an immovable and stable “thing” [16] (p. 40). Likewise, teaching with the aim of preparing children for the next stage of their schooling, a practice that Gagné [18] (p. 16) terms the “age-grade lockstep,” privileges discrete age-appropriate or ‘grade’ appropriate literacy- and numeracy-related outcomes above others, prioritizing outcomes that can be standardized and statistically measured. However, Vygotsky’s research showed that chronological age cannot be used to reliably determine a child’s level of development [16]. Moreover, he found that each stage of a child’s development has a ‘history’ that is contingent upon earlier stages of development, making it erroneous to believe that cognitive development can be fostered by targeting discrete skills in isolation, taught or improved via repetition or discovery [17]. Rather than being a composite of discrete skills, Vygotsky found that cognitive development involves a “complex merging” of elementary and higher order thinking [17] (p. 43); a process of development that necessities returning to earlier thinking processes/skills “but along a spiral, returning on a higher plane to a point that was passed” [17] (p. 53).

When planning for the teaching and learning of reading, it is therefore critical that earlier stages of development, the development of more elementary cognitive skills and thinking processes, are not overlooked in the rush to teach children how to read at age-appropriate levels or above. Rather than teaching to the next stage of education, teachers must know their children well and use that knowledge to teach to the next stage of development for each individual child, not progressing to the next stage of development until foundational skills and thinking processes have been established. Likewise, when age or grade-appropriate outcomes have been met, teachers must aim to support children’s continued development.

1.5.2. Engaging with Parents

Underpinning all of the above was Vygotsky’s [17] (p. 41) most critical finding into the study of higher-order thinking: “that every symbolic activity of the child was at one time a social form of cooperation”. Vygotsky proposed that learning and development, from birth through into adulthood, is a longitudinal process of “converting means of social behavior into means of individual-psychological organization” [17] (p. 41). As such, higher-order thinking, including the ability of “high-ability” children to “find, solve and act on problems,” manipulates abstract ideas and makes connections “to an advanced

degree" [19], arises from engagement in social experiences, while lack of skill (to varying degrees) can often be attributed to a lack of exposure to such experiences.

The opportunities and experiences children are exposed to include those derived via preschool education, as well as the opportunities and experiences children encounter within the context of their home. Research has shown that when parents are engaged in their children's learning, children have more advanced learning outcomes [20], including positive academic achievements in literacy [21], most especially when parents engage their children in a range of informal literacy activities at home before the start of primary school [22]. Likewise, a lack of such experiences disadvantages children whose parents are less able to take an active role in their child's literacy learning, highlighting the importance of school-parent collaboration. Parental engagement promotes shared responsibility for education between parents and teachers and recognizes that the learning process transcends the school environment, into the home [23].

This understanding of child development emphasizes the importance of learning every child's 'funds of knowledge' via informal, qualitative assessments that look beyond the academic, to uncover the experiences and knowledges the child has gained via their everyday experiences [24]. Doing so helps teachers to determine if children have been exposed to, and have engaged in, the necessary experiences that will help them to develop the skills needed to progress to the next stage of development and identifies strengths that can be leveraged to facilitate development. In sum, the Vygotskian theories outlined above have highlighted the need for teachers to (1) use a range of assessments, (2) include parent-teacher communications, (3) track children's capabilities over time, (4) differentiate their teaching, and (5) use approaches and practices that respond to the individual needs of each child.

1.6. Our Research Question

To what extent did the case study exemplify an individualized, child-centred pedagogy in supporting children's reading development in their first year of schooling?

2. Materials and Methods

This study used a single case study to investigate the individualized child-centred approach that a primary school teacher may have adopted to support children's reading development in a foundation-year classroom. We explored the case study within a bounded system, over a one-year period, through detailed in-depth data collection, involving multiple sources of information [25]. This data collection included (1) the classroom teacher's interview data, (2) children's letter-identification knowledge, and (3) children's reading level outcomes.

2.1. Participants

Sixteen children (9 males and 7 females) and one classroom teacher (Mandy) participated in this study. All children were enrolled in the first year of compulsory schooling (i.e., the foundation-year), in the same class, in a Victorian government school. At the time of data collection, the school had a student enrollment of 524 students, with most parents being skilled office staff, sales staff, service staff or tradesmen and women. Four percent of students from foundation to grade 6 were recorded as having Language Backgrounds Other Than English (LBOTE), including Hungarian, Italian, Afrikaans, Filipino, and Croatian, with the majority being Vietnamese and Tagalog. Mandy had over ten years of teaching experience, having taught children at the foundation level for five years and five years in years 1 and 2 (composite). Ethical approval was granted by the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee (DUHREC) and the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET). Written informed consent was gained from the school principal, the classroom teacher and the parents of the 16 children who participated in the study. Pseudonyms and codes have been used for participants throughout.

2.2. Method and Analysis

Information, detailing how Mandy's program reflected and/or expanded upon school-mandated expectations was collected as part of this follow-up study, via a one-on-one interview. Standardized assessment outcomes for the 16 children in Mandy's class were also collected. As detailed in Nicholas and Paatsch [6], all foundation-year teachers at the study site used school-mandated standardized assessments to assess reading-related outcomes. This included the PM Benchmarking Reading Assessment [26] and English letter-identification assessment [10], used to track student outcomes and progress, and to inform teaching. All foundation-year children were provided with leveled home readers based upon their PM benchmarking results, and a set of individualized sight word lists (six words at a time from the *Oxford Word List* [27]). Each teacher planned to engage each foundation-year child in a small-group guided reading lesson for 15–20 mins at least once a week and provided opportunities for daily whole group modeled/shared reading within a one-hour reading block each day.

2.2.1. Teacher Interview

A one-hour interview with Mandy was conducted at the end of the school year to explore the ways in which she may have provided individualized, child-centred practices to support the development of children's reading and letter identification abilities. The interview was audio-recorded and then transcribed for later analysis. The purpose of the interview was to gain reflective insights into Mandy's practices in supporting the reading development of all children, and her perceptions of the efficacy of these practices in influencing children to reach their full potential.

The one-hour interview data was analyzed using thematic analysis [25] where the transcription was coded to categorize the content according to words and phrases, mapped against the Vygotskian themes outlined in Section 1.5. Patterns were identified within the data for each key theme, the outcomes of which are described in the Results. Two of the researchers analyzed the data separately and then compared their coding, reaching agreement on any that differed in the first wave of coding. Table 1 presents the five main themes and definitions that resulted from this process. Examples of each theme are provided in the Results.

Table 1. Interview themes and definitions.

Theme	Definition
Children's capabilities	Content that mentioned children's reading capabilities either on transitioning into the foundation (Prep) year, or children's capabilities during the year
Assessing learning	Content that mentioned the assessment approaches, both formal and informal undertaken by this teacher, or in the context of the wider school.
Teaching approaches and practices	Content that mentioned the planning and the decisions around how reading was being taught, and the practices and approaches used in the classroom
Differentiation and responding to learner needs	Content that mentioned how the teaching was differentiated to support individual children's learning, capabilities and needs
Engaging with parents	Content that mentions the interactions and engagement between the teacher and the families in sharing the child's goals and learning outcomes.

2.2.2. Mandated Standardized Assessments

At the time of data collection, the school had developed a mandated assessment schedule for foundation-year students that measured two aspects of reading: Children's

(1) letter knowledge, and (2) contextualized word recognition/understandings. This coordinated approach was reflective of the finding that “the basic building blocks of reading” are a combination of four “integrated subskills”, which include “whole-word recognition,” “the ability to derive meaning from written text,” “letter-symbol recognition” and “letter-sound” knowledge” [12] (p. 31).

Letter-symbol and letter-sound identification was assessed using the test that had been developed as part of the Department of Education and Training’s (DET) *English Online Interview* [10]. Each child was presented with a sheet of randomly placed letters of the English alphabet in both lower- and upper-case forms. Children were asked to name each of the 52 letter symbols and to give the most common sound for each. Children were awarded one mark for each correct name and one mark for each correct sound. Scores were tallied from a total score of 104.

Children’s contextualized word recognition/understandings was assessed using the PM Benchmarking Reading Assessment [26]. The PM Benchmark Reading Assessment assessed children’s independent and instructional reading levels (Levels 1–30) and identified the strategies, skills and knowledge that they used when reading in context. Children’s fluency, reading comprehension and retelling abilities were also assessed as part of this assessment. The school had established that, as a minimum benchmark, foundation-year children were expected to read a level 5 text at an instructional level by year’s end, and a level 20 text by the end of year 2 (see Table 2).

Table 2. The school’s end-of-year reading level benchmarks (minimum expectations).

Year Level	Minimum Expectation
End of foundation-year	Level 5
End of Year 1	Level 15
End of Year 2	Level 20

Individual PM Benchmarking Reading, and letter identification assessments were collected for the 16 children who participated in this follow-up study. The assessments were conducted at five time periods throughout one school year: (1) beginning of the foundation year; (2) end of Term 1; (3) end of Term 2; (4) end of Term 3; and (5) at the end of the foundation year (end of Term 4). Results were presented in tables and as line graphs to track children’s progress over time.

3. Results

In the following sections we detail the results of this study. Section 3.1 provides the outcomes of the teacher interview according to the key emerging themes. Section 3.2 provides the outcomes of the children’s PM Benchmarking Reading and letter-identification assessments. Section 3.3 provides an analysis that integrates all data sets.

3.1. Interview with Mandy

Findings from the interview showed that Mandy adopted a child-centred approach to teaching with her foundation-year class, teaching to each child’s individual capabilities, rather than narrowly focusing on foundation-level benchmarks alone. She made routine use of standardized assessments, beyond the school-mandated data collection points, as a means of determining and tracking children’s progress towards meeting minimum expectations. In addition, she used informal assessments to track and further extend children when minimum expectations had been met. Further analysis showed that the five themes listed in Table 1, used to assess the extent to which Mandy may have adopted a child-centred approach, often intersected as she spoke about her teaching.

3.1.1. Children's Capabilities

When speaking about her planning and teaching of reading, Mandy often acknowledged the diverse reading capabilities of each child and their rate of progress, identifying that

One [child] in particular found reading quite challenging and learning letter sounds quite challenging—It took him a lot longer than most of the other children in the class.

While at the same time,

There are children who will be working towards the expected level that typically you have at the end of Grade One and Grade Two. There might be some working towards that level.

This was in spite of the fact that the children began the year with comparable skills:

I happen to have a class where none of the children could read at the beginning of the year.

Typically, you get maybe one or two that can read a little bit, but not even a level one. I had not one child that could read at the beginning of the year.

These reflections highlight the need to routinely monitor and track children's progress throughout the year when adopting a child-centred approach, so that teaching and learning can be tailored to meet the ever changing needs and potential of each child, in a timely manner.

3.1.2. Assessment of Learning

Throughout the interview, Mandy often spoke about how she used both standardized and informal assessments to inform the way she responded to the individual reading needs and potential of each child. The assessments enabled her to plan her teaching, while also allowing for child agency in their own learning.

In particular, Mandy noted the importance of informally assessing children during their transition and orientation activities in the months prior to commencing school, looking beyond traditional 'reading-related' skills. She believed that this was a way of getting to know the children and to start thinking of how she may support their learning once they started school, noting that this was a practice that all the foundation-year teachers at her school shared.

In the year prior to them coming to school, in the orientation days . . . we do informal assessments as we're walking around, just to see what their social skills are . . . what their fine motor is like, how they engage with the different tasks, with cutting, with completing puzzles, with the play equipment in terms of the drama area if they engage with that . . . I guess what we look for is what kind of supports they're going to need, to get used to a different way of engaging in their day [and] we look to see whether there are children who might find that challenging.

Mandy noted that she also used standardized assessments at the beginning of the year, such as the *English Online Interview* [10], alongside the informal assessments listed above, to plan for teaching and learning that would support all children's reading development at the beginning of the school year.

At the beginning of the year, we have scheduled meetings where the parents bring them to school, so that we can do the English Online Interview—that gives us data about their oral language development, their reading skills and their writing skills.

Mandy stressed the important role that standardized assessments played in her planning for teaching and learning throughout the year. She used children's standardized assessment results, such as reading level assessments, to determine whether her teaching should aim to (1) support children to meet grade-level expectations, or (2) further extend children to move beyond minimum expectations. For example:

If they can read a Level five or above, they're working, you know, 12 months ahead or more. So that sort of gives me the idea or a measure that I can use that helps me to work out whether they're working above expected level or not.

Throughout the year, Mandy drew on informal assessments of children's reading levels and capabilities conducted during guided reading lessons and during one-on-one conferences, in addition to the standardized assessments noted above. She reported the importance of these assessments for framing her teaching practices and engaging the children in setting their own learning goals. She introduced one-on-one conferencing, a practice that differed to the other four foundation-year classes, as a way of supporting children to be agents of their own learning, and to routinely monitor each child's reading development and progress on a regular basis.

I introduced the conferencing so that I could have a one-on-one opportunity just to see where each individual child was at and give them goals that were specific to them.

During the conference, she used quick informal check-ins to monitor their reading-in-context behaviors, sight word knowledge, and to monitor which letter symbols and sounds each child had grasped and which they were yet to learn:

I did another letter ID, a quick letter ID, if they didn't know all their letters at that stage. And just see how they're going, how they've progressed since the last time we'd done the assessment. I was doing those assessments more frequently than the other prep [foundation-year] grades.

She also created/introduced an informal assessment that would aid in monitoring progress and support children to move beyond the 26 most common English letter-sound matches that were the focus of the letter-identification standardized assessment:

Once they knew the common letter sound matches for the 26 letters of the alphabet, I didn't stop there. Then we moved on to being aware that letters can make more than one sound. That there are digraphs, if you put a 'c' with the 'h', it can make a/t/s/sound. It can make a/s/sound like in 'machine'. We moved on, and so they continued to have goals when it came to letter sounds and decoding.

These reflections highlight how standardized and informal assessments can be routinely integrated into a child-centred teaching program, used to monitor learning and inform teaching throughout the year. Such an approach plans for teaching that aims to support children in meeting grade-level expectations, and to extend children who are working beyond such expectations.

3.1.3. Teaching Approaches and Practices

It was evident from Mandy's interview responses that the approaches and practices she adopted in her teaching were shaped by her use of standardized and informal assessments and a child-centred pedagogy. Mandy incorporated an extra hour into her literacy block, beyond the two hours adopted by the other four foundation-year classes, in order to collect data about each child's reading capabilities on a more regular basis, and to set timely goals. She taught one hour of writing, in keeping with the other foundation-year classes at her school, and taught reading for a two-hour period. The first hour of reading followed the same approach that the other foundation-year classes used. She conducted a whole-group shared/modeled reading lesson, followed by two small-group guided reading lessons while the remainder of the class worked on reading tasks independently of the teacher, and ended the hour with a whole-group reflection. This was followed by a second hour of reading—an approach that the other four classes did not adopt:

I had a two hour reading block. So that's what was different to the other classrooms and I brought the humanities and social sciences into my writing block [in the following hour] and a little bit into my reading when I chose the books that I had during whole group reading. So that's how I was able to do it.

Mandy also collaborated with the children to set up a book corner, where children were able to choose books of interest, rather than only those at their reading level.

I had a reading corner where I had lots of different books and at the start of the year I just threw all the books in the middle of our circle and they [the children in the class]

helped create sort of themes. They grouped the books . . . and once every week or fortnight, they'd have books that they chose from the corner that they'd have in their locker, under their desks . . . I always made sure during the week that they had time for independent reading, they could read from the books that they had chosen, books that interest them.

A key practice of Mandy's that differed to the other foundation-year teachers was her use of one-on-one conferencing, a practice that Mandy incorporated into the second hour of her two-hour reading block. This involved Mandy meeting with each child on a fortnightly basis (at a minimum) to assess and talk about their learning, and re-assess their (1) reading-in-context, (2) letter-identification and (3) sight-word goals. The conferences enabled each child to identify their level of success against their own personal goals, and to plan for further learning, as detailed in Section 3.1.2. For children who found it challenging to set goals, Mandy offered support:

I didn't want them to feel overwhelmed. So, you know, if they didn't know any letters, I would say, 'How about we start with this letter because it's in your name? That would be a good one to start with. What do you think?', and they'd always say yes.

These reflections show that Mandy adopted a strong child-centred pedagogy when planning for the teaching and learning of reading. She made plans to meet with each child in a one-on-one context on a regular basis and involved the children in discussions about their own learning, their progress and the setting of goals. When planning for the teaching and learning of reading, Mandy designated set times to collect data about each child and used that data to inform her teaching.

3.1.4. Differentiating and Responding to Individual Learning Needs

The theme 'Differentiating and responding to individual learning needs' is closely linked to the previous theme of 'Teaching approaches and practices', as Mandy often spoke of differentiation as a teaching approach. For example, Mandy spoke of how she would assess each child's reading against the reading continuum, and from there she would design individual goals that would also inform her teaching. She also acknowledged that within a classroom children will have a range of different reading capabilities and that all children need opportunities to progress their own reading competence along this continuum. It is here that there is evidence that the themes intersected.

Mandy specifically described how she differentiated her teaching to respond to individual needs and goals:

Depending on what their needs might be, through my assessments and observations and through my conversations with them during conferencing, I wanted to differentiate on a one-to-one basis . . . The one-on-one [conferencing] allowed me to really differentiate down to an individual child's level [which] I might have missed if I was just focusing on those small [guided reading] groups.

As with her teaching approaches and practices more broadly, Mandy was committed to ensuring her teaching was differentiated to support each child's continued progress. Thus, while not explicitly speaking of differentiation, she targeted her teaching to each individual child's strengths and capabilities, commenting that,

For the children who got those [letter sounds] really quickly . . . I moved on to, 'Some letters can make more than one sound'. So, for example, the A can make an /e/ sound like in 'angel'; it can make an /ɒ/ sound like in 'was', and so that became their new focus—being aware of and identifying letters that might make lots of different sounds. And so our conversation would be about that.

These reflections highlight the critical role that one-on-one conferencing played in Mandy's planning for the teaching and learning of reading, and the level of flexibility that was enabled when Mandy chose to create and incorporate informal assessments into her teaching. The one-on-one conferences and informal assessments used by Mandy allowed for a differentiated approach to the assessment, teaching and learning of reading in her

foundation-year classroom—an approach that catered to the diverse needs and potential of each child.

3.1.5. Engaging with Families

Mandy's interview data showed that she recognized that a child's home experiences is a source of learning and development. For example, Mandy commented that

If you've taught a sibling who read a lot at home, they always read their homework reader, you kind of expect that their sibling, when they come up, they're going to be ready for that kind of thing and display skills to maybe pick up reading quicker than other children.

There was therefore a connection between Mandy's beliefs and the importance she placed on her partnership with parents. Teacher–parent partnerships were of key importance to Mandy, including how she might communicate their child's individual goals as well as their successes so that the experiences the children had in class could extend into the home. One of the strategies Mandy used to engage with parents was to regularly send communications home via the child's home reader:

I put [the child's goals] in their home reader so their parents would know what their current focus was as well. [This is the] only thing I'm doing differently . . . putting a little note in their reader telling the parents what their goals are, but even just that, the parents have noticed that this is a difference.

Mandy also spoke of parents 'noticing' what their children were achieving and sharing these noticings with her during impromptu catch-ups.

I have had a lot of parents come and talk to me about how pleased they are to see how well their child was doing with reading in particular. Parents were noticing . . . and they were 'blown away' by their own child's competence. Using that kind of language implied to me that they noticed that their child was reading at a higher level than they would expect for a prep [foundation-year child]. They were so proud of their children and they were commenting on that.

These reflections show that Mandy actively sought to partner with parents, so as to work together in supporting children's reading development. In addition, Mandy viewed parental 'noticings' as another form of feedback—evidence (1) that others were also noting the progress that the children were making and (2) that her work was being recognized and acknowledged.

3.2. Children's Reading Outcomes

In addition to interviewing Mandy about her practices and approaches, we also collected the reading level and letter identification outcomes of the 16 children in her foundation-year class to explore whether a connection may exist between Mandy's practices and children's outcomes. Figure 3 presents individual reading levels of the 16 children in Mandy's class at the commencement of the foundation year and at the end of Terms 1, 2, 3 and 4. Results show that at the commencement of the year all children commenced at level 0, suggesting very little differentiated abilities across the group when reading standardized texts. At end of Term 1, 11 of the 16 children (69%) had reached PM Benchmark Reading level 1, while one child had reached level 2 and four children had remained at level 0. In contrast, the children's letter identification knowledge upon school entry and at the end of Term 1 showed that there was evidence of differentiated ability with this isolated skill (Figure 4). Results show that upon school entry, children ranged in ability with one child unable to identify one letter sound or name, and two children at the other end of the spectrum able to identify 81 letter names and/or sounds. At the end of Term 1, 3 of the 16 children (19%) could identify the name and most common sound of all lower- and upper-case letters of the alphabet, one child was only able to identify the name and/or most common sound of 22 letter symbols, and all the other children showed a range of abilities.

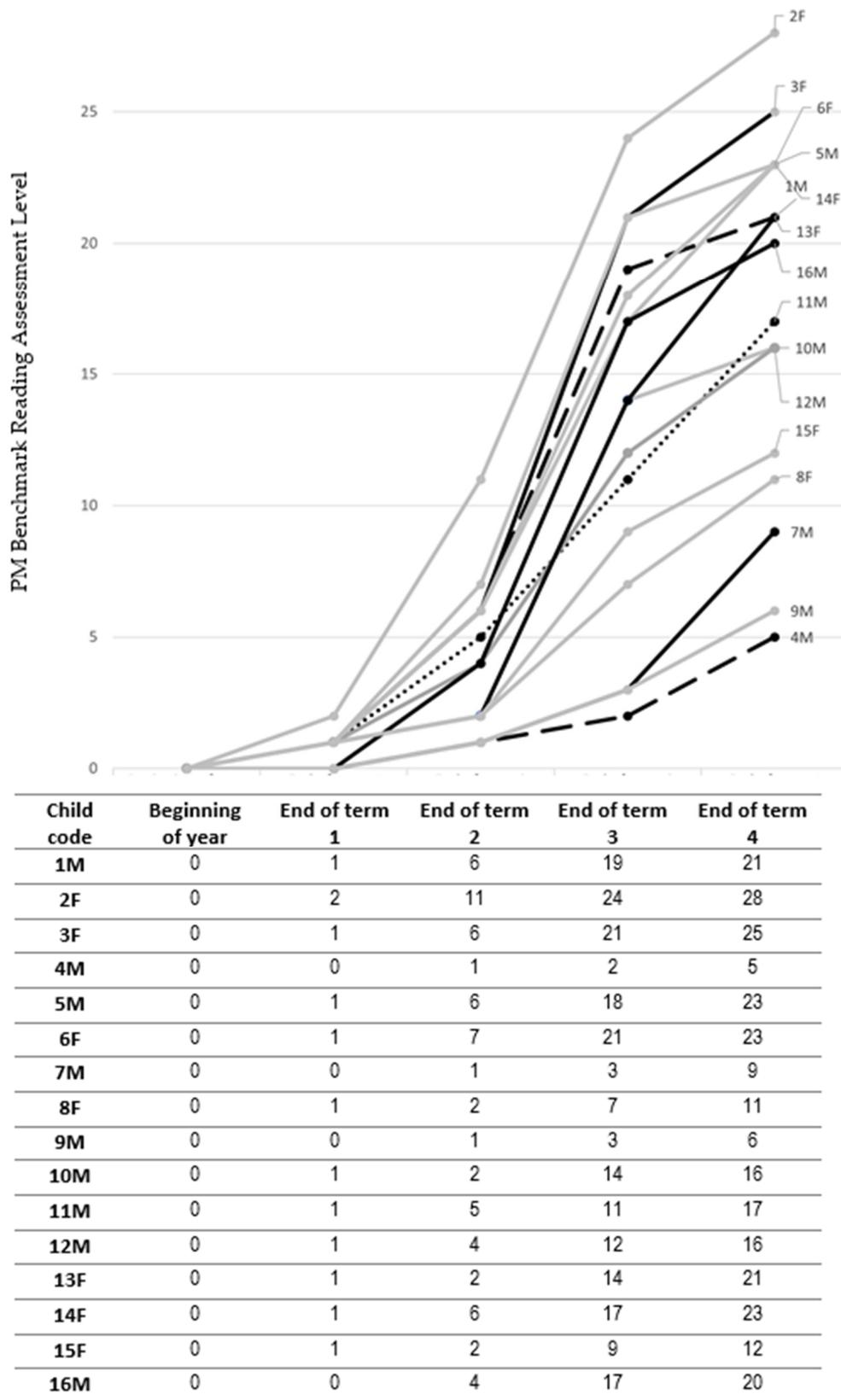


Figure 3. Children’s reading levels from school entry until year’s end. Note that each child has been given a code: 1–16. M = male; F = female.

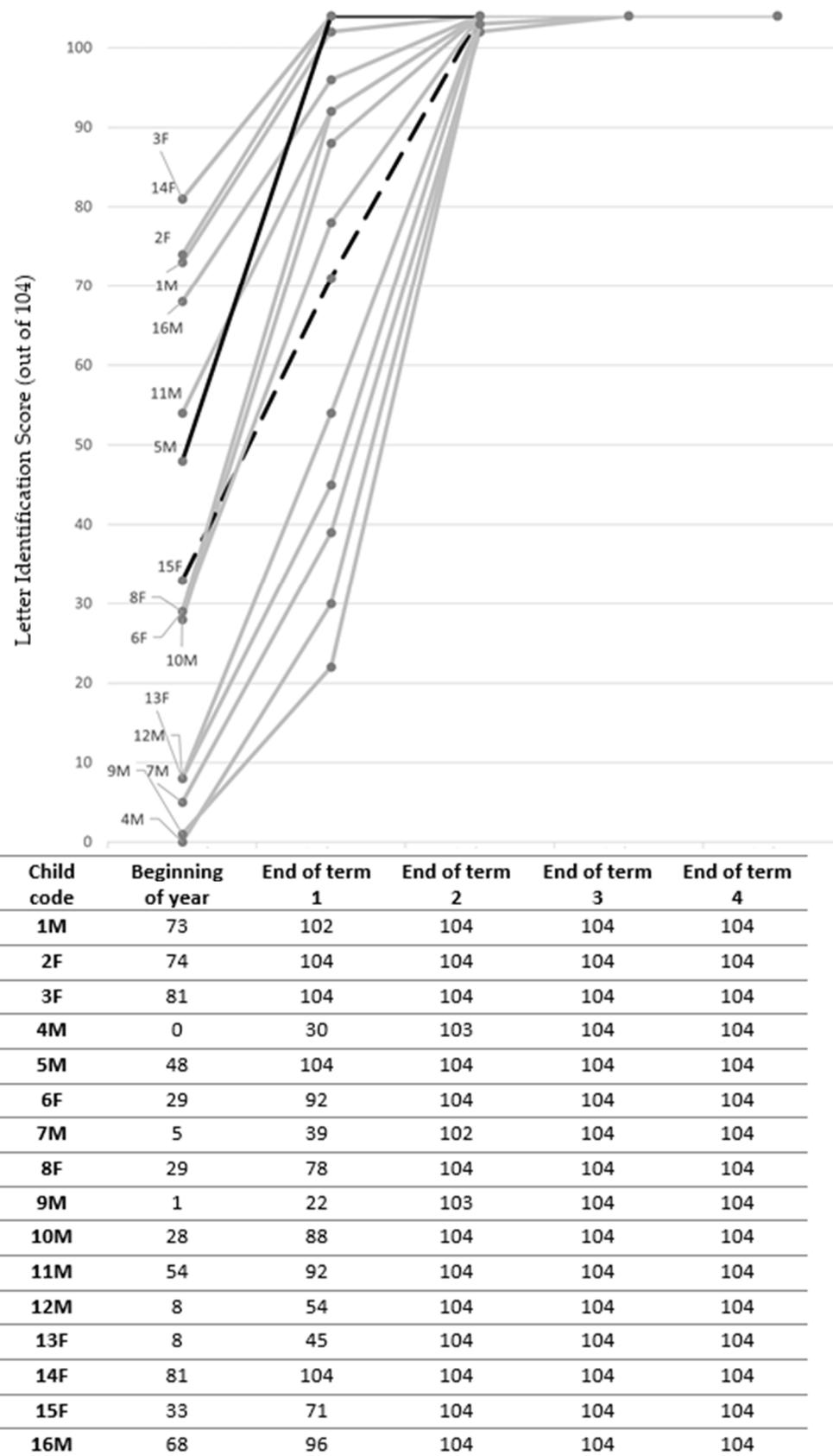


Figure 4. Children’s letter identification knowledge from school entry until year’s end. Note that each child has been given a code: 1–16. M = male; F = female.

Evidence of a broad range of abilities was apparent in children's reading levels at the end of Term 2 with levels ranging from level 1 through to level 11, with the highest percentage of children at levels 2 and 6 (25% respectively). At the same time, most children had learned the name and most common sound of all lower- and upper-case letters (81%), with the remaining three children unable to identify only one to two letter sounds or names. The pattern of performance in reading ability continued to be evident at the end of Terms 3 and at the end of the year (end of Term 4). Further scrutiny of the data shows that all children had reached the minimum reading level for foundation-year (level 5), with 4 of 16 children working towards minimum expectations for children at the end year 1 (level 15), and 8 of the 16 children reaching or surpassing the minimum expectations of reading level for end of year 2 (level 20).

3.3. Mandy's Pedagogical Approach

Mandy's pedagogical approach of focusing on the child rather than the skill to be taught enabled her to gain deep insights into each child's skills and capabilities, and to extend 12 (75%) of the children to achieve reading outcomes beyond the expected level for reading, as set by the school. The children's letter-identification outcomes alone show that most of the children had received a full score of 104 (learning all upper- and lower-case letter names and common sounds) by the end of Term 2, with the remaining three children unable to identify only one to two letter sounds or names. This outcome was comparable to the other four foundation-year classes' end of year outcomes (see Section 1.4: Figure 1), showing that Mandy's approach had supported the children in her class to achieve the same outcome six months earlier than the other four classes. This was despite the fact that none of the children from Mandy's class appeared to demonstrate greater skill at recognizing letters of the alphabet upon school entry compared to the other four classrooms, with the 1st quartile of children in Mandy's class providing the lowest performance of the five groups (see Section 1.4: Figure 2).

Mandy demonstrated awareness that each child had different experiences and prior knowledges from which to draw when developing and extending their skills in reading. She was able to maintain her commitment to teaching to the expected level set by the school and adhere to the school curriculum, but she used this to purposefully remain with or returned to the same goal when warranted and/or continue to develop and challenge each child to explore further ways of progressing their competencies. Purposefully incorporating frequent data collection points and one-on-one discussions with children into her planning, allowed Mandy to continually work to each child's ever changing and developing capacities and potential, allowing her to support all children in her class to achieve minimum standards, and many to reach beyond what was expected for their year level. By drawing on each child's existing skills and tapping into their interests, passions and motivations when selecting texts during independent reading, Mandy, in partnership with parents, was able to support children to move forward in their learning, rather than focusing on what was necessary for the teaching and learning of reading at the foundation level.

While Mandy recognized and saw value in the standardized assessments undertaken across the year as a way of benchmarking students, her approach to informally assessing children's skills, knowledges and conceptual understandings was integral to creating individualized learning opportunities and to reframing the learning focus for each child in a timely manner. This approach enabled her to hear each child's voice, to set challenges and to progress each child's reading development in ways that may not have been possible had she not incorporated an additional hour of reading and one-on-one conferencing into her teaching.

4. Discussion

This study has shown that enacting an individualized child-centred approach in the teaching of reading can support foundation-year children to demonstrate a level of skill that may not have been possible were a teacher to teach to the minimum reading

benchmarks expected of a foundation-year child. As demonstrated in the data, while none of the children could read a level 1 text at the beginning of the school year, children were able to develop their reading competencies at their own rate, through a targeted focus on the specific needs and potential of each child. By the end of the school year, all children had achieved the school-determined minimum reading level for the foundation year (level 5), but more importantly, fifty percent (8 of 16) of the children had achieved the school's reading benchmark level for year 2 (level 20). A similar pattern of differentiated abilities was evident in results from the letter identification assessments across the school year. The interview data appeared to show that engaging children in conversations about their reading goals, in partnership with parents, created an environment where children sought and were supported to extend and challenge themselves, rather than plateauing when they had attained the benchmarked level. Engaging with parents by sharing and discussing their child's individual goals and achievements created a partnership in which there was a shared responsibility for the children's learning, and children's individual achievements were celebrated [23].

This study has shown that when teachers teach to the individual child, and they understand the English curriculum/stages of development, there is less emphasis on whether a child will meet the minimum standards expected of a grade-age level. Rather, emphasis is placed on the individual child's abilities, and the supports that will enable them to reach their potential. Had Mandy solely relied on the 'letter-a-week' approach that all foundation-year teachers had adopted, one that took more than three quarters of the year to realize, it could be argued that the children in her class would not have achieved the letter-identification outcomes that they did halfway through the year, an outcome that was comparable to the end of year outcomes of the other four classes. Mandy's one-on-one conferences allowed her to monitor child progress, move onto new letter foci (or beyond) or to remain/return to letters that had already been covered in the 'letter-a-week' program when warranted, using a three-pronged approach that placed equal emphasis on (1) reading-in-context, (2) letter-identification and (3) sight-word goals. This appeared to have a positive influence on children's reading-in-context abilities, with all children meeting the minimum standard (i.e., able to read a level 5 text) and fifty percent of children achieving a reading standard that was two years above the reading benchmark for the foundation-year.

This study has shown that children may be afforded more freedom to move between levels of attainment and to break free of the "age-grade lockstep" [18] (p. 16) when teachers adopt an individualized child-centred approach. Child 5M's reading outcomes (Figure 3) provide a pertinent example of this. At the beginning of the year, 5M had yet to demonstrate an ability to read a level 1 standardized text and showed median skill at identifying letters of the alphabet compared to his peers (Figure 4). However, he was one of the first children to identify all upper- and lower-case letter symbols and common letter-sound matches by the end of the first quarter of the school year, and was reading a level 23 text at the end of his first year of schooling (slightly higher than the expected benchmark for the end of grade 2). This is an important finding, showing what can be achieved when a teacher frequently monitors and teaches to a child's level of development rather than being influenced by supposed academic readiness, or planning to focus on a 'letter-a-week' to help the child achieve minimum standards by year's end [28,29]. Mandy's approach supports Vygotsky's notion that learning cannot be fostered by targeting discrete skills in isolation but rather that children need to be provided with experiences that require them to integrate a range of thinking processes [17], tarrying with and returning to key content, concepts and skills "on a higher plane" [17] (p. 53), along the way.

In all, these findings suggest that Mandy had an understanding that the characteristics of the children in her class were varied and individual, despite the fact that they were within the same age group, supporting Vygotsky's concept that child learning and development is not tied to chronological age, nor is it stable or immovable [16]. These understandings are essential to ensuring that the learning and teaching of reading is equitable in classroom

environments and highlight the importance of adopting an individualized approach to reading to ensure that equitable access to learning and development is provided for all children, especially those who are reported as not being 'academically prepared' for commencing school. Reductionist approaches that focus on 'preparing' children for success in reading using a drill, skills approach (such as teaching a 'letter-a-week'), irrespective of children's needs and potentials, risk leaving children behind when they need more time to develop understandings, or risk holding children back when they are ready to make further progress in their learning.

5. Limitations of the Study and Future Directions

One of the limitations of this study is that it only included one interview with one teacher at the end of the school year. It would have been useful to collect longitudinal data from the teacher in addition to the student data, to observe Mandy's practice during one-on-one conferences and to further understand her own reflections on her practices over time. Such investigations would provide greater insights into the full context of Mandy's teaching and to understand how she provided equitable access to all children in her class throughout other times of the day to support their learning.

In terms of the oral-to-print continuum of development, we know that Mandy assessed the children on their oral language and phonological awareness knowledges in the children's first month of schooling, using the *English Online Interview* [10]. We also know that all 16 children met minimum standards for reading and basic letter-sound knowledge as determined by the school curriculum and reading benchmark targets. What remains unknown, however, given the data that was available to us, is whether Mandy engaged the children in learning activities that would support further development of phonological awareness, for children who did not have grade-expected capabilities upon school entry that are characteristic of the given age group [16]. More information of how (and whether) Mandy engaged children in activities that are typically considered to benefit pre-school aged children's emergent literacies would have detailed the degree to which Mandy accounted for each of the stages of development from the oral-to-print continuum, according to student need. Furthermore, such data would have provided insight into whether there was more that she could have done for the children who achieved the minimum benchmark for reading, to support them to achieve more, and as such, truly reach their full potential. Clearly, further research is warranted, and as such, the results of the present study should be generalized with caution.

6. Conclusions

This study has provided useful insights into the connection between teacher practice and learner achievements, showing that when a teacher knows each child on an individual basis and uses that knowledge to plan for teaching that focuses on what each child *can* achieve with support, children become agents in their own learning [20]. Rather than focusing on what children *should* achieve to meet an external set of reading standards, this teacher focused on what each child could currently do, and how they could work together, along with the children's parents, to support the child's further development. This case study has shown how important it is to (1) monitor children's progress on a frequent basis, (2) use standardized assessments to monitor children's progress towards meeting minimum expectations rather than to pre-design teaching programs, (3) incorporate informal assessments into the program that move beyond the narrow foci of standardized assessments, and (4) partner with parents. Doing so ensures that teachers are teaching each child (not 'the grade'), addressing children's diverse learning needs, and supporting each child to reach their full potential.

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