



**“Too young to read”: Early years practitioners’ perceptions of early reading with under-threes**

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3 **Figures**  
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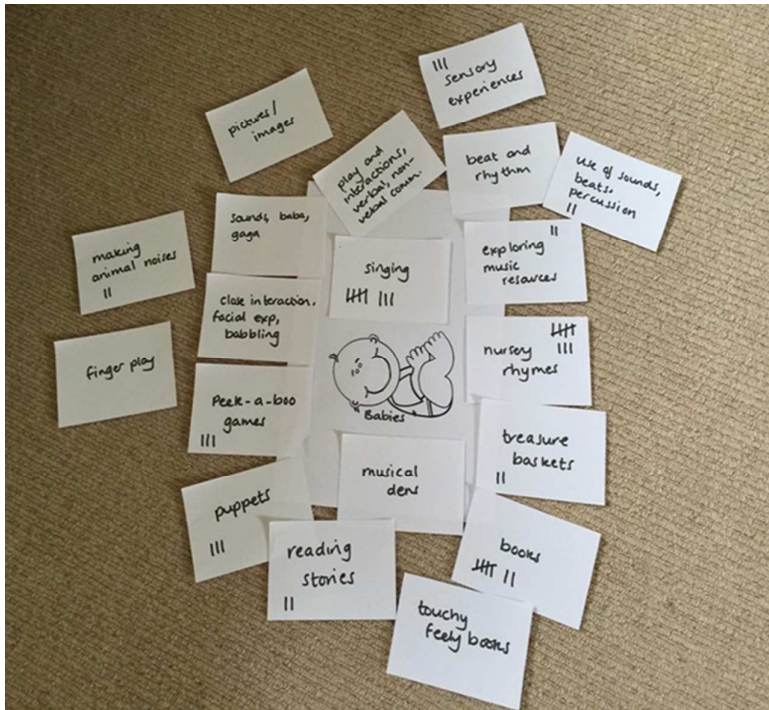
5 Figure 1 Sample of Survey Questions  
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<p>7 How do you currently support very young children with early reading? 8 Please list your strategies/activities/experiences/teaching for: 9 a) Babies 10 11 b) Toddlers 12 13 c) 2 year olds 14 15 d) 3 – 5 year olds 16 17</p>
<p>18 What has informed these strategies/activities? How do you decide how to teach and 19 what to teach? 20</p>
<p>21 Have you have had any training or staff development on early reading? How has this 22 influenced or impacted upon your current teaching in this area? 23 24 Please provide examples. 25 26</p>
<p>27 Are there any particular challenges in teaching/supporting very young children with 28 early reading in your setting? 29 30 31 32</p>

33 Figure 2 Sample of Interview Questions  
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<p>36 Can you tell me about your work with under-threes to support early reading 37 development? 38</p>
<p>39 Can you tell me a little bit more about ....? 40 41</p>
<p>42 How would you define early reading? 43</p>
<p>44 Could you describe the environment you provide for babies, in particular to support 45 their early reading development please? 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60</p>

Figure 3 Manual Survey Data 'Babies age range'



## “Too young to read”: Early years practitioners’ perceptions of early reading with under-threes

This research paper investigates how graduate early years practitioners support under-threes with early reading; presenting their perceptions and daily encounters. Previous research into the practice and pedagogy of early reading appears to have resulted in the latest overarching policy investment in phonics. This paper suggests that this neoliberal policy agenda influences practitioner’s pedagogy with under-threes. This paper reports the findings of an empirical study, involving an initial survey, followed by practitioner interviews and reflective Zines. Findings from this study indicate that the increased emphasis on school readiness is affecting experienced, graduate level practitioners’ perceptions of early reading. Intrinsically, early years practitioners are being driven to adopting a ‘policy compliant’ (Fisher and Wood 2012, 12) approach; consequently, resulting in a deficit model of provision for under-threes in terms of the resources, activities and experiences necessary to encourage and enthuse children to engage with reading. This research concludes that there is an urgent need to support early years practitioners in understanding what ‘early reading’ is in practice.

Keywords: early reading, under-threes, perceptions, phonics, policy compliance

### Introduction

The lexicon of ‘early reading’ is used in this article to denote the reading that happens from birth onwards, with no assumption that there is any ‘pre-reading’ or staged approach to becoming ‘a reader’ or future educational ‘actual’ reading phase. **Early reading, is** often challenging to understand in practice for many educationalists, given that young children learn to read in many diverse ways (Clark 2014; Flewitt 2013; Hulme and Snowling 2013; Levy 2016). **Reading as a contemporary notion of conversational interaction and engagement with multi-media materials (picturebooks,**

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3 images, digital words and pictures) is open to a variety of interpretations and  
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5 definitions. Further research suggests that early reading is much more holistic, visual  
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7 and multimodal (Carrington 2005; Levy 2016; Larson and Marsh 2005; Smith and  
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9 Arizpe 2016). However, perceptions of early reading often focus largely on learning  
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11 specific formal skills (Roulstone et al. 2011; Turbill 2001). Inherently, previous early  
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13 reading research is somewhat preoccupied with supporting struggling readers and  
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15 teaching phonics (Browder et al. 2006; Clark 2014; Goswami 2015; Hulme and  
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17 Snowling 2013), which presents a distinct lack of recognition or respect for the holistic  
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19 early reading journey very young children experience and often already engage with.  
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21 This article maintains that supporting struggling readers and teaching phonics is vastly  
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23 disparate to the daily practice of immersing under-threes in early reading activities,  
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25 which seems to have been misdirected somehow within the many contemporary  
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27 educational discussions and debates. Consequently, practitioners working with under-  
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29 threes merit early reading provision detached from the domineering policy and school  
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31 readiness agenda surrounding phonics instruction. The overarching themes of the  
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33 *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (DfE, 2017) are grounded  
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35 within a child-centred, play-based approach and not the adult-led, formal school  
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37 learning influence from the neoliberal phonics agenda. Certainly, Brostrom (2017)  
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39 suggests that one of the concerns about such schoolification is that play, and learning  
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41 are always viewed as counterparts in this debate.  
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50 This original study advocates that it is imperative to support all early years  
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52 practitioners to understand the central importance of early reading development,  
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54 alongside the fundamental innovative research on early brain development (Conkbayir  
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56 2017; Finnegan 2016; Gros-Louis, West and King, 2016). The first three years of life  
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58 are highlighted by such recent studies as crucial to future literacy development.  
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3 Conversely, Flewitt (2013), Nutbrown et al. (2005) and Rogoff (2003) suggest that  
4 many under-threes may already be immersed in rich early reading practices from birth  
5 and this is considerably different to any informal or formal teaching of phonics taking  
6 place in early years settings. In addition, there is a noticeable lack of research or indeed  
7 any key information to support early years practitioners working with under-threes,  
8 specifically relating to early reading development. Given the prominence of early  
9 reading for contemporary literacy (Clark 2017; Flewitt 2013; UNESCO 2013) and the  
10 considerable lack of support available, there is a requisite for research focused on  
11 exploring early years practitioners' activities, perceptions and experiences.  
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25 The main intention of this research study was to find out what experienced,  
26 graduate level practitioners organise with under-threes to support their early reading  
27 development and the rationale underpinning these decisions. **This is currently unknown**  
28 **and has not been previously explored. As such,** this two-phased empirical study  
29 involved a combination of sources of data -; qualitative and quantitative - to ensure a  
30 comprehensive, 'coherent and rigorous approach' (Gorard and Taylor 2004, 4). These  
31 included a survey questionnaire (50/68 respondents), 5 semi-structured interviews, and  
32 Zine data to respond to the research question, 'What are early years practitioners'  
33 perceptions of early reading and how does this influence their pedagogy for under-  
34 threes?'

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48 The overall design of employing Zines as reflective accounts enabled the  
49 choices, experiences and perceptions of the practitioners to be documented, therefore  
50 'personalised and owned by practitioners' (Appleby and Andrews 2011, 57) **and not**  
51 **influenced by the positionality of the researcher.** The particular focus of early reading  
52 with under-threes and investigating the experiences and perceptions of experienced  
53 early years practitioners regarding their understanding of early reading **is a potential**  
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3 **contribution to new knowledge:** offering a unique insight and viewpoint, pertinent to all  
4 educationalists and researchers. **Currently, this is undocumented, as previous research**  
5 **has not highlighted the work of practitioners and their pedagogy with under-threes to**  
6 **support early reading.**  
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### 14 **Reading for under-threes**

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16 Reading for under-threes includes many all-encompassing concepts: enjoying stories,  
17 reading images, accessing paper, print and screen texts, experimenting with language,  
18 rhyme, rhythm and beat. Reading is also about very young children making connections  
19 within their physical and sensory experiences, extracting key information,  
20 understanding ideas and thus forming their own views (Levy 2016). Reading as a  
21 concept involves ‘complex interactions and reciprocity’ (Jordan 2010, 105) within  
22 context above all else to have value and meaning for very young children. Therefore,  
23 reading is not just concerned with phonological awareness and decoding, as the policy  
24 discourse appears to steer viewpoints towards (Johnson and Watson 2005; Ofsted 2014;  
25 Rose 2006; Torgeson et al. 2006). The latest increased focus on phonological awareness  
26 and the teaching of phonics, in particular Systematic Synthetic Phonics (SSP) as a  
27 mandatory requirement for schools in England, from 2007 is detrimentally influencing  
28 early years pedagogy, as the **empirical research findings assert**. Central to this issue is  
29 that the wider, much more important engagement of reading and understanding of what  
30 reading actually means in practice is left undefined for many early years practitioners,  
31 particularly for practitioners working with under-threes. **This paper hopes to provide**  
32 **some clarification of what early reading is in practice.**  
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### 57 **A policy compliance approach?**

58 Levy suggests that:  
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3 The early years are crucial in fostering a love of reading for  
4 enjoyment, which runs parallel with eagerness to learn to read and  
5 self-confidence in the ability to read from an early age.

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7 (Levy et al., 2014, 3)  
8  
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10 Currently, practitioners working within early years settings in England have a vast range  
11 of policy documents (*Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage*  
12 (EYFS) DfE, 2014, 2017; *EYFS Foundation Stage Profile; Teachers' Standards Early*  
13 *Years*, NCTL 2013; *National Curriculum* 2014) seemingly thrust upon them, many  
14 relating to 'schoolification', as described by Moss (2014) and Roberts-Holmes and  
15 Bradbury (2016b). This positioning of early years education as 'preparation' for school  
16 predicates that the early childhood years are deemed 'not as important' as school.  
17 Therefore, the school readiness agenda, depicted by Moss (2013) continues to empower  
18 the underrating of early years education and particularly for those working with under-  
19 threes (Gibson 2013). Furthermore, there is a compelling focus on phonics within early  
20 years documentation (EYFS, 2012, 2014, 2017; *Ofsted Training Materials*, Inspection  
21 Focus 2013, 2016; *Ofsted Big Conversation CPD* 2016, 2017; *Ofsted Early Years*  
22 *Compliance Handbook* 2016, 2017). In addition, the *Bold Beginnings* Ofsted Report of  
23 November 2017 further illustrates the substantial emphasis on phonics for young  
24 children, given that it is the first recommendation offered:  
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45 Make sure that the teaching of reading, including systematic  
46 synthetic phonics, is the core purpose of the Reception Year

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48 (Ofsted 2017, 7)  
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53 Accordingly, the *Early Learning Goals* for Literacy: 'Reading' and 'Writing' (DfE,  
54 2014, 2017) visibly prioritise developing phonic knowledge in the EYFS, which is a  
55 clear example of the primary school curriculum 'shaping' early years pedagogy,  
56 indicative of the 'standards agenda' described by Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury  
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(2016b). Subsequently, this school readiness agenda seems to be present not only in the UK but also in several other countries and is becoming more of a global issue. This ‘dominant discourse’ expressed by Moss (2017), in relation to the situation in the UK is also what Sims (2017, 1) refers to as the ‘push-down curriculum’ occurring in Australia, certainly in relation to phonics proposed by Clark (2017). In agreement, Moss et al. (2016) suggest that this balance is indeed now shifting to favour schoolification. Significantly, Brostrom (2017) also highlights that children in the Nordic countries (which the UK often aspire to as best practice) also appear to be pressured towards schoolification now. Sims (2017, 4) proposes that this is in fact a ‘neoliberal focus’, with the foci from education Ministers on improving economic and social mobility, which is significantly at odds with the EYFS *Principles and Practice* (DfE 2014, 2017) in England and the established global belief in early years education that children are competent learners and critical thinkers from birth (Brown, 2015; Savva and Erakleous 2017). Consequently, as part of this ‘neoliberal state’, the crusade for teaching phonics appears to be gaining momentum rapidly and injuriously influencing early years pedagogy, as this paper highlights.

## **Methodology**

The methods adopted for this research study were largely qualitative: interviews and Zine entries, alongside a quantitative and qualitative initial survey to explore the early years practitioners’ experiences and viewpoints. The data used in this paper originates from a much larger set of data from a Doctoral thesis. This empirical study embraced an interpretative naturalistic approach. As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) highlighted, each participant and each setting are diverse in nature, actions and opinions and the practitioners’ experiences are the foundations of knowledge. This study explores the

1  
2  
3 activities, experiences and perceptions of qualified graduate practitioners, working with  
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5 under-threes across a fourteen-month period, beginning in July 2015. This mixed  
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7 methodological approach presented opportunities for practitioners to document,  
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9 articulate, reflect and explore their views and beliefs about early reading provision for  
10  
11 under-threes. Given the epistemological and ontological stance, from the researcher's  
12  
13 professional experience and empathy, it is important to acknowledge the positionality of  
14  
15 both an 'insider and outsider' researcher described by Ergun and Erdemir (2010, 16). I  
16  
17 wish to be clear about my own positionality within the context of this research study. As  
18  
19 an experienced early years practitioner, I would be avoiding the formal approach of  
20  
21 teaching of phonics with under-threes and utilising a broader, holistic approach which  
22  
23 includes language and communication contextual activities, rhyme, rhythm and beat,  
24  
25 talking about pictures and enjoying frequent stories – imaginative, print or media-based.  
26  
27 My own philosophy of early reading does not include formally teaching phonics with  
28  
29 under-threes.  
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35 Given that the early years practitioners in this study shared some apprehensions  
36  
37 in their understanding of early reading in practice, this study highlights pertinent issues  
38  
39 relating to the impact of the school readiness agenda, policy compliance and the training  
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41 needs of early years practitioners in supporting under-threes with early reading.  
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### 46 ***Participants***

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48 The participants all volunteered to take part in this research study and demonstrated  
49  
50 clear enthusiasm to be involved in order to 'know more' about early reading. The  
51  
52 principle participants were all female, graduate early years practitioners, working in a  
53  
54 range of ECEC settings across England, with under-threes. Participants' ages ranged  
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3 from 21 – 45 years, with between 3 and 24 years of experience in ECEC settings. All  
4 participants hold an Honours Degree in an Early Childhood/Early Years related subject.  
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### 10 *Ethical considerations*

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12 The ethical principles underpinning this research adhere to the British Educational  
13 Research Association (BERA 2011) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research and  
14 European Early Childhood Education Research Association Ethical Code for Early  
15 Childhood Researchers (EECERA 2014). Informed consent was an on-going feature of  
16 the research process, with scheduled review points built into the study and the right to  
17 withdraw was constantly respected (Bertram et al. 2016).  
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### 28 *Empirical study*

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30 The study consisted of an initial survey, 5 semi-structured interviews and Zine data.  
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32 Zines are a relatively new, inventive resource, defined by Desyllas and Sinclair (2013)  
33 as a small sample of work, presented as a booklet. The Zines offered a unique way of  
34 sharing information, daily activities and reflections, noted by Radway (2011) – ensuring  
35 that ‘ownership’ of the data was left to participants and not influenced by the researcher.  
36  
37 Practitioners were provided with a small blank booklet (Zine) with ample space to  
38 respond to the research question independently. The Zines offered five participants  
39 space to describe their activities, experiences, views and opinions as an open-ended  
40 approach. The Zines ranged between 30 pages of entries to 160 pages. The purpose was  
41 to print the completed Zines to support continued staff development (CPD) for the  
42 settings.  
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3 The survey was designed as a self-completion questionnaire with a range of  
4 multiple choice, and open response questions. Figure 1 presents a sample of the survey  
5 questions:  
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### 10 11 12 **Figure 1**

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17 The semi-structured interviews were designed to explore further perceptions, to  
18 examine practitioner's responses from the survey or to explain any ambiguous  
19 responses. The interviews were digitally recorded, then transcribed and assigned a  
20 pseudonym to preserve anonymity and confidentiality. Transcripts were shared with  
21 individual practitioners for validity and transparency. Figure 2 represents a sample of  
22 the interview questions:  
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### 30 31 32 33 **Figure 2**

#### 34 35 36 37 ***Data Analysis***

38 Emerging themes were identified from the data using the Qualitative Content Analysis  
39 (QCA) (Schreier, 2012) approach to manually coding, alongside NVivo Pro 11 (QSR  
40 International) as a systematic, flexible method of reducing the data (Schreier 2012, 5).  
41 Two consistent themes emerged from this set of data. In addition, a research diary was  
42 completed throughout the study, enabling a review of subjectivity, reliability and  
43 trustworthiness at pertinent points, leading to a consistency of findings as noted by  
44 Creswell (2012) and Fraenkel et al. (2012). Themes relating to 'access to reading  
45 materials' and 'understanding reading' emerged from the data.  
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## Experiences of supporting under-threes with early reading

The findings exemplify that early years practitioners support under-threes with early reading in a wide variety of ways, providing daily activities such as; ‘singing songs’; ‘nursery rhymes’; ‘sharing books’; ‘using music, sounds, rhythm, beat and percussion’; ‘sensory experiences’; ‘puppets’; ‘story props’; ‘treasure baskets’; ‘action rhymes’; ‘listening games’; ‘Toddler Talk’; ‘print in the environment’; ‘story sacks’; ‘listening walks’; ‘Letters and Sounds’ and ‘Jolly Phonics’ activities.

Examples of ‘reading books’, ‘sharing stories’, ‘using story props’ and ‘sharing interactive books’ were cited across all the data sources. However, the data also exposed that babies do not regularly have daily access to books. Practitioners choose what, when, and how babies experience and engage with books. A notable example from one interview transcript refers to the environment provided for babies:

We read, provide books, have lots of treasure baskets, sound mats and things, singing nursery rhymes – it’s the same in toddlers, as we tell stories and do lots of singing.

We have a mini bookcase – accessible at all times – and a basket of picture books, images on the carpet.

The data collected from the other practitioner interviews presented contrasting provision:

The books are in the cupboard and staff get them out at various times. This happens with our two-year olds – they have a few books out but not all the time. The bookcase is at their level, but it doesn’t get used.

We have books out at various times, mainly before lunch, but sometimes we sing songs. There are books on the shelf. Perhaps these are too high for the little ones to reach?

During the interviews, the practitioners discussed having set ‘times’ for the availability of books for babies in their settings, determined by the adults:

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3 We do have times where we get the basket of books out and we have story time  
4 and singing.  
5

6 We have story time daily.  
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10 Likewise, Zine entries noted how the adult is deciding on when and how often babies in  
11 the setting have access to books.  
12  
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15 The basket of books is out on the carpet today for the toddlers.  
16

17 After lunch we put some books out for the toddlers.  
18  
19

20 **We decided to put more books out today for the babies.**  
21  
22

23 During the interviews and across the Zine entries, practitioners reflect and recognise  
24 within their accounts that access to books for babies and toddlers is an area of provision  
25 requiring some review and enhancement. Subsequently, this also indicates the value of  
26 sharing books with babies is not an integral part of the daily routine. A substantial issue  
27 within the findings is that babies in these settings have not had the opportunity to  
28 become interested in reading activities, as the practitioners seem to have overlooked the  
29 importance of babies having independent access to books and stories:  
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40 When I read through the entries, it is like I have forgotten about the  
41 babies and books. I have genuinely considered this, and we  
42 purchased some fixed furniture so that they can get access to books  
43 themselves. It's really noticeable now that the older babies are using  
44 books and turning the pages over to their favourite bits all the time.  
45  
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48 Figure 3 illustrates this further, given that there were 50 survey responses in total and  
49 only 35 practitioners responded to the first question; 'How do you currently support  
50 babies with early reading? This in itself is a significant finding. Yet, only 2/35 survey  
51 respondents listed reading stories and 7/35 noted books as an activity for babies to  
52 support early reading:  
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### Figure 3

This may well be due to the practitioners' perceptions of the nature of their work with babies as part of the wider 'care versus education' debate previously suggested by Bennett (2003). Alternatively, they may have generated misleading assumptions about the competence of babies and the necessity for babies to be engaged in valuable reading activities. Practitioners raised important examples of very young children being interested in reading. When this was noticed by the practitioners, this led to further adult participation in reading activities;

I have to say that these 2-year olds spent a long time looking at the pictures and concentrated on turning the pages, going to the back to see the last picture often and then starting again from the beginning. This was really interesting for me as perhaps I wouldn't have noticed this previously? As they were all interested, we spent a long time on this activity and it was really enjoyable – lots of language and talk and spent a long time concentrating.

Initially, it seems that the practitioner did not place any value on this learning experience, yet later described 'interested' actions from the children to warrant spending more time looking at the pictures and sharing the story. Trivette et al. (2010) previously highlighted that adults appear to encourage enhanced participation when children spend long periods of time engaged in any book reading activities. This also aligns with Levy and Preece (2016) who propose that observed feedback is significant and perhaps challenging for some parents in their study. As such, it appears that under-threes are involved in a regrettable cycle of requiring 'access' to become engaged in reading activities.

To consider and understand this further, it is important to explore what 'reading' means to early years practitioners, as well as how they might define the term 'reading' in practice.

### Tensions and Conflicts

The data revealed that many of the practitioners working with under-threes experience some tension and conflict between balancing the ‘care’ and ‘education’ aspects of their role. A response to the first interview question; ‘Can you tell me about your work with very young children to support early reading?’ revealed some ambiguity surrounding pedagogy and perceptions of early reading;

I’m not really sure that I do. We read books and sing songs, but I would say that is it really.

Well my staff team are not really trained to deliver early reading – we do more of the care aspect and support children’s transitions, child development and the EYFS for under-twos. We would leave the early reading bit until pre-school and then reception really.

The care versus education contradiction highlighted by Bennett (2003) and Taggart (2011) is predominant in this practitioner’s perception of her team’s practice. It is possible that a specific focus on early reading could be recognised as ‘in addition to care’ and perhaps secondary for babies. This tension and conflict may relate to the early years practitioners’ own professional identities (Osgood 2006, 2012; Manning-Morton 2006; McDowall Clark and Baylis 2012). In fact, Pupala, Kascak and Tesar (2016) propose that this is a ‘contemporary’ (p. 656) viewpoint, suggesting that there are now many ‘new educational challenges and criteria that early years education is increasingly expected to fulfil’ (p. 656). However, early reading has not usually been described as a ‘new educational challenge’, given that reading stories and sharing books from birth onwards has already been well documented by researchers (Clark 2014; Elkin 2014).

Practitioners also highlighted the busy care routine of the day as a possible tension. In the following Zine extract, it appears on this occasion that the ‘care’ nappy changing routine has averted the practitioner from encouraging ‘reading activities’:



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2  
3 Baby crawls over to a practitioner and stops to look at a board book.  
4 Practitioner picks up the baby to change her nappy, taking the book  
5 out of the baby's hands and placing on a nearby worktop.  
6  
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8

9 **“Early reading is teaching phonics?”**

10  
11 The findings also revealed that practitioners' views and perceptions of early reading  
12 appeared to be embedded in a 'readiness' to read, preparation for 'real' reading and  
13 related to teaching phonics in school. Practitioners define early reading as 'activities  
14 young children engage in before they read', such as 'listening and communicating',  
15 'singing songs', 'rhyming activities', 'sharing stories' and 'phonics'. To illustrate:  
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23 Early reading is all those things you do to support children in their  
24 reading development – singing songs, nursery rhymes to teach them  
25 about rhyming and that words have meaning, letters of their names  
26 and that there is print all around them.  
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29  
30 Likewise, all the interview participants define early reading as getting children  
31 interested in reading to be 'ready to read for school'. It appears that practitioners have  
32 mentioned reading books, sharing stories and singing rhymes with under-threes as  
33 appreciated experiences, yet have not described these as actual 'reading' activities. Here  
34 early reading is defined as;  
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41 Getting them interested in books and picture books and words so that  
42 they will be ready to read, I think? (pause) Early reading is the bit  
43 before they read in school.  
44  
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46 Early reading is phonics, letters and sounds is phonics. All early  
47 reading is phonics and getting them ready and so on because they  
48 need to be able to read later, before they go to school and actually  
49 have to take home a reading book.  
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52 The perception is that 'reading' is only reading when accessing the reading scheme  
53 books 'later' in school. Similarly, other practitioners defined early reading as:  
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58 Early reading is getting them interested in books and picture  
59 books and words so that they will be ready to read. Early  
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3 reading is the bit before they do the formal phonics, but I  
4 think that it merges a lot doesn't it?  
5

6 It is difficult to separate early reading and phonics as early  
7 reading is actually phonics - all those letters and sounds  
8 activities, so they are ready for school.  
9

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12 This perception of reading occurring 'when children are ready', which is understood by  
13 early years practitioners to happen 'usually in school' was a consistent theme across all  
14 interview transcripts. This 'school readiness' perception appears to be linked to the  
15 wider policy compliance debate, including teaching phonics to be 'ready for school'.  
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21 The following interview extract indicates that this is intentional practice;

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23  
24 We need to ensure that our nursery children are ready for school –  
25 teaching Jolly Phonics and focusing on letters and sounds daily helps the  
26 children to learn to read, so they will settle and do well in school.  
27  
28

29 Critically, the findings highlight that some practitioners in early years settings readily  
30 teach phonics to children under-three. This is illustrated in this Zine entry;  
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32

33  
34 Circle time before lunch  
35 Olders – phonics session  
36 Youngers – story time  
37 Staff plan 1 phonics lesson each week with each key child  
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41 The 'youngers' (toddlers) have a story time activity scheduled and the 'olders' (2 – 3-  
42 year olds) participate in a phonics session. In addition, it appears that story time has  
43 been sacrificed for the 'olders' and replaced with a taught phonics activity.  
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48 In response to the survey question 'How do you currently support under-threes  
49 with their early reading development?' 16/35 participants (46%) cited formal phonic  
50 schemes such as Letters and Sounds (DfES 2007), Jolly Phonics (Jolly Learning  
51 Education 2012) and Read, Write Inc. (Miskin 2016). Many practitioners identified and  
52 defined early reading development for under-threes as 'teaching phonics'. Only 1/50  
53 survey responses contested this approach:  
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3 The challenge is that we are required to do this [teach phonics], but  
4 if this is not right for the children in our setting - we don't as we  
5 focus on the needs of the children in our care.  
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9 The EYFS (2014, 2017) and Ofsted *Early Years Compliance Handbook* (2016, 2017),  
10 which is key documentation for ECEC settings frequently refers to phonics,  
11 strengthened within the *Early Learning Goals* for Literacy: 'Reading' and 'Writing'  
12 (DfE, 2014). Therefore, it seems that practitioners are planning activities and  
13 experiences designed to meet the ELGs, which appears to consist of imprudently  
14 'teaching phonics' to under-threes. This is deeply concerning as many researchers and  
15 educationalists advocate that the formal teaching of phonics is not good practice,  
16 specifically for under-threes (Clark 2017; Lancaster 2007). Levy (2009) proposed that if  
17 young children are taught that phonetic decoding is actually 'reading' then this  
18 adversely influences young children's' relationship and engagement with reading. The  
19 practitioners in this study are somewhat bewildered about how to support early reading  
20 development with under-threes:  
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36 I think reading is difficult to get right - the confusion about how to  
37 teach reading and phonics, too early, when and what. Parents are  
38 confused and want their children to be doing something, but I don't  
39 think anyone is actually sure about what this is. You asked about  
40 accessible books – and this could be one thing that the setting and  
41 also myself just don't get right. I think the biggest challenge for me  
42 is am I getting it right?  
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47 The findings from this research suggest that overall the practitioners are confused about  
48 how to support under-threes with their engagement of early reading.  
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### 53 **Discussion**

54 The complex issues emerging from the data are that some practitioners are in fact  
55 providing varied reading experiences with under-threes. Consequently, the early years  
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3 practitioners in this study then, do not seem to have placed notable value on these  
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5 experiences, since their definitions of reading focus principally on teaching phonics.  
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7 Furthermore, some practitioners are not offering reading activities to under-threes at all,  
8  
9 babies in particular. Hence, practitioners do not acknowledge the central importance of  
10  
11 early reading activities for this age group, encouraged by many researchers (Arizpe and  
12  
13 Styles 2016; Goswami 2005; Larson and Marsh 2013; Makin 2006). Crucially,  
14  
15 practitioners describe having books ‘on the shelf’, ‘in a basket’ or ‘in the cupboard’;  
16  
17 clearly inaccessible for under-threes and therefore, mainly within the constraints and  
18  
19 ‘power’ of the practitioners. Consequently, if early years practitioners are not  
20  
21 participating in early reading activities with babies and toddlers, this will adversely  
22  
23 impact on the children’s future enjoyment and engagement with reading. This is  
24  
25 significant, given that Finnegan et al. (2016, 10) suggests that more under-threes are  
26  
27 ‘spending at least part of their day at nursery’ (p. 10). This raises concerns for early  
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29 years provision.  
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36 Early years practitioners in this study suggest that they are unsure how providing  
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38 access and sharing books with under-threes associates with children as ‘readers’:  
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42 It is a bit tricky really, as babies and toddlers are too young to read.

43  
44 I am not sure how best to support the toddlers as they are not  
45  
46 interested – they are too young to read yet.

47  
48 The perception from many early years practitioners taking part in this research that  
49  
50 under-threes are ‘too young to read’ is an integral part of the ambiguity surrounding  
51  
52 early reading.  
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54  
55 This study reveals that practitioners are using phonics as the basis of their  
56  
57 knowledge or as a teaching approach for under-threes, **surprisingly**. Survey participants  
58  
59 documented that ‘the biggest challenge is the pressure from feeder schools to do  
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3 phonics', highlighting the school readiness dominance (Moss 2017) is influencing  
4 provision for under-threes. Other practitioners suggested in their survey responses that  
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6 'there is pressure from the government to get on with phonics early' 'schools and  
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8 advisors tell us that phonics is the best way to teach reading', 'if you ask about early  
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10 reading and look for courses, it's always about phonics'.  
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15 This study discovered, from the personal accounts of early years practitioners  
16  
17 who volunteered to take part in this research, that a variety of 'unintentional' (2017,  
18  
19 162) early reading activities are provided for under-threes. These unintentional activities  
20  
21 and experiences were often grounded in tradition, hierarchy and a misunderstanding of  
22  
23 early reading, structured by the neoliberal policy agendas of school readiness and  
24  
25 phonics. Practitioners raised their anxiousness about early reading with under-threes as  
26  
27 a consistent theme across all data sources. These early years practitioners did not  
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29 consider themselves as 'teachers' of reading in their pedagogy with under-threes, which  
30  
31 is a tangible anxiety for early years education. Early reading is assumed to be the  
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33 responsibility of schools, yet ironically early years practitioners are evidently teaching  
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35 phonics to under-threes, to add to the complexity.  
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41 The substantial government focus on phonics (Clark 2017; DfE *KSI Phonics*  
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43 *Screening Check*; EYFS 2012, 2017; *National Curriculum* 2014; Ofsted *Bold*  
44  
45 *Beginnings* 2017) is clearly influencing how early years practitioners support under-  
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47 threes with early reading. Intrinsicly, practitioners assume and note in their responses  
48  
49 that this is what is expected of them to enable children to be 'ready' for school.  
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52 Firstly, a compelling recommendation from this research is that the EYFS (DfE  
53  
54 2017) *Early Learning Goals* for Reading and Writing ought to be reviewed, with a  
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56 greater emphasis on access, engagement and enjoyment of wider reading experiences.  
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58 This research reveals that there is clear inequality within supporting early reading as the  
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3 emphasis for under-threes, versus the dictatorial policy approach to phonics thrust upon  
4  
5 early years practitioners, which has little relevance for under-threes.  
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8 Secondly, early years practitioners need to be supported in their understanding  
9  
10 of early reading, with an agreed definition and effective guidelines for pedagogy. Early  
11  
12 reading, as a fundamental theme, detached from SSP should be included in all training  
13  
14 programmes, CPD and early childhood programmes. This study recommends that  
15  
16 practitioners need to be supported with their daily provision for early reading – based  
17  
18 upon the empirical findings, suggesting that their understanding of early reading is  
19  
20 rooted in phonics. Early reading in practice is everything, everyday – accessible  
21  
22 reading resources that support connective, interactive, multimodal (visual and digital)  
23  
24 experiences. Early reading activities require meaningful interactions, such as sharing  
25  
26 books, picturebooks, images and photographs - talking, connecting and contextualising  
27  
28 the information for under-threes. Many of these have already been acknowledged by the  
29  
30 early years practitioners in their survey responses. Therefore, early reading experiences  
31  
32 are daily holistic interactions and not typically synonymous with the discrete teaching  
33  
34 of phonics. Under-threes need to be read to and involved in many repeated shared  
35  
36 reading experiences. Thus, embroiled within a ‘reading’ environment to build empathy  
37  
38 and to develop new language as an enjoyable, valuable experience.  
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45 Crucially, practitioners are still wrestling with the balance of care, intervention  
46  
47 and education. Indeed, Murray (2018) asserts that this requires complex proficiency  
48  
49 from early years practitioners. Yet, early reading is so crucial and integral to the holistic  
50  
51 development of under-threes for their life-long learning (Melhuish 2014) that the care  
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53 versus education needs of under-threes, in some ways transcends this debate, requiring a  
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55 shared understanding of the value of early reading in its widest sense.  
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For Peer Review Only

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50 Figure 1. Sample of survey questions

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53 Figure 2. Sample interview questions

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60 Figure 3. Manual survey data 'babies'