READING WITH THE LIGHT SWITCHED ON

Steen Videbeck
Foreword by Oliver Hartwich

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About the New Zealand Initiative

The New Zealand Initiative is an independent public policy think tank supported by chief executives of major New Zealand businesses. We believe in evidence-based policy and are committed to developing policies that work for all New Zealanders.

Our mission is to help build a better, stronger New Zealand. We are taking the initiative to promote a prosperous, free and fair society with a competitive, open and dynamic economy. We are developing and contributing bold ideas that will have a profound, positive, long-term impact.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steen Videbeck is a Research Fellow specialising in education. Before joining the New Zealand Initiative, he taught at an International Baccalaureate school in Denmark. Previously, he was a Senior Advisor to the Parliamentary Undersecretary (Education), Senior Advisor at the New Zealand Productivity Commission, and Senior Economist at the Commerce Commission. He holds a Master of Science in applied economics from Cornell University, a Master of Arts (with Distinction) in economics from Victoria University of Wellington, and a Graduate Diploma in Teaching (Primary).

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I am particularly grateful to Carla McNeil, Liz Kane and Bronwyn Bayne and my colleagues at the New Zealand Initiative for their support and guidance.

I would also like to thank all my past students and to apologise to many of them. I wish I knew then what I know now about reading instruction.

Responsibility for all views expressed, and any errors or omissions, lies with me.

CONTENTS

Foreword 7
Preface 10
Introduction 15

CHAPTER 1
New Zealand's lost potential 21

CHAPTER 2
My Journey: Following the Science 33

CHAPTER 3
Structured Literacy in the Classroom 46

CHAPTER 4
Policymaking to switch the light on 64

Recommended reading 87
Appendix: Reading Recovery 89
About me 98
Endnotes 101
Bibliography 112

Figures

FIGURE 1: New Zealand's PISA Reading Score (2000–2018) 23
FIGURE 2: Long-term trends in PISA Reading 24
FIGURE 3: Proportion of New Zealand students achieving various proficiency levels (2000–2018) 25
FIGURE 4: Māori students achieved at all PISA proficiency levels, from poor performers to top performers – Reading (2000–2018) 26
FIGURE 5: Pacific students achieved at all PISA proficiency levels, from poor performers to top performers – Reading (2000–2018) 27
FIGURE 6: Pākehā students achieved at all PISA proficiency levels, from poor performers to top performers – Reading (2000–2018) 27
FIGURE 7: PIRLS – Average Year 5 student scores for various English speaking countries (2001–2016) 29
FIGURE 8: Percentage of Year 5 students reaching the PIRLS International Benchmarks (2016) 30
FIGURE 9: Percentage of Māori students reaching the PIRLS International Benchmarks (2015 and 2010) 30
FIGURE 10: Percentage of Pasifika students reaching the PIRLS International Benchmarks (2015 and 2010) 30
FIGURE 11: Percentage of Pākehā students reaching the PIRLS International Benchmarks (2015 and 2010) 31
FIGURE 12: NMSSA English: Percentage of students by ethnicity (2019) 32
FIGURE 13: Nancy Young's Ladder of Reading & Writing 39
FIGURE 14: NMSSA Writing: Proportion meeting curriculum expections (2019) 56
FIGURE 15: NMSSA Writing: Percentage of students achieving at each curriculum level, by year and level (2019) 57
FIGURE 16: 6-Year-Olds access to Reading Recovery (2005–2019) 92

Boxes

BOX 1: The curious case of three-cueing 45
BOX 2: The Te Reo advantage 52
BOX 3: Letter from a student 55
BOX 4: Marianne Brown's story 61

Foreword

When we are very young, we do a lot of things naturally. For example, we smile as babies. After a few months, we roll over. Later, we use sounds that then develop into words and sentences.

Other skills, however, require more effort to learn.

Riding a bike is not something we are born with. Before we become confident swimmers, we will most likely swallow a lot of water. Playing an instrument, let alone mastering it, takes years of practise.

Learning to read and write is in the same category. Scientists have known for decades that becoming literate is a learned skill, not something that happens semi-automatically as we grow up. And, if we go back far enough in our memories, we may recall how difficult this can be.

As a young child, I was a big fan of 'Sesame Street.' Bert and Ernie taught me all the letters of the alphabet when I was about three or four years old ("Would you like to buy an O?"). I recall being frustrated that despite knowing all the letters, I still could not read.

That only changed in primary school when my teacher turned each letter into a sound, and suddenly everything made sense. Why hadn't they told me that earlier?

As soon as I learned how to combine the various sounds of letters, reading became easier. In some ways, I was fortunate that my mother tongue is German because the way letters sound is highly regular. In that regard, I am told, German is very similar to Te Reo Māori.

For young children learning to read English, it is more challenging. The relationships between letters and sounds are a little more inventive, so to speak.

Take the classic example 'Ghoti', which is supposed to be a creative re-spelling of the word fish. How so? Well, if you pronounce the 'Gh' as in 'enough', the 'o' as in 'women' and the 'ti' as in 'nation' – and, voilà, it will sound like 'fish'.

There are, of course, clear rules between letters and sounds in English – but there are more of them than in other languages. It is complicated.

So, there we are: Reading is not innate, and learning to read English is especially challenging.

Since we have known all of that for so long, should we not have figured out by now how to make reading as easy as possible for our children?

Well, in a way, we have. Numerous schools - and entire countries - have taught the wonders of reading English to virtually all their students. That is the good news: All children can learn to read.

For many children in New Zealand, that is sadly not the case. According to surveys of literacy, our general level of literacy is behind that of other English-speaking countries. In addition, many children from disadvantaged backgrounds struggle to read.

In this report, Steen Videbeck shows that it does not have to be that way. Steen explains that New Zealand's literacy problems are self-inflicted. The problems stem from following flawed teaching methods and inadequate teacher training - and are made worse by the education bureaucracy's inertia.

Based on a sound understanding of the science of reading, and grounded in his experience as a primary school teacher, Steen presents practical solutions to New Zealand's literacy crisis.

May they inform our education debate. And may all children, regardless of their background, learn more than just reading, but also develop a lifelong appreciation for letters that form words into ideas.

Wellington, November 2021
Oliver Hartwich

Preface

I was reluctant to use a lightbulb analogy as it is overused in education. However, I found it particularly apt. Sadly, New Zealand's reading light has been dimming for some time. New Zealand used to almost lead the world in literacy in the 1970s.[1] However, over the past 50 years, our performance has fallen substantially. The decline has been gradual, so it has gone relatively unnoticed to many. Every couple of years, we get a glimpse of our poor performance as another international survey is released.

Indeed, international assessments of New Zealand's reading performance paint a worrisome picture. PISA scores (for 15-year-olds) and PIRLS (for 9-year-olds) both have fallen, and our substantial underachievement has persisted.

There is no need to cherry pick statistics to make a point. Open any random page of the reports and you are faced with numbers that should raise serious concerns. Many are worthy of being front-page news. Māori and Pasifika students are particularly underserved. PISA 2018 showed that 30% of Māori 15-year-olds are in the bottom category for reading. For Pasifika, it was 36%.[2] Overall, few countries have slid further than New Zealand in the past 20 years.[3,4]

The data should have alerted us that what we are doing is not working. Instead, deflection has occurred. Optimistic officials argue that our schooling system works well for 'many' students and that the trends are stabilising or turning around. Changing demographics and socioeconomic inequality are blamed. Committees are formed and their recommendations, some good and some bad, are ultimately ignored. Worse still, the disappointing results are then used by some to double down on the exact inefficient teaching methods that have created the problems.

Behind the statistics, our failure has a human face. Like the 15-year-old I met at a small rural school in Northland. Despite attending school all his life, he had only just learnt to read. This is a stark example, but there are many more students suffering unnecessarily. Kids who label themselves as being 'dumb' because they are struggling to learn to read. Kids who withdraw from learning. Kids who face lowered expectations from their teachers. Sadly, many of these students never catch up. And as reading is the foundation of foundational skills, failure inevitably spreads to other subjects. Then there are the often overlooked flow-on effects on families – parents worried about their children and exhausted from searching for solutions.

Despite the challenges, there are many reasons to be optimistic. Every year, the evidence base for effective reading instruction grows. This report shares my search to find solutions for New Zealand's reading problem. Throughout my journey, I have seen many examples of outstanding teaching. Educators who have chosen to follow the science and adopt evidence-based approaches for teaching reading. For these teachers, it was like the light had been switched on. And through their instruction, a light has also been switched on for the children they teach.

Special people and places

Over the past year, I have been fortunate to visit many schools using an evidence-based approach called Structured Literacy. Diverse schools, ranging from a 100-year-old private boys-only primary school where the students wear ties and blazers to a nature school where barefoot kids spend hours searching for eels in streams. And everything in between. Typical local Kiwi schools – rural and urban; decile 1 to decile 10; and English and Māori immersion. All were at different stages along their path to evidence-based reading instruction – some were in their first year, others

several years down the track. What they all shared were principals and teachers who have chosen to follow the science of reading. While the conventional wisdom is that we all learn differently, the overarching lesson from neuroscience is that we all learn to read the same way. We are not as different as we think we are.

I have also been fortunate to meet many notable people who shared remarkably similar stories. Like the experienced former primary school principal who discovered that she could not help her own son when he was struggling to learn to read. I also heard about the mother of a dyslexic child who petitioned Parliament to change how New Zealand schools teach reading. And the education reporter who discovered that the methods she had previously written about glowingly were not working for her son.[5] The same story is repeated. Parents and grandparents, who have real skin in the game, desperate to find answers are becoming avid supporters of Structured Literacy. But widespread change towards evidence-backed approaches should not be contingent on the diagnosis of a loved one.

Then there are the many dedicated teachers that I met. Like, the literacy lead at a decile 1 school in South Auckland who has overseen her school's transition to Structured Literacy. Or the West Auckland teacher, who has just introduced a new writing programme. These two enthusiastic educators are also having an impact beyond their own schools through the Auckland Structured Literacy Facebook group, which has quickly attracted more than 3,000 members. This is a community of teachers who devote their spare time to reading books, listening to podcasts, and sharing their knowledge and experiences.

Finally, there are the students. I was privileged to see first-hand the joy and excitement on children's faces when the seemingly random squiggly lines on the page finally made sense.

Falling in love with the problem

These anecdotes are powerful as they bring a real world, human-interest angle to the change that is happening on the ground. However, as an economist, I am naturally wary of the attraction of a sample of one, a few, or even a few hundred. I have seen too many education TED talks that consist only of a hook, a generous helping of stories, and a sprinkling of evidence.

In this report, I have taken the advice of Ann Mei Chang, former Chief Innovation Officer at USAID, who says, "To make the biggest impact, fall in love with the problem, not your solution." When an approach is being used on children, especially some of the most vulnerable, it is important to stress test it and make sure it is the best it can be, and discard what is not working. This is what being a truly 'reflective teacher' is and should be applied to all proposed solutions.[6] To paraphrase cognitive neuroscientist Mark Seidenberg, we need to change "the culture of education from one based on beliefs to one based on facts."[7]

This report therefore aims to be both 'science-based' and 'evidence-based'. I appreciate that 'evidence-based' is a somewhat loaded term that is developing a bad reputation in education circles. Everyone is seemingly yelling from the rooftops that their approach is 'evidence-based'. Navigating the evidence is difficult and time consuming. There is a lot of noise, conflicting results, and red herrings thrown in by poorly designed studies. However, it is possible to make headway, and many good researchers have done just that. By combining quality empirical studies with science-based[8] evidence from cognitive psychology and neuroscience, a clear winner emerges – Structured Literacy.

Myths

Along the way, I encountered numerous myths about the teaching of literacy that need to be dispelled. Honestly, before embarking on this journey, I held many of them myself. For example, I thought that phonics, a part of Structured Literacy, was boring rote-learning. The so-called 'drill and kill' argument is foremost amongst many teachers' concerns. However, in the classrooms I visited, I saw the joy, wonder and delight of real playful learning. And student engagement is something I take very seriously. I have taught at the epicentre of playful learning in Denmark, at a school created by the company that makes the most famous plastic bricks in the world. And yet the richness of play I saw at the schools using Structured Learning was on par with anything I witnessed in Denmark. Reassuringly, the evidence shows what they were doing would also bring longer-term joy, open a world of education, and encourage deeper learning.

There are many more falsehoods to slay. Like, 'Structured Literacy is just phonics'. It is not. Or that Balanced Literacy is best. It is not.

Introduction

The Literacy 'Reset'

There are many ways a Minister can communicate with their Ministry. From an email to an advisor to a quiet word with officials (or sometimes a not-so-quiet word). Some are discreet, while others are meant to send a signal.

This is what makes the Minister's handwritten notes on briefing papers so interesting. Ministers know their notes will be publicly released at some stage and that they are writing for a wider audience – at least the shrewd ones do.

On 26 May 2021, the Ministry of Education (MoE) proactively released a ministerial briefing on Primary-Level Literacy. In the briefing from 2020 the Minister for Education, Chris Hipkins, asked to "… prepare the ground for a literacy 'Reset' … with a scaling up of initiatives that are working and a scaling down of ones that aren't."[9]

To make things even more interesting, the proactive release also contained a refreshingly frank Ministry report from late 2020 that included a preliminary paper called "How our education system is performing for literacy: Progress and achievement of New Zealand learners in English medium settings." In this paper, the Ministry acknowledged that "[o]ur current system for literacy learning is clearly not working for a reasonably large group of students."[10] The phrase "systematic failure" even appears.[11]

A 'Literacy Reset' is long overdue, as the way most New Zealand schools teach reading and writing is unfortunately based on outdated beliefs rather than science or evidence. But resets should

come with some amount of trepidation. All too often, a reset is followed by the same problems or it makes things even worse. Twenty years ago, New Zealand had faced a similar decision and unfortunately it chose the wrong path.

So, what would a true Literacy Reset look like?

Scaling up what works

Step one in the reset should be to scale up the use of Structured Literacy, an approach that is proven to work. Structured Literacy explicitly teaches phonics, and other evidence-based essential elements like phonology and morphology, in a systematic and cumulative way. It also uses decodable texts, which progressively incorporate words that are consistent with the letter-sound relationships that have been taught. This contrasts with the levelled readers used in most New Zealand schools.

While the Ministry has recently produced a Structured Literacy resource aimed at dyslexic students, the evidence clearly points to this approach being the best for all learners. The Ministry also has released decodable books, called *Ready to Read Phonics Plus*. While they are not perfect (they introduce too many new sounds at once), they are a step in the right direction.

Scaling down what does not work

There are many examples of ineffective approaches being used in New Zealand schools. Two of the most prominent form the crux of New Zealand's literacy strategy. And their use seems to persist despite the overwhelming evidence against them.

The first is the use of Balanced Literacy, a combination of the discredited Whole Language philosophy that incorrectly assumes children learn to read naturally, and some phonics. Balanced Literacy is the approach that has been publicly favoured by Ministry of Education officials and some Ministers, who all bought into, and repeated, the politically expedient Balanced Literacy mantra. For example, a Ministry official recently said: "The debate around how to teach children to read can often be a fierce one, but what we know at the ministry is a balanced approach is the way to go."[12] However, while Balanced Literacy appears to be a middle ground, it is incompatible with Structured Literacy. And it is not supported by evidence.

The second is the Ministry of Education funded intervention, Reading Recovery, which is used for struggling Year 1 students. Reading Recovery is a New Zealand institution that has been exported around the world. Yet, despite having many hardworking and passionate educators, Reading Recovery suffers from many problems, including being both costly and ineffective.[13]

The combination of Balanced Literacy and Reading Recovery creates a cascade of failure. Balanced Literacy (and the associated Whole Language approach) creates many more struggling readers than Structured Literacy. These students are then placed in Reading Recovery, which is basically more of the same. Sadly, many do not recover.

Achieving change

There is a disconnect between the well-established science and educational practice in New Zealand. As cognitive neuroscientist Mark Seidenberg said:

> The gulf between science and education has been harmful. A look at the science reveals that the methods commonly used to

> teach children are inconsistent with basic facts about human cognition and development and so make learning to read more difficult than it should be.[14]

I was one of these teachers.

This report is an honest account of what I believed, why I believed what I did, and what I have learnt during my journey over the past year – visiting schools, talking to teachers and researchers, and reading books and reports. It also shines a light on some of the educators who are changing the way they teach to help their students.

The report is not meant to be exhaustive. It does not cover all the reading theories or contain all the evidence. It is also only a snapshot of where the Science of Reading is now. The past 20 years have seen great leaps in the use of brain imaging; going forward, it looks like the quality and quantity of evidence will continue to accelerate. The science will continually be expanded, refined and revised as more evidence is gathered.

This report is positioned as a think tank piece that hopefully provokes ideas and discussion. Some will of course disagree, read the evidence in different ways, or find other theories more persuasive. Debate is good – we need to 'stress test' our ideas and challenge our assumptions, especially when our choices will affect the lives of the most vulnerable members of society. There are areas where the evidence is extremely solid, like the superiority of phonics over Whole Language. But even within the Science of Reading/Structured Literacy camp, there is some disagreement about the best way to put theory into practice – for example, teaching phonological awareness with or without letters.

For full disclosure, I was in the classroom for a relatively short time before I became a teacher retention statistic. I sometimes joke that this report is about "the confessions of a failed teacher."

But through talking with other teachers, many of whom were vastly more experienced than myself, and looking at various teacher surveys, I discovered that my experiences probably were not unique. We were the product of the same system and, therefore, had similar misunderstandings. I am only partway along my journey, and there are many more educators who have a lot more knowledge and experience.

This report ends with policy recommendations that will help encourage the use of evidence-based approaches. The recommendations naturally fall into three themes – sending strong evidence-based signals, levelling the playing field and increasing transparency.

First, the Ministry of Education needs to send strong signals that explicitly endorse Structured Literacy.

Second, Ministry of Education policies are creating an uneven playing field. For example, some approaches, like Reading Recovery, are centrally funded. If schools decide to use a Structured Literacy intervention, they must fund it themselves using their operations grant.

Third, the whole education system desperately needs more transparency. Something that is colloquially known in economics as 'sunlight regulation'. It is not good enough that we only get a glimpse of our reading performance when international surveys, like PISA or PIRLS, are released. There is opaqueness at every level of the system, from what is taught in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes to the information that parents get from their schools regarding the curriculum and performance of their children.

This report also looks at implementing change in education, which is difficult and often overlooked. Every school has a dusty shelf to which curriculum resources have been consigned,

or more honestly, where they are hidden. Every teacher has left a professional development seminar that seemed useful, only to quickly abandon it. It is not a criticism. In the bustle of the classroom, with its frequent firefighting, it is normal to relegate change until tomorrow, the next week or the next year. As a teacher I know how easy it is to revert to what we know and unconsciously mimic what others around us are doing. Professional Development and Initial Teacher Education therefore need to be at the centre of the reset.

Hopefully this report will provide motivation for teachers, principals, support staff, parents, politicians, and policymakers to start their own journey.

CHAPTER 1

New Zealand's lost potential

It was both distressing and inspiring. In 2015, when I was a part of a small delegation to a tiny rural school in Northland, I met a 15-year-old student with an intriguing story. Despite attending school all his life, the boy had just learnt to read. His pride in describing his achievement was obvious, as was his gratitude to his new school and teachers. I admired his bravery. It could not have been easy sharing his story with an MP, a Ministry of Education official, and me, an advisor. However, my persistent thought was "How could a high school student be illiterate in New Zealand?"

I should not have been surprised. During my short time teaching several years later, I came across many students who were on a similar path. Perhaps they would not end up being illiterate, but they would forever struggle with literacy. These students had massive untapped potential. Yet, for all the years of schooling they had received, they had not even learnt the basics.

Introduction

This chapter looks at the reading achievement data for New Zealand. When examining the evidence, it is essential to remember "the plural of anecdote is data."[15] Behind the aggregated statistics are thousands of human stories. Our failure very much has a human face. The 15-year-old boy I met is a stark example, but there are many more students suffering unnecessarily. Kids who label themselves as being 'dumb' because they are struggling to learn to read. Kids who withdraw from learning. Kids who face

lowered expectations from their teachers. Kids who never catch up and go into adulthood unprepared and disenfranchised.

It is easy to be discouraged when confronted by the results – the substantial underachievement, the falling proportion of high-achieving students, the unfairness of Māori and Pasifika students being particularly underserved, and the persistence of poor results year after year.

However, while the results are undoubtedly challenging, the source of the real discouragement is the deficit thinking that many apply to the problem. Simply blaming socioeconomic disadvantage and the backgrounds of children is an easy out. It sends the message that the problems are entrenched until society is transformed. This not only absolves teachers of responsibility, but also disempowers them.

Rather, the data should alert us to how we have taught literacy for the past 30 years has not worked – or at least not for a substantial proportion of school children. Future chapters offer hope that by changing the way we teach literacy in New Zealand, it would be possible to empower teachers to move students to capture more of their potential. Society can be transformed by great teaching.

This chapter uses international surveys (PISA and PIRLS) together with a New Zealand survey (NMSSA). We rely on surveys, which test a sample of students, because New Zealand lacks a "mechanism to monitor the progress of all learners in the system."[16] The strength of international surveys is that they measure New Zealand's performance against independent benchmarks. Their major weakness is that they only provide snapshots and do not track individual students (or even cohorts) over time.

PISA

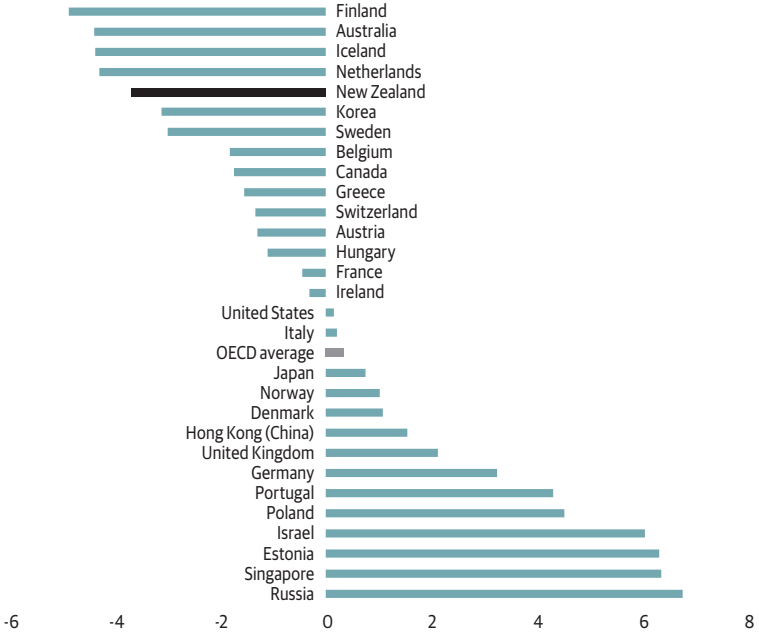
The most well-known international test is the OECD's PISA, or the Programme for International Student Assessment.[17] PISA measures 15-year-olds' ability in reading, mathematics and science and the results often capture the headlines in the media when they are released every three years. The 2018 results were again newsworthy. Radio New Zealand reported that "NZ teenagers hit new lows in reading, maths and science tests."[18] Sadly, this headline was accurate. For reading, New Zealand's average score was 506, an all-time low (see Figure 1). This result also anchored a worryingly long-term trend. In the first PISA reading in 2000, New Zealand scored 529. Few countries have seen their reading scores fall as far over the past 20 years (see Figure 2).[19]

For those wanting a more positive story, counterintuitively New Zealand's PISA ranking for reading was up – 8th in 2018 up from 10th in 2015.[20] An important reminder that rankings are not everything.

Figure 1: New Zealand's PISA Reading Score (2000–2018)

Source: OECD "Programme for International Student assessment (PISA) Results from PISA 2018: Country Note: New Zealand," (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019) 2.

Figure 2: Long-term trends in PISA Reading



Source: Productivity Commission, "Educating New Zealand's future workforce – Draft Report," (Wellington: Productivity Commission, 2020), 13. *and* OECD, "PISA 2018 results: Combined executive summaries, volume I, II & III," (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019) 17.

Beyond averages and rankings

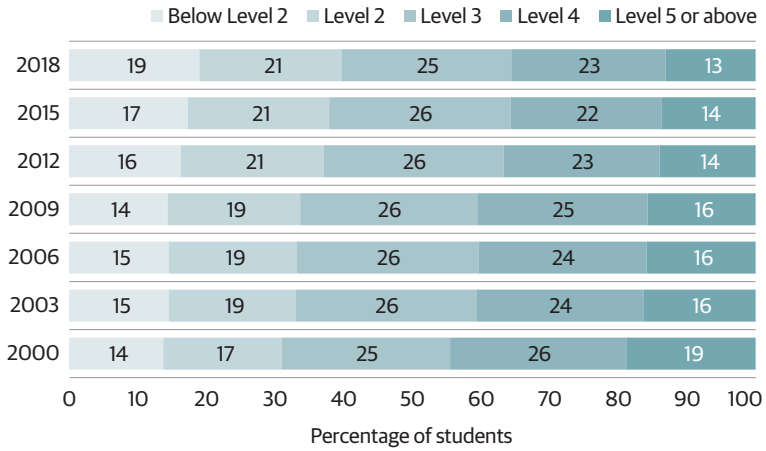
While headlines are often fixated on the averages and rankings,[21] behind the aggregated numbers lies a wealth of information. The Ministry of Education has produced reports totalling hundreds of pages on PISA 2018 alone. Open any random page of the reports and you are faced with numbers that should raise serious concerns. Many are worthy of being front-page news in their own right.

One of the most useful ways to slice the data is the breakdown of students into achievement levels – ranging from Level 1b (the

lowest proficiency) to Level 6 (the highest proficiency). Here, proficiency Level 2 is particularly important as it is the baseline level "at which readers begin to demonstrate the competencies that will enable them to participate effectively and productively in life as continuing students, workers and citizens."[22]

When viewed through this lens, the data paints a particularly troubling picture.[23] In 2018, the percentage of New Zealand students below proficiency Level 2 was 19% (see Figure 3). Clearly, having almost one in five students not reaching a level where they are able to participate effectively in society is concerning. Also, we often hear of the long tail of underachievement, but it can be difficult to get a feeling of what this really means with percentages alone. To put this in perspective, every 1% represents approximately 542 15-year-old students across New Zealand. So, 19% is around 10,868 students in 2018 alone.

Figure 3: Proportion of New Zealand students achieving various proficiency levels (2000–2018)

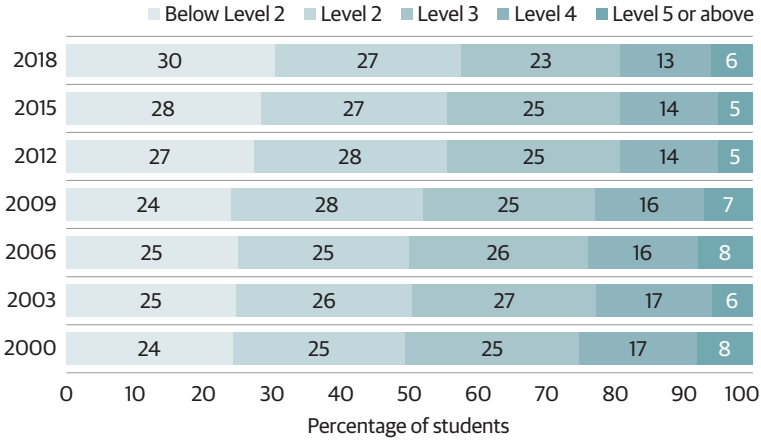


Source: Emma Medina and Alexandra McGregor, "PISA 2018: Reading in New Zealand – Reading achievement & experiences of 15-year-olds" (Wellington: Ministry of Education, 2019), 14.

The picture becomes even more troubling when the data is broken down by ethnicity. It shows that 30% of Māori students are below proficiency Level 2 (see Figure 4). For Pasifika students it is even higher at 36% (see Figure 5). And for Pākehā it is just over 1 in 10 (13%) (see Figure 6). These numbers represent an education system that is failing large numbers of students. How can it be that after 10 years at school (or approximately 10,000 hours of formal education), so many students still have not reached a level of literacy where they can participate effectively in society?

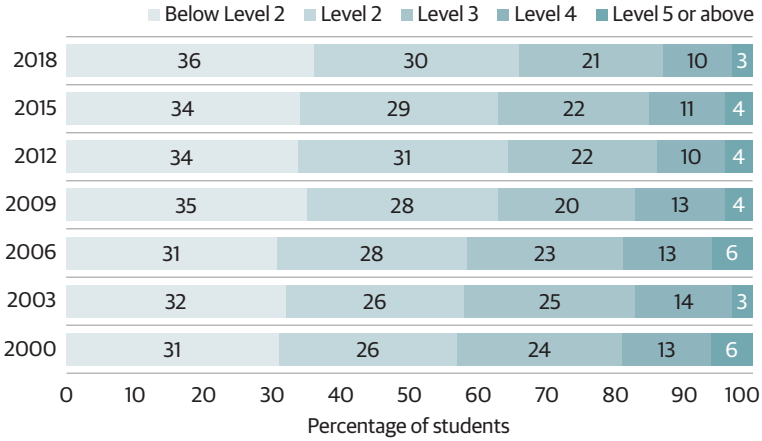
Sadly, the data points to this being a longstanding issue in New Zealand. PISA has released reading results every three years since 2000, so it possible to track the percentage of students in the bottom category over time. The percentage of Pasifika students below proficiency Level 2 has always been above 30%. For Māori, Pasifika and Pākehā, the percentage in the bottom category have all increased over the past 20 years. Year after year, the lost potential keeps multiplying – a conveyor belt of failure.

Figure 4: Māori students achieved at all PISA proficiency levels, from poor performers to top performers – Reading (2000–2018)



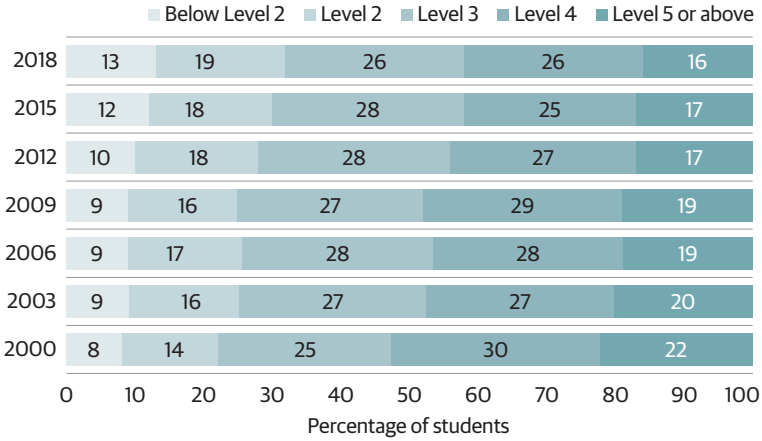
Source: Steve May with Adam Jang-Jones and Alexandra McGregor, "PISA2018 New Zealand Summary Report System Performance & Equity" (Wellington: Ministry of Education, 2019), 38.

Figure 5: Pacific students achieved at all PISA proficiency levels, from poor performers to top performers – Reading (2000–2018)



Source: Steve May with Adam Jang-Jones and Alexandra McGregor, "PISA2018 New Zealand Summary Report System Performance & Equity" (Wellington: Ministry of Education, 2019), 45.

Figure 6: Pākehā students achieved at all PISA proficiency levels, from poor performers to top performers – Reading (2000–2018)



Source: Steve May with Adam Jang-Jones and Alexandra McGregor, "PISA2018 New Zealand Summary Report System Performance & Equity" (Wellington: Ministry of Education, 2019), 59.

Fewer high achievers

The students who fail to reach PISA proficiency Level 2 are the starkest examples of lost potential. Another way to gauge the performance of the education system is to look at the opposite end of the spectrum. Is New Zealand producing top performers? For PISA, this is defined as proficiency Level 5 or above, where "… students can comprehend lengthy texts, deal with concepts that are abstract or counterintuitive, and establish distinctions between fact and opinion, based on implicit cues pertaining to the content or source of the information."[24]

In 2000, 19% of New Zealand students reached proficiency Level 5 or above. By 2018, this had fallen to 13% (see Figure 3). Again, Māori and Pasifika students were particularly underserved, with 6% and 3% reaching the top category (see Figure 3 and 5).

PIRLS

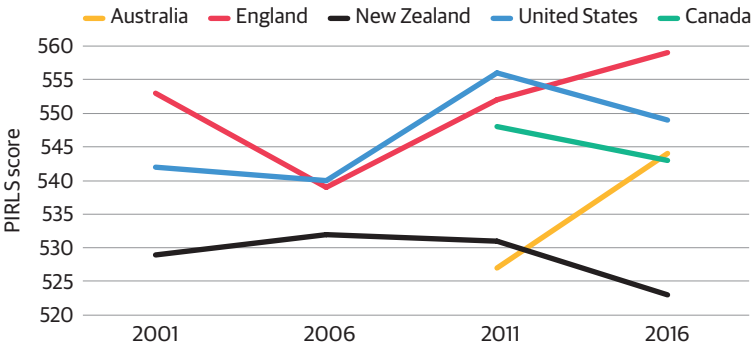
PISA focuses on 15-year-old students who are approaching the later years of their formal schooling. Because PISA shows that many students are struggling, it makes sense to see whether younger students were facing a similar situation. When do problems start occurring? An international survey called PIRLS gives some answers.

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, known as PIRLS, tests 9-year-olds and is overseen by the IEA and Boston College. The most recent PIRLS assessment was in 2016, where 5,646 Year 5 children from 188 New Zealand schools were tested.[25]

At first glance, the New Zealand PIRLS results do not look particularly interesting – having been relatively flat since it began in 2001, albeit with a 10-point decrease between 2011 and 2016.

Overlaying the results of other English-speaking countries starts to raise some red flags. New Zealand's performance is far behind that of England, the United States, Australia and Canada. And both England and Australia have improved their performance, while New Zealand's has decreased (see Figure 7).[26]

Figure 7: PIRLS – Average Year 5 student scores for various English speaking countries (2001–2016)



Source: "PIRLS 2016 International Results in Reading" (Boston: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 2016), 25–29.

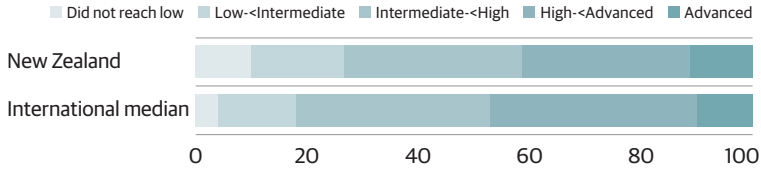
The story becomes even more worrying when the data is broken up into proficiency levels, just as for PISA. Regrettably, similar patterns emerge.

The PIRLS benchmark we are most interested in for struggling students is low. The low benchmark means "Essentially, when reading the less difficult PIRLS Literacy texts, students could retrieve explicitly stated information and make straightforward inferences."[27]

In 2016, 10% of New Zealand students did not even reach the low benchmark – meaning they effectively could not read a simple text for meaning (and 27% did not reach the intermediate benchmark) (see Figure 8). Again, the ethnic breakdowns reveal an education system that is failing many of its students. For Māori, 22% did not reach the low and 44% did not reach the intermediate benchmarks

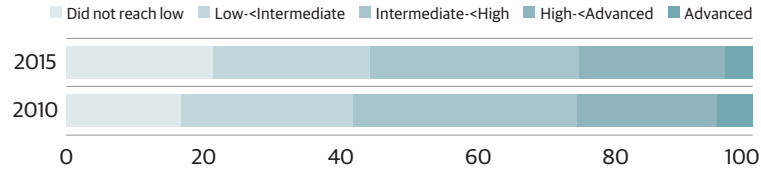
(see Figure 9). For Pasifika, 16% did not reach the low and 42% did not reach the intermediate benchmarks (see Figure 10). For Pākehā, 5% did not reach the low and 17% did not reach intermediate benchmarks (see Figure 11).[28]

Figure 8: Percentage of Year 5 students reaching PIRLS International Benchmarks (2016)



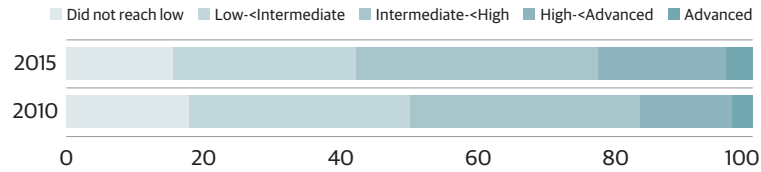
Source: Ministry of Education, "PIRLS 2016: New Zealand's Achievement," (Wellington: New Zealand Government, 2017), 14.

Figure 9: Percentage of Māori students reaching the PIRLS International Benchmarks (2015 and 2010)



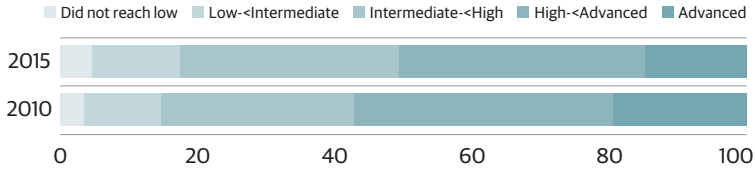
Source: Ministry of Education, "PIRLS 2016: New Zealand's Achievement," (Wellington: New Zealand Government, 2017), 28.

Figure 10: Percentage of Pasifika students reaching the PIRLS International Benchmarks (2015 and 2010)



Source: Ministry of Education, "PIRLS 2016: New Zealand's Achievement," (Wellington: New Zealand Government, 2017), 29.

Figure 11: Percentage of Pākehā students reaching the PIRLS International Benchmarks (2015 and 2010)

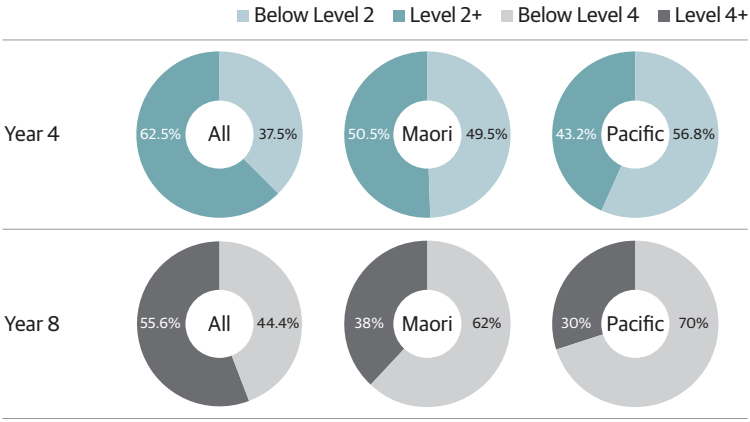


Source: Ministry of Education, "PIRLS 2016: New Zealand's Achievement," (Wellington: New Zealand Government, 2017), 31.

NMSSA

New Zealand has a local equivalent survey to PISA and PIRLS, called National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement (NMSSA).[29] It is run by the University of Otago and measures students in Year 4 (8-year-olds) and Year 8 (12-year-olds) against the expectations from the New Zealand Curriculum.[30] The 2019 results for the reading echo the PISA and PIRLS results discussed above. They show that overall, 37.5% of Year 4 students are below curriculum expectations. Among Year 8 students, 44.4% are below curriculum expectations. Again, when broken down into ethnicity, similar patterns emerge. For Māori, 49.5% are below expectations at Year 4 and 62% are below expectations at Year 8. For Pasifika, 56.8% are below expectations at Year 4 and 70% are below expectations at Year 8 (see Figure 12).[31]

Figure 12: NMSSA English: Percentage of students by ethnicity



Source: Educational Assessment Research Unit and New Zealand Council for Educational Research, "National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement Report 22: English 2019 - Key Findings" (Otago: Educational Assessment Research Unit, & New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2019), Table A1.11, 100.

Conclusion

PIRLS, PISA and NMSSA leave us under no illusions of the extent of the challenge and the magnitude of the lost potential of our children. New Zealand has shown persistent underachievement, and Māori and Pasifika students are particularly underserved. This pattern has repeated for decades.

The data shows the lost potential of students. But it is also indicative of the lost potential of teachers. The way most New Zealand schools teach reading is not aligned with the science of how children learn to read. I was a teacher who knew nothing about how children learn to read. Even worse, what I thought I knew was completely wrong. During my journey over the past year, I have met many teachers who have learnt about the science of reading and have developed as educators. As one teacher said, "I wish I could talk to my former students and tell them that I can teach now."

CHAPTER 2

My Journey: Following the Science

The statistics presented in the last chapter are a reality check.

In response to those poor reading results, it is easier to focus on external factors.[32] For example, some may blame socioeconomic disadvantage. And it is true that many children face substantial additional challenges – poverty, chronic health issues, substandard housing, lack of parental education, transience, and even residing in a non-English speaking home.[33]

Indeed, some of the students I taught faced challenges I could not begin to understand. But as a teacher, I had no control over external factors. I could only control what happened in my classroom. Was education the great equaliser that I had hoped it would be when I switched careers, or could my teaching only make a difference when it was not needed?

Seidenberg, when commenting on the US context gave me some hope: "Rather than focusing narrowly on the undeniably large role of poverty in poor achievement, we might also focus on the undeniably large role that education could play in improving outcomes."[34]

This challenged me to look at my own practices. What could I do differently?

Lack of a framework and unexamined beliefs

It is important to know from where I had started. After my teacher training and first teaching jobs, I had developed a general teaching philosophy. It was more of a set of beliefs than a framework. My teaching philosophy was best described as a form of constructivism, made famous (separately) by the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget and Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Their theories were the mainstay of my teacher education, somewhat surprising as they were developed in the 1920s and 1930s.[35] According to my university lecturers, it seemed that the advances in science over nearly 100 years had little to offer me in my goal to become a better teacher.[36]

Even the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky blurred into a set of heuristics. I believed that learning was natural and children learnt from their environment. Everywhere I went, I saw that most teachers appeared to have a similar schema to mine.

My approach to reading instruction dovetailed with these beliefs. I thought that learning to read (and write) was natural, just like learning to speak. That the teacher's role was to provide a 'print rich' reading environment, where children were surrounded by a wide selection of high-quality books that engaged them. That the key to overcoming reading difficulties was reading more.

While I did teach some content, it was unstructured and incidental. My lack of understanding also made it hard for me to identify in a meaningful way where my students had gaps or what I should teach next or how fast to go.[37]

Because of the lack of a framework, my teaching practice was more a collection (mismatch) of activities – some good and some bad. I had learnt the what, without knowing the how and why. The only reading specific theory I relied on was called three-cueing – a strategy that helped my students guess unfamiliar words. I had no

idea where this approach came from, or the evidence it was based on, but it seemed like a reading version of problem-solving (see Box 1).

The problem was that I had general beliefs and I had classroom practices, but between the two there was a gap – a knowledge/understanding gap. I knew nothing about the science of how children learn to read. I rationalised this gap in several ways. Maybe there was not any new information that could help my teaching, or maybe the latest research would simply confirm what I already knew. After all, what other reason could there be that I had not been taught or even heard about it.

Then, I came across a group of educators who seemed to have something I was lacking. They understood the building blocks of literacy acquisition.[38] Their practice was anchored on a deep understanding of a theory backed by evidence (rather than the soft moorings of beliefs). They knew the ingredients that would help their students become better readers and they had a plan.

The brain research shows that learning to read changes a child's brain. These educators were teaching in a way that made these changes happen as quickly and easily as possible. The theory, evidence and practice clicked together. Because practice was based on solid research, they were having deeper teacher-to-teacher conversations based on new research. One teacher said how she and her year-group teachers messaged each other even on weekends discussing the latest findings. While there are still disagreements, they are more constructive, moving beyond the high level to the details.

Over the past year, I set about filling my knowledge/understanding gap. I challenged my beliefs, and the assumptions that led to those beliefs, at all levels – the scientific evidence, theory and practice, as well and the links between them. This chapter shares important 'aha' moments that shifted my understanding that created an inflection point when thinking about my practice.

Looking back, I feel deeply disappointed, even angry, towards my Initial Teacher Education (ITE) provider. I wonder why I was not exposed to the most up-to-date information about reading. Why I was not taught the knowledge I needed to be an effective literacy teacher. Why instead did they waste my time with outdated and defunct ideology. I could have been a highly knowledgeable professional, but instead I went into the classroom with no understanding and equipped with practices that would not work. They failed me as a trainee teacher and failed all the students I taught.

Reading is not natural

I used to think that learning to read was natural, like learning to speak. Vygotsky concurred:

> The best method (for teaching reading and writing) is one in which children do not learn to read and write but in which both these skills are found in play situations. … In the same way as children learn to speak, they should be able to learn to read and write.[39]

Unfortunately, we now know this is not the case.[40]

Neuroscience, with its advanced brain imaging, has given us insights into the brain's fascinating journey to literacy. Foremost among them is French psychologist and cognitive neuroscientist Stanislas Dehaene, who wrote *Reading in the Brain: The New Science of How We Read* (2010).[41]

Dehaene explains that the brain does learn to speak its first language naturally – as it has the specialised circuits for spoken languages.[42] This tricks many teachers into thinking reading and writing develop in the same way as speaking.

But the squiggles on the page are a human invention. Written language has only been around for 5,500 years[43] and even up until the early 20th century most people in the world were illiterate.[44] From an evolutionary standpoint, written languages have simply not been around long enough for the brain to have developed specialised circuits.[45]

How the brain adapts to reading is fascinating and a testimony to its plasticity. When a child learns to read, two astonishing changes happen in the brain. A facial recognition region of the brain is repurposed and used for text recognition. And an interface is created between the child's sophisticated spoken language system and the sophisticated visual system.[46,47]

It is amazing to realise that learning to read changes a child's brain. As Dehaene says, "When children learn to read, 'they returned from school literally changed.' Their brains will never be the same again."[48]

Now this could just be interesting trivia, but it has important implications for how teachers teach children to read. As Dehaene puts it: "Some ways of feeding the brain with written words are more effective than others."[49] From a neuroscience standpoint, it turns out that phonics is superior to the whole word training I was taught.

As Dehaene says: "Teaching letter-sound correspondences is essential. Brain research converges with education research: teaching letter-sound correspondences is the fastest way to acquire reading and comprehension."[50]

And there is more good news. Some of the magical self-teaching can happen, but after a child is taught to decode. "Once these correspondences are learned, self-teaching can occur: children decipher words, recognise them auditorily and access their meaning."[51]

Why we cannot trust ourselves

The myth that reading is natural pushed me towards Whole Language (and the ill-defined Balanced Literacy), but it turns out other misunderstandings also made these approaches more appealing and may perpetuate the way reading is taught in schools.

When it came to reading, I relied on my intuition. But simply relying on intuition does not cut it. As Seidenberg points out:

> People manage to be good at reading without knowing much about how they do it. Most of what goes on in reading is subconscious: we are aware of the result of having read something – that we understood it, that we found it funny, that it conveyed a fact, idea, or feeling – not the mental of neural operations that produced that outcome. People are unreliable narrators of their own cognitive lives. Trying to understand reading by observing our own reading is hopeless, like trying to understand how a television works by watching Game of Thrones. Being an expert reader does not make you an expert about reading. That is why there is a science of reading: to understand this complex skill at levels that intuition cannot easily penetrate.[52]

We do not read whole words

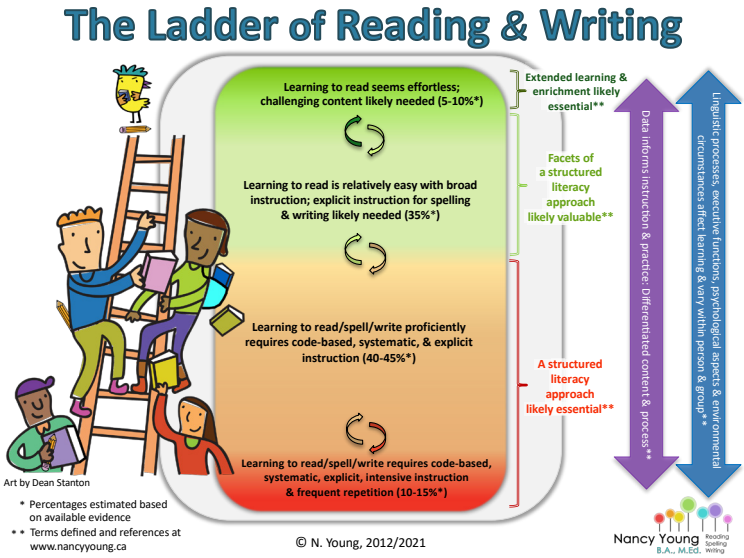
As a fluent reader, I thought that people read whole words. It therefore made sense to teach children to learn whole words. But it turns out whole word reading is a myth. When we read, our brains process every letter. As we do this in parallel, it gives the illusion of whole word reading. Again, once I knew this, the importance of phonics and decoding made more sense.[53]

Whole Language child

As far as I can remember, I learned to read using Whole Language/ Balanced Literacy – apart from some Sesame Street phonics. So, it was natural for me to think that the way I learned to read would work for everyone. Unfortunately, I had fallen for survivorship bias. Yes, it worked for me; I have survived, but I had overlooked all the people who struggled to learn to read. I also tended to do something similar with my students. If my methods worked it was because of my teaching, if they did not it just was not their time.

One powerful anecdote to my survivorship bias is "The Ladder of Reading and Writing" infographic by Nancy Young (see Figure 13).

Figure 13: Nancy Young's Ladder of Reading & Writing



Source: Nancy Young, www.nancyyoung.ca. Used with Nancy Young's permission.

I was probably one of the lucky students who learned to read effortlessly or relatively easily. But what about the other 50% to 65%.

This is reinforced by Seidenberg: "Some children learn to read with minimal instruction, but unlike learning to talk, it is a mistake to assume they will."[54]

I was guilty of making this mistake.

Curse of knowledge

I also thought because I could read, I could teach reading. In a way, being able to read is a disadvantage. Of course, you would not want a child to be taught to read by an illiterate teacher, but as expert readers, we have forgotten how difficult it is to learn to read. This is the curse of knowledge. My brain, like yours, has already been changed, which makes it difficult to put myself in the position of the child.

Because of this, I underestimated the value of explicit instruction and the amount of repetition/retrieval most children need. This also may help explain why I did not closely examine my practice and why I did not go looking for solutions.

But the wrong knowledge

Knowing how to read and being able to teach reading are two very different things. I was an expert reader, not an expert in teaching reading. I did not have the knowledge of reading to teach it well. I did not have a deep understanding of the logic of English.

In *Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science*, Louisa C. Moats explains: "Thus, to understand printed language well enough to teach it

explicitly requires disciplined study of its systems and forms, both spoken and written."[55]

Similarly, Seidenberg argues, "An introductory course in linguistics should be a permanent requirement for teaching children. Educators need to know how language works."[56]

There was a lot I did not know. As a Whole Language child, the terms, morphology, orthography, phonology, syntax, semantics were all foreign to me. My teacher training had not covered any of these – instead, it had focused on using comic books because they had both text and pictures close together.

How a math equation changed how I looked at reading

The evidence from neuroscience helped disrupt my previous beliefs about learning to read and looking at linguistics helped me realise how little I knew about the inner workings of the English language. It was clear that I needed a conceptual framework to see how everything fitted together.

Somewhat surprisingly, I had never heard about one of the most influential theories on learning to read – the Simple View of Reading (SVR). Even more surprising was that one of its authors, William Tunmer, has lived in New Zealand since 1988 and been a professor at Massey University and the University of Canterbury. This simple formula with three letters would be pivotal in furthering my understanding of reading.

The SVR framework was first presented in an article from 1986.[57] The paper, which Tunmer co-authored with Philip Gough, was only five pages long. It proposed a simple equation for Reading:

R = D x C

or Reading Comprehension (R) = Decoding (D) x Language Comprehension (LC).[58]

One of the nice things about the SVR analogy is that it stresses the importance of having both Decoding and Language Comprehension. So, talking and reading to children is important to develop oral language comprehension. But oral language comprehension without decoding is not sufficient.

It is easy to see parallels with the evidence from neuroscience.

> The simple view reflects a deep insight about learning to read. He observed that early reading has two components: print knowledge and comprehension. Beginning readers can already comprehend spoken language. They will be able to read if they can just gain access to language from print. The task is to build a new circuit linking the visual code to the existing neural systems for language.
> — Mark Seidenberg[59]

Tunmer and Gough always meant for the equation to be a framework to test empirically. And it has been, extensively.[60] This simple equation would go on to become a key feature of Sir Jim Rose's 2006 report, "The Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading"[61] in the United Kingdom.

SVR focuses on Decoding (or Word Recognition) and Language Comprehension, and these have been subsequently unpacked – including by Tunmer and Hoover in their Cognitive Foundations framework.[62] This makes SVR a stepping stone to an even deeper understanding.

A particularly popular infographic from Hollis Scarborough, that was developed independently to SVR, unpacks Language Comprehension and Word Recognition.[63] I saw it proudly

displayed, or even carefully reproduced with string, in some of the schools I visited.

The information contained in the infographic is particularly powerful as it gives teachers more insights into what to teach. It also gives teachers insights into the cognitive load of the act of reading.[64]

Word Recognition is unpacked into Phonological Awareness and Decoding (and Sight Recognition).

Language Comprehension is unpacked into Background Knowledge, Vocabulary, Language Structures, Verbal Reasoning and Literacy Knowledge.

I found it very interesting that Language Comprehension includes Background Knowledge. This shows how important teaching background knowledge is to reading comprehension. When a child is reading a text, the background knowledge they have in their long-term memory can help them comprehend. This insight is the perfect counterargument that knowledge is not important – that they can 'just google it'.

As Scarborough notes, "Weakness in ANY strand can disrupt reading, and weakness in SEVERAL strands can disrupt reading more."[65] [Emphasis added]

The next breakthrough occurred when I looked at the National Reading Panel, who examined quantitative studies to see what techniques worked in teaching children to read.[66] Although the National Reading Panels' report was published over twenty years ago its findings remain relevant today. The five essential components of reading instruction they identify (which are also known as the 'Big 5') are: Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Fluency, Vocabulary, and Comprehension.

Reflecting on my own practice, I had overemphasised comprehension and fluency and underemphasised phonemic awareness, phonics, and vocabulary.

Structured Literacy

All the above form part of a wider body of research called the Science of Reading, which brings together scientifically based research about learning to read from multiple fields: cognitive psychology, communication sciences, developmental psychology, education, special education, implementation science, linguistics, and neuroscience.[67]

Structured Literacy brings the Science of Reading into the classroom. It is an umbrella term used by the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) to describe evidence-based programmes and approaches.

> A Structured Literacy approach provides:
>
> - explicit, systematic, and sequential teaching of literacy at multiple levels – phonemes, letter–sound relationships, syllable patterns, morphemes, vocabulary, sentence structure, paragraph structure, and text structure
> - cumulative practice and ongoing review
> - a high level of student–teacher interaction
> - the use of carefully chosen examples and non-examples
> - decodable texts
> - prompt, corrective feedback.[68]

It is important to note that Structured Literacy contains much more than just phonics. Structured Literacy also stresses how literacy is taught – through explicit, systematic, and sequential teaching. This creates a contrast to Balanced Literacy that includes some phonics.

Box 1: The curious case of three-cueing

My teaching was centred on prompting my students using the three-cueing method. If a child came to a word that they couldn't read, I would ask them to "think of a word that makes sense" or "look at the picture" or "think about the story." I thought of it as informed guessing. Although often it was clear the child was randomly guessing rather than reading the text in front of them or had just memorised the story. I would also ask them to sound it out.

Three-cueing also showed up in the assessment I used for my students - Running Records. I would listen to the child read and analyse any errors using the "MSV" system. Did the student use meaning (M), sentence structure (S) or visual information (V) to figure out what a word was?

I assumed that three-cueing was evidence based, but I didn't know where it came from or how it was supposed to work.

It turns out there is no evidence behind the three-cueing system to teach reading. It was a theory to explain how expert readers make meaning from text, that somehow found its way to teaching children to read. [69]

Seidenberg pulls no punches in his critique:

> The level at which reading is understood is unacceptably low and justifies misguided practices. The [three-cueing] theory is a gloss on some ideas picked up from the research literature that have been passed through a massive game of Internet Telephone and come out as something far removed from the original.... It is a shallow theory but creates a strong feeling of understanding among group members."[70]

CHAPTER 3

Structured Literacy in the Classroom

The neuroscience and the reading theories covered in Chapter 2 are key to our understanding. But as a teacher, I was curious about what Structured Literacy looked like in the classroom.

One of the barriers to change is that Whole Language and Balanced Literacy have been romanticised. It is easy to see why: teachers facilitating reading as a natural process, and children surrounded with engaging books. Even the backstory to Whole Language and Balanced Literacy focuses on Marie Clay, a New Zealander who took her reading theories to the world and grew a global following.

Compare this to Science of Reading, where reading can be seemingly distilled into an equation (R = D x C), teachers need to be experts in linguistics, and explicit teaching is valued. Even the term Structured Literacy can involve fears of a less child friendly classroom.

Proponents of Whole Language have been quick to repeat the myths that Structured Literacy is not playful, phonics is synonymous with rote learning, and decodable books are boring.

So, I visited four diverse schools that have adopted Structured Literacy:

1. Central Normal School in Palmerston North
2. Robertson Road in South Auckland

3. Summerland Primary School in West Auckland
4. Ako, an outdoor-centric school on Auckland's North Shore

These schools are part of a growing movement across New Zealand. Principals, RTLits (Resource Teacher Literacy) and teachers who saw that things were not working and changed them. What I found was engaged, happy students who were delighted they could read.

Hopefully, this chapter gives insights into daily classroom life – a taste of what the New Zealand education system could be like. There were no carefully choregraphed/staged lessons during my visits. Just the everyday bustling classroom life – with all the unpredictability that children bring. In addition to observing, I was able to have some honest conversations with educators working with Structured Literacy on the ground.

These experiences humanised Structured Literacy for me. Reassuringly, these were usual Kiwi schools. There was not anything unfamiliar – except the teaching and engagement were on a level I was not used to. In many ways, it was comforting that the switch to Structured Literacy is not scary. All the practices that I enjoyed doing as a teacher were present – but they were supplemented with evidence-based practices. The teachers were knowledgeable and had a plan to accelerate their student's learning. Nothing was left to chance.

Central Normal School

> *The delight that we see in our staff, and especially our students, when they see their own progress, which grows their own self esteem. That's the reward.*
>
> – Regan Orr, Principal, Central Normal School.

My first school visit was to Central Normal School, a Year 1–6 primary school in Palmerston North. It was recently featured on Te Karere TVNZ for bridging the academic success rate between Māori and non-Māori students using Structured Literacy. Since implementing Structured Literacy three years ago, they have seen a significant improvement in the results among both Māori and non-Māori students. The acceleration of Māori learners means that Māori and Pākehā students are now achieving at the same level. The school is encouraging other schools to pursue Structured Literacy.

It is not an understatement to say that I learnt more during my visit to CNS than I did from the literacy courses of my initial teacher training.

New entrants

The first class I observed was a Year 1 classroom – a little outside my comfort zone as I had taught Years 3 and 4. As we entered the classroom, the teacher (Catherine Pallesen) showed the principal a student's handwriting book and excitedly commented: "Look at the improvement." The owner of the exercise book, a small girl with even smaller glasses, was glowing with pride. A heart-warming start to the lesson – and a reminder of the importance of celebrating real success.

The teacher started working with a group of three students seated at a small desk, as the other students were engaged in playful activities. The 10-minute lesson[71] was fast paced with a clear plan, explicit instruction, and lots of fun opportunities for retrieval. They looked at 'm' which was described as two tunnels, explored the sounds in words (phonemic awareness) by slapping their thighs and clapping, and played a game reading words. The three students were focussed and having fun – with laughter and high fives. There was a fourth student, a girl at the end of the desk who was watching and also twirling.

Partway through the lesson, sensing I had questions, the teacher asked one of the boys: "Can you be the teacher?" While we talked, the group continued to play the reading game. The teacher told me how during free play, the children hold their own lessons, where they take turns pretending they were the teacher – accurately mimicking all her mannerisms. Two things struck me – how engaged the children were and how much they were doing. I jokingly thought that the 5-year-old who took over the lesson was a better literacy teacher than I was – a thought that was closer to reality than I like to admit.

After 10 minutes of sustained attention, the groups rotated around to the equally important task of playing with cardboard and pretend play – this was a Year 1 classroom after all. After the lesson, I asked the teacher about the girl. It turns out that the girl was not even in the group. She had chosen to watch the lesson for her free play. The teacher also reassured me that she still does the 'colourful things' I loved about teaching reading – like reading big books to the class. Indeed, *Dan the Flying Man* by Joy Cowley was displayed prominently. But reading aloud to the children is about expanding their knowledge of the spoken language[72] – the Oral Language Comprehension (OLC) in the Simple View of Reading. It is not a substitute for explicitly and cumulatively teaching decoding (D).

I also saw the Little Learners Love Literacy (LLLL) Scope and Sequence the school uses. The m sound is in stage 1 of 7.4, which makes sense as the children I observed had only been at school for 10 weeks. The scope and sequence is aligned with the LLLL decodable books the school has purchased.

Before, the school saw students' plateau followed by building frustration. Now, with Structured Literacy, the children are excited about reading and keen to learn.

Tier 2 Intervention

I also observed a tier 2 lesson by reading intervention teacher Marianne Brown (she has kindly shared her story in Box 4). The lesson takes place in a detached prefab, which has been decorated to be welcoming. It is an impeccably organised room with the polka dot walls carefully displaying information that is all aligned to Structured Literacy.

Marianne was working with two students, a boy and a girl, who needed extra help with their decoding. She sees the kids, who are 6–12 months behind, four mornings a week. The boy excitedly announces that he is already at stage 4.

Again, the lesson was fast paced and fun. The teacher pulled foam letters out of a bag and the children said their sound. She gave lots of genuine encouragement and the children were engaged and having fun. They made words like dog using the foam letters and then were asked to change dog to dig and then to pig. Even putting away the letters was a learning opportunity – when the teacher says the sound the kids put the letter in the bag. They wrote words on mini-whiteboards (while saying the sound), blended words, used phoneme fingers, and read a decodable book – *Tim and His Van*, which is LLLL series, stage 2, book #7. When they got stuck on a word, they mostly resisted the urge to guess,[73] instead carefully sounded out the letters – good reading habits. Towards the end of the lesson, both students excitedly wanted to play the 'playing out' game – where they read words – some real and some pseudowords. If it is a real word, they move a counter. The word 'pat' came up, presenting the teacher the opportunity to ask 'what does it mean to pat something' – building vocabulary.

The lesson was short, taking only 20 minutes before the children bounced out the door happy. It was highly orchestrated with no wasted time searching for materials. There was explicit instruction,

which the kids lapped up as they were excited about learning the code, and engaging games for retrieval. I left, thinking this is the type of teacher I want to be.

Tier 1 (classroom) and Tier 2 (intervention) are aligned, both using Structured Literacy.

Te Reo

There was another surprising part to my visit to Central Normal School.

Central Normal School are very proud of their Māori Immersion classes. In 2019, one of the teachers, Mahina Selby-Law, attended a Structured Literacy workshop with Liz Kane. While the workshop was for teaching English reading, Mahina left thinking, "This needs to be recreated for Te Reo."

She had noticed that some Māori children were having trouble decoding Te Reo. She looked around at how other schools taught Te Reo. Most schools were using Whole Language. Phonics was also popular but not in a way that was consistent with Structured Literacy (i.e. systematic, explicit and cumulative). To her, the smaller bites and the sequence of Structured Literacy made all the difference.[74]

So, she set out to create a Structured Literacy Te Reo programme[75] for her classroom. She designed a scope and sequence,[76] wrote decodable books, and created a Phonological Awareness Screening Tool.[77] Then Liz Kane encouraged her to share it. So she set up a company, Mahi by Mahi workshops, published the decodable books, and started running sold-out workshops.

When I met with Mahina, her newly published decodable books covered the table. They looked amazing with their bright blue and

purple covers complete with friendly illustrations. She was careful to point out that her Structured Literacy programme is combined with a rich Oral Language programme (consistent with the Simple View of Reading of having both Decoding and Language Comprehension).

Like the school's Structured Literacy programme, reading and writing are taught together. It also means that aligned Te Reo and English are taught using the same approach.

Mahina is keeping data on the cohorts she is using her programme with – 80 children so far. She wishes she could scoop up her past students and tell them "I can teach now."

Mahi by Mahi is a perfect example of the entrepreneurial spirit – searchers looking for bottom-up solutions to local problems. Mahina's approach is grounded in evidence-based practices but adapted to local conditions. On my journey, a number of teachers said they would like to have Structured Literacy programmes for their student's home languages, for example, Tongan.

Box 2: The Te Reo advantage

The lucky Italians (and Germans and Finns)

English is known for having a complex orthography. Dehaene has said:

> English is probably the world's worst alphabetic language.. because there are many irregularities, and it is known that children will need two more years to achieve the same level as in Italian or in other regular languages.[78]

Some might be thinking, "If only New Zealand had a national language that regular." And, of course, we do. Te Reo has 15 sounds (compared to 44 for English) and regular spelling, which makes the letter-sound relationships easier to learn.

Psychologist, Professor Helen Abadzi, thinks we could use Te Reo to our advantage. Her provocative idea is that children in New Zealand should learn to read in Te Reo first, even if it is not their first language. Once they read fluently, they can start reading English. Until then, they work on English orally.[79]

> Transparently written languages are more efficient in automatising reading for use in formal education, even if students may not know them well. For dialectical English in countries where this is common, transparent orthographies could be used until automaticity.[80]

The basic reasoning is that learning to read changes the perceptual learning pathways in the brain that link to language areas (see Chapter 2). Once you have learnt to read one language, you can learn to read a second (that uses the same script) more easily.

The advantages of learning Te Reo were covered in a 2010 article:

> Based on a wealth of evidence from cross-language comparisons, it is argued that the orthographic consistency of the language, its regular spelling, is likely to result in rapid reading acquisition due to the ease in which letter-sound relationships can be learned. Additionally, learning to read in an orthographically consistent language optimises the development of phonological processing skills and successful reading strategies, which can later be transferred to literacy acquisition in English.[81]

Robertson Road

Robertson Road School is a South Auckland primary school (Years 1 to 8) located in Mangere in Auckland. Pacific Students make up 75% of the roll.

I met with Gemma Maddocks, the school's Literacy Leader. Like all the teachers I talked to, she had stories of former students that struggled. Like the Year 7 boy who admitted, "I'm going to high school next year and I can't read properly". Or the student

who had completed Reading Recovery, only to have a deer in the headlight's moment whenever they came to an unknown word. The school's data showed that many of their learners struggled to read and spell words they did not know or had not memorised. This led to low self-esteem, disengagement in learning or a reliance on avoidance strategies during learning time. The school knew they needed to change the way they taught literacy.

So, in 2019, the school started its journey with Structured Literacy with the support of Liz Kane. They used their operations grant to buy decodable books.

One of the misconceptions that people have is that Structured Literacy is only useful up until Year 3 – when children have learnt to read. This isn't the case. At Robertson Road they have a complete structured literacy programme from Years 1–8. In the later years, attention turns from phonology to more complex spelling rules (encoding) and morphology (which is useful for both spelling and vocabulary).

At Robertson Road, I observed a Year 7/8 class to get a flavour of a Structured Literacy lesson for older students. The class looked at suffixes, which the teacher helpfully defined as "the group of letters placed after the base of a word." The lesson's suffix was "tion" "the act of, condition of." During the lesson, I was amazed at the words the students came up with - elimination, pollution, evolution, destruction, celebration, invention, competition, immigration and many more. I was also reminded of how fascinating the English language is.

Just before I left, Gemma showed me a neatly handwritten letter from a former student (see Box 3).

Box 3: Letter from a student

"When my family and I returned from Samoa to New Zealand, it was hard for me to learn a different language. I was worried that the students will make fun of me.

When I had my reading, writing and spelling test I was at a below stage. Unlike everybody else.

Thankfully, Code started in Robertson Road School. I loved Code. I enjoyed every minute of it. I never wanted to miss a day of Code.

Every morning we sound out the letters from the sound pack. At the beginning of the week we learn a sound, either a short-vowel, long-vowel, split digraph, or a trigraph. At the end of the week we look back at the sound and revise on it.

Code took my English into a higher level. Code helped me with my weaknesses in literacy. With Code, I was able to read English vocabulary fluently, it helped me with writing the words and knowing what sounds I need to use. In writing I didn't have to use a Chromebook to search for words suitable for my year level.

I enjoyed learning Code because I was taught together with a group of students I was comfortable around. I feel like an English pro speaker in our class, because all the student with higher levels than me are asking me for help.

I recommend Code to be continued in Robertson Road School for those who need help like me." *Rosemary (Year 8 Learner 2020)*

Ako Space

Lastly, I visited Ako Space – a small independent primary school that emphasises playful and experiential learning. The school is also outdoor-centric, and my visit took place amongst a forest, complete with students searching for eels.

Visiting Ako Space reinforced that Structured Literacy can be used irrespective of a school's philosophy. And, like the other schools

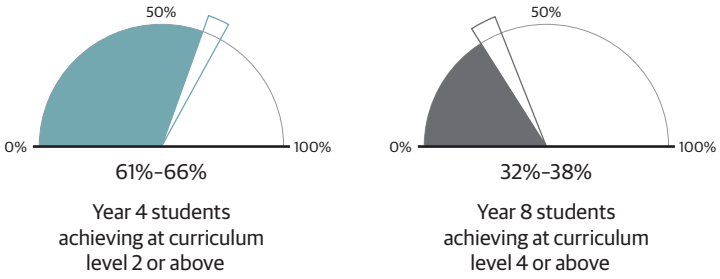
I visited, that playful learning and Structured Literacy are not mutually exclusive. Bronwyn Bayne, who founded the school, also donates her time to spreading the word about Structured Literacy through Lifting Literacy Aotearoa.

Writing

While the reading instruction I received during my teacher training could be at best described as sparse and at worst incorrect, my training on how to teach writing was non-existent. I was not alone. Judy Parr and Rebecca Jesson surveyed New Zealand teachers and found that "70% of respondents rated their training to teach writing as 'non-existent', 'minimal', or 'somewhat helpful'."[82]

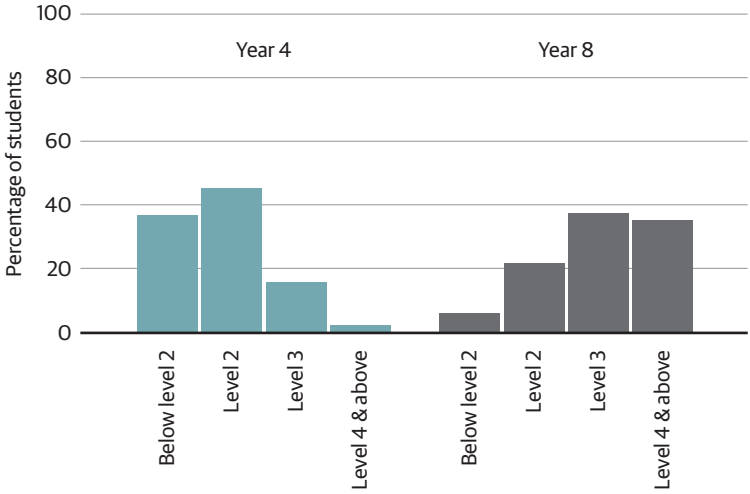
The data also shows that low writing achievement is a perennial problem. NMSSA 2019, which we looked at briefly in Chapter 1, also had a writing assessment. The results show that between 34% and 39% of Year 4 students were below the curriculum expectations.[83] For Year 8, it was between 62% and 68% (see Figure 14 and 15). The results were similar in 2012.

Figure 14: NMSSA Writing: Proportion meeting curriculum expections (2019)



Source: Educational Assessment Research Unit and New Zealand Council for Educational Research, "National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement Report 22: English 2019 - Key Findings", (Otago: Educational Assessment Research Unit, & New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2019), 27.

Figure 15: NMSSA Writing: Percentage of students achieving at each curriculum level, by year and level (2019)



Source: Educational Assessment Research Unit and New Zealand Council for Educational Research, "National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement Report 22: English 2019 - Key Findings", (Otago: Educational Assessment Research Unit, & New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2019), 29.

Putting the two together, you have many teachers who are not prepared to teach writing and many students who are not achieving. This is especially problematic as writing is in many ways even more complex than reading.

Previously, I shared my misunderstanding that learning to read was like learning to speak. I had the same misunderstanding with writing. Hence, my reading instruction was 'read lots' and my writing instruction was 'write lots'.

Again, the concept of cognitive load is relevant. What would my writing lesson look like through the eyes of a child, say an 8-year-old?

I would expect my students to write an interesting piece of work from scratch, with correct grammar and spelling, the ideas arranged in paragraphs, interesting vocabulary, and neat handwriting.

This was despite them struggling with each of these tasks individually.[84] Yet somehow, I was surprised when I received a stream of consciousness with, at best, a scattering of full stops and sometimes correct use of capital letters. My conclusion was that my students were somewhat lazy or forgetful. So, to be helpful, I printed little checklists they would paste haphazardly into their exercise books. Unfortunately, this resulted in limited success.

I was unaware of the cognitive stress I was putting my students under.

So is there a better way to teach writing?

The Writing Revolution

In 2012, *The Atlantic* magazine wrote about a writing programme that was transforming struggling students into confident writers, with positive spill-over effects across all subjects.[85] The setting was New Dorp High School, "a notorious public high school on Staten Island." The programme was called the Writing Revolution, also known as the Hochman Program.

What is the Writing Revolution? It's a step-by-step recipe where students "are explicitly taught how to turn ideas into simple sentences, and how to construct a complex sentence…"[86] The programme attempts to break the writing process down into manageable chunks. It is complementary to Structured Literacy.

In 2017, the book *The Writing Revolution: Advancing Thinking Through Writing in All Subjects and Grades*, was published. Judith Hochman teamed up with journalist Natalie Wexler, a regular

Forbes contributor, who would go onto write T*he Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America's Broken Education System – And How to Fix It*. The book has found its way into some schools in New Zealand.

Summerland

Summerland Primary School, a typical Kiwi school located in the Auckland suburb of Henderson, was one of the first schools on my list to visit. I had originally wanted to see their reading programme. At Summerland, all the junior school classes are now using Structured Literacy to teach reading. But then I saw on a Facebook post that they were starting to use the Writing Revolution.

The contrast between New Dorp High School and Summerland is vast on almost every dimension. They are worlds apart. Geographically of course, high school versus primary,[87] 3,000 students versus 649, even the buildings – brick, almost factory-like generic American school building, compared to brightly painted yellow and blue.

I first visited a Year 2 class (6-year-olds). Adrienne Kinder is one of the teachers driving the change. She is also Liz Kane's sister. Adrienne is reading to the kids on the mat. They are enthralled in the story, "The Terrible Suitcase," intermittently discussing its rich vocabulary. They then go on to laying the foundations of writing orally by completing the sentence "I was hungry because …" As morning tea approached, the conversation was relevant for many of the students. What struck me was how intelligent the conversation was, especially considering their age. Sentences, fragments and conjunctions are all known terms. The children in her class can expand sentences using specific detail, vocabulary taught from the story and conjunctions – from modelling, to scaffolding, to being able to do it independently.

I next observed a Year 5/6 class (9- to 10-year-olds). The teachers stress to me several times that they are new at this and definitely not experts. They need not have worried. It was one of the most interesting classes I have seen – and I learnt something about writing.

It was whole class teaching – the sort my university lecturers would have frowned upon. The teacher started off with a review of nouns and pronouns, before moving onto appositives and noun phrases.

The lesson follows the "I do, we do, you do" format and is filled with humorous examples like: Mr Giles saved the bee from certain death. He is a superhero. Rewrite with an appositive.

During the class, one of the kids says to his friend "this is pretty easy". It was – expert teaching made the content accessible and engaging.

Some may worry that a structured approach to writing, like the Writing Revolution, could kill creativity. That structure will replace the opportunity for children to use rich language and write imaginatively. My visits to Summerland and other schools suggest it is just the opposite. Teaching writing skills explicitly gives children the knowledge and skill to express themselves. One teacher told the story of a 9-year-old girl who struggled to get words out, but who now writes to her heart's content. From a cognitive load perspective this makes sense. Automating spelling, grammar and punctuation frees up brain resources for creativity. Explicitly teaching writing also gives students the knowledge to play with structure as well as ideas.

Box 4: Marianne Brown's story

Marianne Brown is a Tier 2 Reading Intervention teacher at Central Normal School. She takes around 20 students a day for extra tuition in structured literacy, tutors students in her home and enjoys training other teachers to use the approach. Five years ago, she made the change to structured literacy.

I have been teaching for 28 years and I have been in the role of Tier 2 Reading Intervention teacher for eight of those years. For the first three years in this role, my mantra was "more sight words need to be learnt and then they will get there." I was fully embedded in the Whole Language philosophy, in fact, I used to be very vocal about why it was the best way to teach, (notice I didn't say the best way that children learn).

Then in 2016, my son was assessed as being dyslexic. He had gone through Reading Recovery and I couldn't understand why he wasn't succeeding....after all his own mother was a reading teacher! I went to school and spoke with the RTLit at our school about how I could help him. She responded that I needed to go and see Liz Kane, who had just returned from Australia with some interesting training and could maybe help me.

So off I went to an information evening she was holding for parents about dyslexia. I sat there with no idea what she was talking about. Phonemes? What are they? However, it was enough to whet my appetite, so I went again the following meeting. I was starting to realise that this could help my son, I could maybe try what she was suggesting with him. It was then, and I remember this as clear as day, that I grew hot and my mouth hung open as the penny dropped that this wasn't just for my son, but for all those kids I saw every day! What a revelation! I was embarrassed that I hadn't even considered the students at school until now, as I was so focused on my son, but what a game-changer.

However, as I imagine for a lot of you, management wasn't fully on board. It wasn't that they were anti, it was just they had never heard of structured literacy. After all, at this stage, there were only a handful of teachers I knew in the country that were starting down this path. For a full year, I read everything I could on structured literacy. I attended any course Liz was conducting when she started doing those. I learnt how to articulate pure sounds and I learnt the science behind reading.

To say that it was a rollercoaster year is an understatement. My brain felt like it was exploding with information, but the biggest hurdle I had to overcome was my own prejudices and hesitancy in starting. I had to put aside, and unlearn, 23 years of thinking I knew how to teach reading. I started teaching structured literacy at school, ever so slowly and only a little bit (didn't want to get too crazy!) I got plenty of curious glances from my colleagues as to what I was doing. Then the results started coming in and teachers were noticing that the reading was improving with our intervention students, and I decided to go all in. I was lucky enough that after a few years we had a change of management, who were more on board, and it was implemented throughout our school.

It is important to note that as I look back on my feeble attempts to get started that I got plenty wrong, there wasn't a lot of information or resources in NZ. But as misguided as some of my first steps were, they were not as far back as teaching using Whole Language. I was starting to teach using this approach and I was learning, and to this day I am still learning and refining my practice. If you are just starting on this journey and feeling totally overwhelmed, take heart. It is a process. It took me at least a year before I even dared take my first structured literacy lesson, and then I attempted to teach structured literacy for 6 months using PM books, as I didn't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater, and I was required to report using PM levels based on running records. My advice is to start, just start. Pick one aspect of the structured literacy approach like developing phonological awareness, educate yourself on what it should look like, and try it out.

I wouldn't go back for the world. I have been using structured literacy for five years now as a Tier 2 reading intervention teacher and what a difference it has made compared to the first three years as a Whole Language intervention teacher. I could talk about data, assessment results and graphs, they all are impressive, but the biggest measurement of success isn't what is on paper....it has been that I don't get repeats anymore. Previously I would make progress with a child, discontinue them and the following year they had not matched pace with their peers and so they were back with me again. I had some children enrol into intervention for 3 years in a row. I very rarely have that anymore. The difference with structured literacy is that I am not increasing their number of sight words known, I am increasing their knowledge on how to decode any word that is put in front of them.

Not only do I get to teach using structured literacy to children, I am now starting to train other teachers as well. I love that moment when you can see the penny dropping for new teachers to the approach. I see the excitement and it makes me think, "Wild rollercoaster ahead! But how lucky are those kids this teacher is going to impact".

I will finish with one other thought when starting out on the journey. Strive for gold standard. There is a lot out there at the moment, which is packaged as structured literacy, but while based on some reading of science principles they are a mix of Whole Language and structured literacy. I get it. Like me, when you first start out you will feel hesitant and don't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater and you will see this as a good compromise. Some resources may even come from a source of authority. But this is not gold standard, and our children deserve gold standard. Continue to learn more. Find out what is gold and what is bronze. Strive for the best, for the sake of our tamariki.

CHAPTER 4

Policymaking to switch the light on

Knowing the best way to teach reading is perhaps the easy part. Transforming an education system with decades of entrenched behaviour is a difficult policy challenge.

While there are no easy answers, this chapter looks at some of the Ministry of Education's plans and provides several cautionary tales, so we do not repeat the mistakes of the past.[88]

The literacy reset

This report started with a handwritten note from Minister Hipkins that said, "… prepare the ground for a literacy 'reset'."

The Ministry's subsequent plans provide some hope. This year, it produced a dyslexia guide that promoted the use of Structured Literacy. The Ministry has released decodable books that align with Structured Literacy and announced professional development for literacy specialists and New Entrant and Year 1 teachers. Reading Recovery, the Balanced Literacy aligned tier 2 intervention, has been modified with more emphasis on phonics. On a wider scale, the New Zealand Curriculum and curriculum resources are being refreshed. All these initiatives are steps in the right direction.

But education is littered with big promises and disappointing results – often because political constraints mean that watered-down solutions are pursued. In 1999, the Government had proclaimed that "By 2005, every child turning nine will be able to read, write, and do maths for success."[89] The data in Chapter 1 shows this did not happen, neither by 2005 nor by 2021. Since the time this promise was made in 1999, almost 1.4 million Year 1 students have started school.[90] This is a reminder of how compromised solutions can affect generations of students.

Shallow or deep reset?

Cognitive neuroscientist Seidenberg issued a challenge to the teaching profession, saying we need to change "the culture of education [in reading] from one based on beliefs to one based on facts." To do this, teacher knowledge about reading needs to be at the centre of the reset.

A shallow reset would once again jump straight to practice – focusing on teaching activities and bypassing teacher knowledge. It would push out decodable books with limited training – so they are not used to their full potential or gather dust on a resource room shelf. It would shy away from evidence-based Structured Literacy and again offer a compromised version of Balanced Literacy. It may be better, but it would ultimately suffer from all the same limitations that I experienced after my initial teacher education.

On the other hand, a deep reset would prioritise increasing teacher knowledge of both language and evidence-based practice – allowing teachers to become experts in teaching reading, just like the teachers I saw during my visits to schools that had adopted Structured Literacy.

So, how do policymakers help switch on the light for all teachers?

This chapter looks at reform in five main areas:

1. The signals the Ministry of Education sends
2. Initial Teacher Education (ITE)
3. Resources and professional development
4. Tier 2 Interventions
5. Reporting and data

Sending strong signals

New Zealand has one of the most devolved education systems, with schools and teachers enjoying enormous freedom in how they run their classrooms. Hasn't this devolution been squandered? After all, Balanced Literacy and Whole Language are still widely used. Teachers could have easily switched to Structured Literacy if they had wanted to. Isn't the data presented in Chapter 1 proof that bottom-up decision making has failed?

This type of thinking is woven throughout various Ministry of Education documents. For example,

> The Tomorrow's Schools Taskforce Review has noted that the early learning and schooling systems are highly devolved with great autonomy within learning settings. **This autonomy leads to teachers and leaders having to discover for themselves what works best for learners under which circumstances, and this can become onerous and overwhelming.**[91] [Emphasis added]

However, the situation is not so clear cut.

While the Ministry may appear to be hands off, it does exert significant influence over classroom practice. First, it sends explicit and strong signals about best practice. Two prominent examples are the New Zealand Curriculum and support materials, including

TKI and *Effective Literacy Practice*. These signals not only guide current teachers but also ITE providers, who train new teachers. Also, Ministry officials have repeated the message that Balanced Literacy is the preferred approach. This was even the case last year when a deputy secretary said, "The debate around how to teach children to read can often be a fierce one, but what we know at the Ministry is a balanced approach is the way to go."[92]

Second, the Ministry of Education tilts the playing field through funding to encourage schools towards certain approaches. Two prominent examples of this are its funding of Ready to Read levelled readers and the tier 2 intervention, Reading Recovery (both are aligned with Balanced Literacy). For more than 50 years, the Ministry has provided Ready to Read levelled readers to schools for free.[93] Up until recently, if a school wanted to switch to Structured Literacy aligned decodable books, it would have to fund this itself. The same is true for Reading Recovery. If a school wants to drop Reading Recovery in favour of Structured Literacy, it loses funding. Both are implicit endorsements for Balanced Literacy.

New Zealand Curriculum

The strongest explicit Ministry of Education signal is the content of the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC). Unfortunately, the current New Zealand Curriculum sends mixed messages. For example, the first indicator for Level 1 English (for Year 1–3 students) is "selects and reads texts for enjoyment and personal fulfilment."[94] The third indicator is "uses sources of information (meaning, structure, visual, and graphophonic information) and prior knowledge to make sense of a range of texts."[95] It is easy to see this as a reinforcement of the whole language three-cueing system. While there is also a nod to phonics with the indicator "associate sounds with clusters as well as with individual letters,"[96] it is easy to imagine that a teacher could

read around this. Or at the very least not focus enough attention on it.

The opportunity

Over the next few years, the Ministry of Education will refresh the New Zealand Curriculum, including curriculum supports. The Ministry has released a roadmap that sets out how content for English will be co-designed, trialled with schools, refined, and implemented.[97] It is expected that all schools will be using the refreshed curriculum by the end of 2025.

While co-design sounds like a nice way to move forward with everyone on board, it also suffers from some problems – especially when there are entrenched incumbent views or where there are diametrically opposing views. For reading instruction, both are present.

The danger is of a compromise effect – where officials choose the seemingly middle option to appease everyone rather than optimal, evidence-based solution. A similar outcome is when all options are included, which allows teachers to cherry pick what they agree with and read around what they do not like.[98]

The turn of the millennium provided a good example of incumbents perpetuating the status quo. On one side were the experts (Literacy Experts Group), and on the other were practitioners (Literacy Taskforce). The entrenched practitioners won out.

As Tunmer and Chapman point out:

> In March 2000, the Education and Science Committee of the New Zealand Parliament initiated an inquiry into the teaching of reading in New Zealand to determine "how and why many children are failing to learn to read effectively" and "to provide recommendations to the Government on how the reading

> gap can be closed" (New Zealand House of Representatives, 2001, p. 5). Following the inquiry, the Committee made 51 recommendations from all political parties in the Parliament. These recommendations were largely rejected by the Government. Rejected recommendations included those calling for significant changes in New Zealand's approach to literacy education – for example "that the Ministry of Education provide advice and support to schools to incorporate successful phonics programmes into the classroom" (p. 17), "that all primary teacher-training providers incorporate the teaching of phonetic skills and word-level decoding into their programmes" (p. 27), and that "there be a greater emphasis on the benefits of phonics instruction in Literacy Leadership materials" (p. 28). Instead, the government decided to adopt the recommendations of the Literacy Taskforce (Ministry of Education,1999b), which essentially called for a continuation of New Zealand's constructivist approach to literacy with only minor modifications, that is, do more of the same, but better ...[99]

Of course, experts are not infallible – they bring their own biases. And practitioners have valuable on-the-ground knowledge – like those highlighted in Chapter 3. Yet many of the Literacy Experts Group's recommendations remain relevant even today. As noted earlier, since 1999, an estimated 1.4 million Year 1 students have started school. One cannot help but wonder what would have happened if the recommendations of the Literacy Experts Group had been adopted 20 years ago.

Hope

The dyslexia kete provides some hope of evidence-based leadership from the Ministry of Education. At the beginning of 2020, the Ministry released a "new kete of resources to strengthen support for students with dyslexia."[100] This original kete was met with strong criticism.[101] What happened next is encouraging. The Ministry took on board feedback and endorsed the International

Dyslexia Association's Structured Literacy(TM) in its *Guide to Dyslexia and Learning*.[102] The guide also included many of the evidenced-based theories covered in Chapter 3, including the Simple View of Reading (SVR), Scarborough's Reading Rope, and the National Reading Panel's five components of reading (The Big Five). As the scientific evidence strongly supports that all children learn to read using Structured Literacy, the New Zealand Curriculum (and supporting documents) should endorse a similarly 'pure' approach for all students.[103]

- **Recommendation 1: The New Zealand Curriculum should explicitly endorse Structured Literacy.**

Improving Initial Teacher Education

I was undoubtedly let down by my initial teacher education. I was not exposed to the evidence-based reading theories. My courses did not cover SVR or The Big Five of Reading. I was only exposed to a constructivist ideology and not given essential knowledge about how children learn to read. Because of this, I went into the classroom without the toolkit I needed to help my students.

The content of the literacy courses in initial teacher education is especially important as it is often the first information teachers receive – creating an anchoring effect.

Sunlight

The first problem with ITE is the lack of transparency.

In *Shifting the Dial on Literacy*, the Ministry of Education acknowledged:

> A large degree of discretion and flexibility is afforded to Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers in designing their

> curriculum. A similar approach is taken to identifying the level of knowledge capability needed for a provisionally registered teacher to attain full registration. **The Ministry has no mechanism to ensure that essential content and pedagogical knowledge is embedded consistently across ITE programmes or that specific knowledge and skills are attained prior to full teacher registration.**[104] [Emphasis added]

I was curious to see whether things had changed since my training days in 2013. So I contacted the ITE providers and asked about the content of their literacy courses. While some were helpful, most were not.

In declining my request, an email from one provider stated, "A weekly schedule and reading list do not communicate the richness of the teaching and learning that takes place in a range of classes."

Unfortunately, most of the high-level course outlines that are available online also provide little information on the content of their literacy courses.

The opaqueness from ITE providers about what they teach is surprising, especially as they are receiving public money and their future graduates will mostly be employed by public schools.

How can a prospective student choose an ITE programme if they do not know the content of their courses? Do they just trust the provider, or rely on the halo effect of the university, like I did for the University of Auckland? How does a principal or HOD know that the candidate they are hiring has covered the evidence-based reading instruction?

Thankfully, the Ministry of Education is planning to look into this.

> We currently lack information on how ITE programmes cover literacy content and pedagogical knowledge. We propose

> commissioning research to understand how ITE providers currently prepare trainee teachers for teaching literacy at all stages of the learning pathway, with a view to strengthening literacy knowledge, skills, and capability for teachers (both school and early learning) as part of their initial preparation. This would need to commence in 2021 after the Teaching Council's new ITE programme requirements become mandatory across the board.[105]

The Ministry of Education should also look into Buckingham and Meeks' research in Australia examining the contents of 116 literacy units across 38 different universities. They found that only 4% of those units had a specific focus on how to teach beginning readers in the first few years of school. In 70% of the units, none of the five essential evidence-based areas were mentioned.[106]

In economics, the lightest regulation is called the Sunlight regulation. The premise is that you do not have to force companies to do the right thing; simple transparency can be enough. It is the simple principle behind streetlights in parks. The first step, therefore, should be to provide sunlight, with ITE providers publishing a detailed syllabus for each course. This way, external reviewers can critique the offerings of ITE providers.

- **Recommendation 2: Increase transparency of the content of ITE literacy courses.**

Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand

Another actor in the education ecosystem is the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand. They "… ensure quality teaching and high standards by registering teachers, setting and maintaining professional standards and ensuring teachers are competent and fit to practice."[107]

In their vision for Initial Teacher Education 2021, they put forward several proposals – two of which are especially relevant. Proposal one is to raise the entry requirements, including higher literacy and numeracy. While this is a positive development, it focuses on implicit knowledge of reading.[108] As we have seen, being able to read and write is necessary but insufficient to be a good teacher of reading. Effective teachers have a deeper explicit knowledge of reading and writing. As Buckingham and Meeks point out:

> Implicit knowledge of language is sufficient to be able to read and write well, but explicit knowledge of language is necessary to teach it to others. Implicit knowledge will allow a teacher to identify and point out where a child has made errors in reading or writing, but effective teaching requires an explanation of why it is an error.[109]

An increasing number of US states have also been trying to get ITE providers to adopt the Science of Reading. Some now require teachers to take a reading instruction exam based on the Science of Reading. A middle option is to allow newly trained or existing teachers to voluntarily take this type of exam as a signal to prospective employees.[110]

- **Recommendation 3: Give newly trained teachers the option to sit a reading instruction exam that is aligned to the Science of Reading.**

Practica

The Teaching Council's second proposal involves strengthening the quality of practica arrangements. This includes making sure "Practica arrangements are structured so that ... practica are integrated with other courses in the ITE programme."[111]

When I was training, there was an unsaid assumption that ITE was not that important as teachers really learn on the job. It was just the first step in becoming a fully registered teacher. My thinking while a trainee teacher was similarly misguided – "I do not need theory. I just want to teach."

This journey has shown me how important research is for reading instruction. Looking back, it would have been ideal if my ITE literacy courses had covered linguistics, cognitive science, psychology, theories of reading acquisition, and neuroscience – and this was combined with practica at schools that used Structured Literacy. Then I would have had both the theory and the theory to practice. Unfortunately, both my ITE courses and practica reinforced Whole Language/Balanced Literacy.

▶ Recommendation 4: ITE literacy coursework and practica should be aligned to the Science of Reading.

Going further?

In Australia, ITE providers have been resistant to change. And the federal Minister for Education and Youth, Alan Tudge, is losing patience with them. "… If necessary the Government is going to use the full leverage of the $760 million which we pay to teacher education faculties each year to insist that evidence based practices are put in place … It's been too long."[112]

An increasing number of US states also require teacher training programmes to teach the science of reading (on which structured literacy is based).

Effective Literacy Practice

Some ITE providers have been slow to incorporate evidence-based reading instruction into their courses – despite the knowledge being widely available for the past 15 to 20 years. In their defence, the ITE providers can point to the New Zealand Curriculum or

the Ministry of Education's literacy textbook, *Effective Literacy Practice*. It is easy to cherry pick from these resources (and not cover all of it) and say it is aligned.

When I completed my ITE in 2013, the literacy courses I took used the Ministry of Education produced textbook *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1 to 4*[113] (and its companion volume, *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5 to 8*). In 2021, the University of Auckland, as well as other ITE providers,[114] still use this textbook.

Like the New Zealand Curriculum, *Effective Literacy Practice* contains some good information hidden among a lot of outdated information. For example, 'learning the code' is mentioned, as is phonemic awareness, phonics, orthographic patterns, and direct instruction.[115] There is also a short section on technical skills for writing, which includes spelling.

> The teacher needs to support students to enable them to use their phonemic awareness; use their knowledge of letter-sound relationships; develop a knowledge of orthographic patterns develop a knowledge of the morphological structure of written English."[116]

The problem is that while these concepts are mentioned, they are not explained in any detail. This leaves the trainee teacher reliant on their course lecturer to unpack them, which did not happen in my programme. Instead, most of the book is devoted to high level and vague 'theory' and practice. This allows teachers to read around the concepts they do not understand – and go straight to instructional strategies like reading to children, shared reading, and guided reading.

A lack of knowledge may mean teachers underestimate the amount of structure and direct instruction needed to teach effectively. This is where a detailed Scope and Sequence is so important.

Effective Literacy Practice, the New Zealand Curriculum, and the Ready to Read (levelled readers) all signal to ITE providers and teachers that the Balanced Approach they use is the preferred approach. The Ministry of Education needs to take some ownership of the current situation.

ITE providers are not absolved of responsibility, though. There is nothing stopping them from incorporating the Science of Reading into their courses. From the readily available information, only the University of Canterbury – given its association with the Better Start Literacy Approach – and Massey University focus on the Science of Reading.

Some ITE providers may be cherry picking the concepts in *Effective Literacy Practice*[117] and using them as a shield – as those concepts align with their constructivist programmes.

Comparing the content of *Effective Literacy Practice* to a leading Science of Reading textbook shows a stark difference. *Speech to Print: Language Essentials for Teachers* by Louisa Moats is like the missing 400-page manual for the knowledge gap.[118]

There is positive news. In *Shifting the Dial on Literacy*, the Ministry of Education recognised there is a problem.

> The Ministry has produced several print and digital resources to provide guidance and tools to support teachers to follow good practice. In many cases, these resources are not regularly updated, do not go into enough detail of omit important information or tools that teacher's need to put quality teaching approaches into practice.[119]
>
> …
>
> Scoping is underway to revise the Ministry's literacy guidance and resources, for example the Effective Literacy Practice series and Literacy Learning Progression Framework.[120]

- **Recommendation 5: Update the Effective Literacy Practice series and Literacy Learning Progression Framework to focus on Structured Literacy and the Science of Reading. The Ministry of Education's Guide to Dyslexia provides a good starting point.**

Resources and Professional Development

'Picking winners' is a term borrowed from industrial policy R&D, but the same lessons apply to government tenders.

The Ministry of Education has a history of picking winners in reading – for the approach and the supplier they choose. Ready to Read books and Reading Recovery are two examples.

Since 1963,[121] Ready to Read levelled books have been provided to schools for free. By choosing Ready to Read, the Ministry picked the levelled reader approach over explicit phonics and decodable texts, and a single supplier (SOE Learning Media and later Lift Education).[122] Alternative approaches and suppliers would have found it difficult to compete.

The same is true for Reading Recovery. Since 1982, Reading Recovery has been the funded tier 2 intervention.[123] In doing so, they picked the Balanced Literacy approach, Reading Recovery, and the supplier, the National Reading Recovery Centre.[124]

The main problem with selecting a sole supplier (or approach) is that it can distort competition and become entrenched. In general, competition between suppliers can lead to lower prices, increased quality, and innovative solutions.[125] Having multiple suppliers can increase diversity/differentiation of offerings – leading to schools being able to select the one that is best aligned to their needs.

When a large buyer like the Ministry of Education (effectively a monopsony) selects only one supplier, it can also reduce competition in the wider market – killing off other competitors who might compete against the subsidised product.

Some of this may have been played out in the past. Interestingly, a Ministry of Education paper said, "Our key centrally funded interventions have been implemented piece-meal **and have not been modified over time to meet changing needs or up-to date research evidence**"[126] [Emphasis added]

This comment might be referring to Reading Recovery.

Looking forward, the Ministry seems to be making similar mistakes with the Early Literacy Approach. They would do well to heed the advice "Do not pick winners."

Early Literacy Approach

The Ministry has released its new Early Literacy Approach aimed towards children in their first few years at school. It has three parts: Ready to Read Phonics Plus, the Better Start Literacy Approach, and Reading Recovery and Early Literacy Support.

Ready to Read Phonics Plus

Up until this year, the Ministry provided Ready to Read levelled readers. This, combined with the use of running records has sent a strong signal to teachers that Whole Language/Balanced Literacy was the best approach. As mentioned above, providing free books gives equitable access but it also incentivises schools to use them over commercially available products – tilting the playing field against schools switching to decodable texts.

In 2021, the Ministry of Education started distributing decodable books to all schools with children in Years 1–3 – The Ready to Read Phonics Plus. "The books will be distributed to all schools with

children in years 1–3, providing equitable access to free resources and guidance."[127] These books have been developed by the University of Canterbury, which won the $989,428 contract in 2019.[128]

Concerns

Educators well versed in Structured Literacy have voiced some concerns about the new Phonics Plus Books.[129]

- The scope and sequence move too quickly, there are too few books at each stage, too many 'sight' words are included, and many of the sight words are not actually decodable.[130]
- The inclusion of *te reo kupu* increased the complexity and would confuse children.[131]

Home bias

Another overarching theme is home bias. That New Zealand produced, or centrally produced, resources are considered somehow better. This is one of the assumptions that drives Ready to Read and the Ready to Read Phonics Plus (and even *Effective Literacy Practice*). The reasoning was outlined in the GETS tender, which stated: "It is important for all of our students to see themselves, their families, whānau and communities in the texts they learn to read with."[132] This presumably is meant to increase meaning or engagement. While this is a noble goal, locally produced books are not necessary for children to learn to decode – especially when they can see themselves in other books that are read to them, or which they will read later. Also, many popular children's books in New Zealand are not New Zealand centric, for example, the Harry Potter series or Captain Underpants.

Many of the early adopter schools that switched to Structured Literacy (before the Ready to Read Phonics Plus books were released) used decodable series from overseas, such as Little

Learners Love Literacy from Australia. Schools also used other decodable texts, including the New Zealand/Australian Sunshine Decodable books and Learning Matters Decodable texts. Many of the early adopters would like to continue using the commercially available scope and sequence and books as they are better than Ready to Read Phonics Plus.

Learning how to read English is the same process no matter where in the world a child is. It would be a shame if excellent, established and tested resources were not able to be used, or suffered competitive disadvantage because of funding or home bias.

- **Recommendation 6: Funding should be made available for schools that want to purchase alternative decodable books. Schools should also be able to use an alternative Scope and Sequence.**

Professional Development

Creating a pipeline of more knowledgeable teachers coming into the system is important. Helping the stock of current teachers backfill their knowledge is also essential. With close to 40,000 Years 1 to 8 teachers (and another ~30,000 ECE teachers and close to 2,000 reading specialists), many of whom will have limited knowledge of language constructs,[133] there is a lot of work to do.

Better Start Literacy Approach

In 2021, the Ministry of Education awarded the University of Canterbury $10,636,409 for developing Professional Support for Teaching Foundational Phonics Based Literacy.[134] The Better Start Literacy Approach | Te Ara Reo Matatini (BSLA) will provide professional support to literacy specialists, and new entrant and Year 1 teachers.

The additional funding of professional development is a good first step. It is easy to see why the Ministry chose the University of

Canterbury, with its eminent researchers and association with the Ready to Read Phonics Plus and the Better Start Approach, which has been researched for many years and successfully piloted.

However, there are several ways to improve the roll-out. For example, the expected lag between the schools getting the new Ready to Read Phonics Plus books and teachers subsequently getting professional development is problematic. Also, while it makes sense to prioritise teachers of younger students first, expanding the training to cover all primary school teachers should not be neglected as the benefits of Structured Literacy go far beyond just Year 3.

Another concern is the extent of training provided. The BSLA micro credential spans just one semester, with 6 hours of online learning and another 6–10 hours of work with a partnered facilitator.[135] The key to a deep reset is teacher knowledge. Considering the complexity of the English language and the large gaps in teachers' knowledge of phonological skills, the alphabetic principle, and role of phonics instruction, more professional development is needed.[136]

There should also be funding opportunities for teachers who want to go further. Over the past year, I met several teachers who were so excited about Structured Literacy that they completed self-funded overseas courses like LETRS.[137]

The same caveats for the Ministry of Education 'picking winners' also apply here. So far, the two major contracts have been won by a single provider, the University of Canterbury. While it has excellent researchers, the lack of diversification is worrisome. It also has the potential to create a bottleneck of supply. There are excellent professional learning and development providers who pioneered the use of Structured Literacy in New Zealand. It would make sense to leverage their experience and expertise, rather than tilt the playing field against them.

- **Recommendation 7: The Ministry should allow more choice for funded Professional Development for Structured Literacy and extend funded professional development to all Year 1–8 teachers.**

Reading Recovery and Early Literacy Support

Since the late 1970s, Reading Recovery has been a mainstay of the New Zealand education system. It is a Whole Language/Balanced Literacy aligned tier 2 intervention for struggling readers and is subsidised by the Ministry of Education.

At the end of 2020, following an evaluation, the Ministry announced enhancements to Reading Recovery. Critics have pointed out how reluctant the Marie Clay Trust has been in the past to make changes to the programme.[138]

> From 2021 Reading Recovery will be known as Reading Recovery and Early Literacy Support. Reading Recovery Teachers will contribute to schools' literacy strategies. This will include working with class teachers, providing targeted group support and teaching individual children.[139]

From the available information, the changes represent a major shift towards phonics-based instruction. Reading Recovery teachers will now work with children, either in small groups (tier 2) or one-on-one (tier 3), using Ready to Read Phonics Plus approaches.[140]

While the changes are positive, Reading Recovery remains the main tier 2 intervention funded by the Ministry of Education. This again puts schools in a difficult position. They can either go with the Ministry subsidised intervention or use their own operations budget to switch to another intervention.

- **Recommendation 8: Schools that choose not to use Reading Recovery and Early Literacy Support should be eligible for funding to implement an alternative Structured Literacy aligned intervention.**

Even more sunlight – Improving transparency in the system

In *The Literacy Landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand*, Stuart McNaughton, the chief education scientific advisor, states:

> This report also reveals just how little evidenced we have in some areas. For example, we know very little about what literacy and language activities and instruction actually occur in the everyday experience if children and young people. We also do not know what outcome these activities lead to.[141]

A recent Ministry of Education report concurs: "There is not a lot of recent large-scale research that focuses explicitly on literacy teaching and learning in the early years."[142]

There are several ways to improve transparency – both in terms of curriculum and data.

Schools

Sunlight can be applied to schools. One simple way is for schools to put more curriculum information on their websites.[143] For example, they could clearly display the scope (what they plan to teach) and sequence (the order they teach it) and curriculum resources they use.

One example of this is Sunnyhills school.

> We have invested in the Little Learners Love Literacy (LLLL) decodable texts, the Heggerty Phonological Awareness

> Programme and David Kilpatrick's Phonological activities too. The Ministry of Education's new Ready to Read, Phonics Plus readers will be used in the scope and sequence that we have adopted from the LLLL programme.[144]

This allows parents and external parties to examine how literacy is taught in the school. In the United States, an independent non-profit called Ed Reports (www.edreports.org) analyses the quality of instructional materials. A similar not-for-profit organisation in New Zealand would allow Boards of Trustees (and the community) to better assess the quality of reading (and writing) instruction.

▶ Recommendation 9: Schools should display detailed information about their literacy programme on their website.

New School Entry Assessment Kete

Another positive initiative from the Ministry is the New School Entry Assessment kete.

> Work is also underway to develop a new School Entry Assessment kete (SEA) to help teachers know where learners are at in their early literacy journey. This information will enable more precise use of instructional strategies and associated texts for next learning steps, as well as identifying where they might need more specific development and support.[145]

Encouragingly, the kete will potentially include assessing phonological and phonemic awareness, which are critical for learning to read.[146]

In *Shifting the Dial on Literacy*, the Ministry of Education also proposes developing systematic checks as a 'safety net' for learners who have fallen through the cracks. The proposed checkpoints are

at entry to primary school; the end of Year 3/beginning of Year 4; Year 7; and Year 9. "The results from these checkpoint assessment (if either progress or attainment do not meet expectations for that child) would trigger access to specialist support if needed."[147]

This is an excellent proposal that will help the students who fall behind unnoticed. The Primary Reading Pledge in Australia provides a plan to implement such an initiative. "Every child who does not meet the designated achievement benchmark … is automatically provided with standardised reading assessments and, on the basis of those results, provided with appropriate evidence-informed interventions."[148]

The Primary Reading Pledge underlines the importance of using standardised screening assessments to determine the subset deficits that underlie a child's reading difficulties. Merely knowing a child is struggling with reading comprehension is not enough. The screening assessments are then used to determine which evidence-informed intervention the child needs.

- **Recommendation 10: Standardised screening assessments should be used to determine the subset deficits that underlie a child's reading difficulties.**

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The New Zealand Curriculum should explicitly endorse Structured Literacy.

Recommendation 2: Increase transparency of the content of ITE literacy courses.

Recommendation 3: Give newly trained teachers the option to sit a reading instruction exam that is aligned to the Science of Reading.

Recommendation 4: ITE literacy coursework and practica should be aligned to the Science of Reading.

Recommendation 5: Update the Effective Literacy Practice series and Literacy Learning Progression Framework to focus on Structured Literacy and the Science of Reading. The Ministry of Education's 'Guide to Dyslexia', provides a good starting point.

Recommendation 6: Funding should be made available for schools who want to purchase alternative decodable books. Schools should also be able to use an alternative Scope and Sequence.

Recommendation 7: The Ministry should allow more choice for funded Professional Development for Structured Literacy and extend funded Professional Development to all Year 1–8 teachers.

Recommendation 8: Schools that choose not to use Reading Recovery and Early Literacy Support should be eligible for funding to implement an alternative Structured Literacy aligned intervention.

Recommendation 9: Schools should display detailed information about their literacy programme on their website.

Recommendation 10: Standardised screening assessments should be used to determine the subset deficits that underlie a child's reading difficulties.

Recommended reading

- *How We Learn: The New Science of Education and the Brain* by Stanislas Dehaene
- *Language at the Speed of Sight: How We Read, Why So Many Can't, And What Can Be Done About It* by Mark Seidenberg
- *Reading in the Brain: The New Science of How We Read* by Stanislas Dehaene (2010)
- *Speech to Print: Language Essentials for Teachers* by Louisa C. Moats
- *Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science: What Expert Teachers of Reading Should Know and Be Able to Do* by Louisa C. Moats, https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/moats.pdf
- *The Science of Reading: Evidence for a New Era of Reading Instruction* by Laura Stewart https://www.zaner-bloser.com/reading/superkids-reading-program/pdfs/Whitepaper_TheScienceofReading.pdf
- *The Writing Revolution: A Guide to Advancing Thinking Through Writing in All Subjects and Grades* by Judith C. Hochman and Natalie Wexler
- William E. Tunmer and Wesley A. Hoover, "The Cognitive Foundations of Learning to Read: A Framework for Preventing and Remediating Reading Difficulties," *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*, 24:1 (2019), 75–93, DOI: 10.1080/19404158.2019.1614081
- Educator Training Initiatives Brief: Structured Literacy™: An Introductory Guide, International Dyslexia Association, 2019 https://www.readingrockets.org/sites/default/files/Structured%20Literacy%20Brief.pdf

- Guide to Dyslexia and learning, Ministry of Education, https://inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/dyslexia-and-learning/
- Lifting Literacy Aotearoa, https://www.liftingliteracyaotearoa.org.nz/

Appendix: Reading Recovery

My second teacher-training practicum was at a low-decile primary school in West Auckland. During an obligatory tour, we visited the Reading Recovery room. I was fascinated, as I knew almost nothing about Reading Recovery. This was despite studying at the University of Auckland, home of the National Reading Recovery Centre.

The teacher told us that if a child was struggling after their first year of school, they would come to Reading Recovery and receive 30 minutes of one-on-one tuition daily for 20 weeks.

After the whirlwind tour, I was reassured that the children I taught had a proven safety net. If my instruction was not good enough, a professional reading specialist had my back with intensive one-on-one tuition. This also covered older students.

Also comforting was that Reading Recovery was aligned with the small amount that I was taught about literacy in my teaching qualification. Basically, this consisted of the three-cueing strategy – if you come to a word that you do not know just look at the words and pictures around it and make an educated guess. Reading Recovery also used familiar levelled readers – books that started off with simple language and got progressively harder. I remembered these from when I was kid, with their colour wheel segments, starting with magenta, followed by red and yellow all the way to gold.

I was also reassured that Reading Recovery was partly funded by the Ministry of Education, which I viewed as tacit endorsement. Combined, everything seemed to point in the same direction, so I had no reason to question its effectiveness.

After my teacher training, I did not really give Reading Recovery another thought for a while. But over time, I started to worry about the poor results I was seeing from my Whole Language reading instruction. Knowing that Reading Recovery was built on the same theories, I began to wonder whether the safety net was as secure as I had originally thought. Does Reading Recovery really work?

Chapter 3 considered the best approach for classroom literacy instruction.

Of course, no classroom instruction will be 100% effective. Some children will always need additional help to learn to read. So, it is important that New Zealand also has high-quality reading interventions for children who are struggling.

In New Zealand, the Ministry of Education subsidised reading intervention is Reading Recovery – a constructivist approach created in the 1980s by the celebrated New Zealand academic, Dame Marie Clay. Reading Recovery sits very much at the Balanced/Whole Language end of the reading instruction spectrum.

Reading Recovery has been a mainstay in the New Zealand education system for the past 40 years. It is used by 55% of New Zealand primary schools, although this number has been falling over the past 15 years (down from 65% in 2005).[149]

Faced with New Zealand's declining PISA and PIRLS scores and sustained underachievement, one might expect the effectiveness of Reading Recovery to be called into question. This is especially given the growing number of schools, with their local knowledge, that are abandoning the programme. To its credit, the Ministry of Education funded an independent Reading Recovery Review in 2019.[150] But the rapid review came back with a counterintuitive recommendation – that Reading Recovery should effectively play a bigger part in schools' literacy approach, expanding its reach

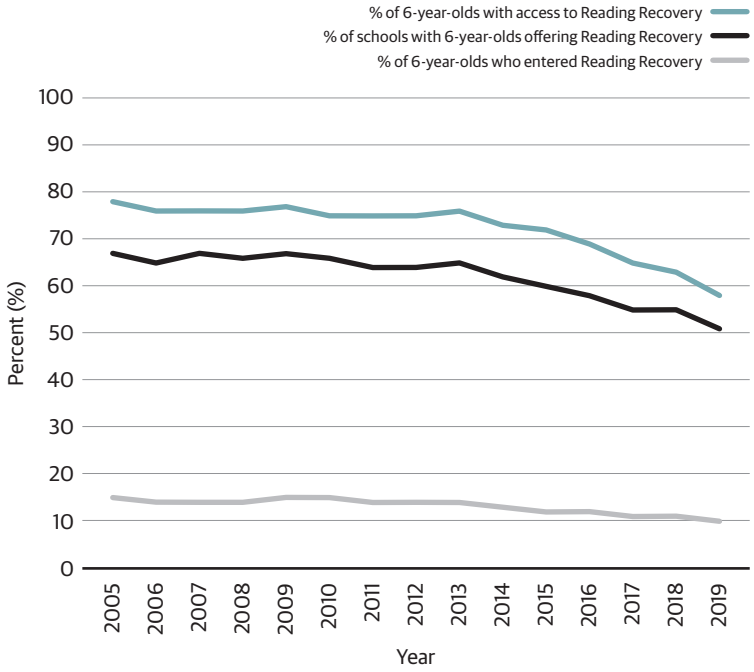
into classroom teaching. The Ministry of Education then took this recommendation and added an interesting twist – deciding to combine Reading Recovery with the new Ready to Read Phonics Plus resources they were developing in parallel. The Ministry has effectively made Reading Recovery teachers the champions of the Phonics Plus programme, a role they may not be suited to because of the differences between Reading Recovery and Structured Literacy. There are many unanswered questions surrounding the Ministry's approach, including how much of the original Reading Recovery approach will survive.

Seeing that Reading Recovery (or at least a modified version) is likely to play a bigger part in classrooms across New Zealand, this appendix examines the international evidence behind the Reading Recovery programme.

Evidence

Reading Recovery is a good example of seemingly conflicting evidence awaiting inquiring teachers. On the one hand, you have the relatively recent expansion of Reading Recovery in the United States – with an Investing in Innovation Fund (i3) grant worth US$45 million as part of the Obama administration's 2010 stimulus funding. On the other hand, the NSW Department of Education abandoned Reading Recovery in 2016. In New Zealand, Reading Recovery's popularity is also declining, with the number of schools offering it steadily falling over the past 15 years (see Figure 16).

Figure 16: 6-Year-Olds access to Reading Recovery (2005–2019)



Source: Education Counts, "Reading Recovery Data Report 2019", Website (accessed 18 November 2021).

The academic evidence is also contradictory at first glance. Proponents of Reading Recovery point to the positive findings from US Department of Education's What Works Clearing House (WWC) and the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE), which evaluated the i3 scale-up. On the other hand, Australian researcher Jennifer Buckingham and Massey University Emeritus Professor James Chapman have both been highly critical, questioning the reliability of the above studies and contributing new evidence against the effectiveness of Reading Recovery. To add to the complexity, researchers aligned with the Reading Recovery Council of North America are quick to aggressively counter any negative finding.

As a busy teacher, I never had the opportunity to carefully look at the evidence. Instead, I was consumed by the high-level noise that often benefits the status quo.

Now, I finally have had the time to read the research. I decided to start by looking at the evidence from the Reading Recovery Council of North America, which has unsurprisingly declared that 'Reading Recovery Works', even securing the domain name https://readingrecoveryworks.org/.

Central to their claims that "Reading Recovery is an Evidence-Proven Approach to Succeed" are the 'WWC' and 'i3 Scale-Up' studies.[151] Regrettably, the Reading Recovery parent organisation overstates the strength of both studies.

WWC

What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) is located in the evaluation arm of the US Department of Education. Its tagline is "At the WWC, translating scientific evidence into accurate, accessible, and useful information for educators." It is basically a one-stop shop for teachers. So rather than teachers using their valuable prep-time poring over academic studies, WWC does all the hard work – filtering out all the poor quality studies and then handily translating the research into an easy-to-read effectiveness rating from - - to + + (negative effects, potentially negative effects, potentially positive effects, positive effects).[152]

For the Reading Recovery report, WWC whittled down 202 studies until only three were left – a timely reminder of the challenges of conducting quantitative research in education. The three studies that met the WWC evidence standards without reservation were from 1988, 1994 and 2005 and involved relatively small numbers of children (together, the studies included 227 students).

Questions have also been raised about potential conflicts of interests with these studies. Two were conducted by the developers who brought the Reading Recovery programme to the United States and one was funded by the Reading Recovery Council of North America using their own research consultant, Robert Schwartz.[153] Professor Schwartz would later become president of the Reading Recovery Council of North America.

The WWC effectiveness ratings were also relatively disappointing, reporting 'potentially positive effects' (+) for three domains (Alphabetics, Reading Fluency, and Comprehension) and 'positive effects' (++) for one (General Reading Achievement).[154]

Reading Recovery proudly produced its own summaries of the WWC evidence, even appearing to match the WWC fonts. Unfortunately, this material omitted the last column of WWC evidence, which stated that the extent of evidence for all four domains was 'small'.

Another limitation with the WWC evidence was that it only used studies that evaluated the short-term impact of Reading Recovery.[155] For an intervention to be truly effective, it should boost short-term reading scores and also put students on a new trajectory for success. This is particularly important as fade is notoriously problematic in educational interventions, with students often falling behind again over time. Unfortunately, the WWC evidence gives no indication whether any impact that Reading Recovery may have is actually sustained in the medium or long term.

So, the WWC evidence ends up in a rather unsatisfying place – a handful of relatively old studies with small numbers of students, and questions remaining about Reading Recovery's effectiveness and its longer-term impact on student achievement. Fortunately, a new study called the 'i3 Scale-Up' promised to remedy all these shortcomings.

i3 Scale-Up

The global financial crisis in the late 2000s led to an unexpected boost for the evidence on Reading Recovery. As part of the Obama administration's 2010 stimulus package, $45.6 million was allocated to the Investing in Innovation Fund (i3) to expand Reading Recovery. Private donors pitched in another US$9.1 million; the funding also included US$5 million earmarked for an independent evaluation of scale-up.[156] This evaluation promised to resolve many of the weaknesses of the WWC evidence. It would be well designed, contemporary, involve large numbers of students (eventually 6,888 students) and give insights into the medium-term impact of Reading Recovery.

Unsurprisingly, the i3 Scale-Up evaluation has become the new battleground over the effectiveness of Reading Recovery.

In 2016, the results of the final evaluation were released.[157] Again, Reading Recovery North America championed the results, stating that the "final independent research report finds i3 scale-up of Reading Recovery 'highly successful'."[158] The short-term results (measured soon after the intervention) were positive, with a moderate (and significant) effect size.[159] [160] However critics point out that you would expect a one-on-one intervention to have a positive impact short term.

> Clearly, one-to-one instruction in general is better than no instruction or small group instruction. A more important question is whether RR is superior to other forms of one-to-one intervention, both in terms of cost and outcomes.[161]

Disappointingly, the i3 Scale-Up evaluation failed to shed much light on Reading Recovery's medium-term effectiveness. The authors looked at reading achievement at third grade [162] but could not conclude anything about the long-term effect because the

available data was too sparse.[163] So a US$1 million follow-up study was commissioned by the US Department of Education. This promises to see whether the impact of Reading Recovery is sustained through third and fourth grades. However, despite the grant ending in July 2020, the results have not yet been released.[164]

As James Chapman and William Tumner point out, "After three decades of Reading Recovery, there is virtually no empirical evidence to indicate that successful completions in Reading Recovery result in sustained literacy achievement gains."[165]

Reading Recovery's Response

For anyone who is in doubt why they are called the 'reading wars', a quick look at the responses from Reading Recovery proponents should suffice. Some of the academics who support Reading Recovery certainly do not pull their punches. In one response to critics, the Reading Recovery Council of North America states: "When you're recognized as a leader with proven success, you often become the target for those with limited knowledge," adding the authors "… advocate for their ideological perspective in their biased, selective and fallacy-full analysis of Reading Recovery." They also add that the article was "… an affront to researchers, scholar, educators, and others who know the facts …"[166] All of this appeared in the first two paragraphs of the response. Chapman and Tumner have also been accused of having 'ideological and political agendas' by Reading Recovery expert Schwartz.[167]

Despite their quickness to resort to aggression and hyperbole, dispersed through the rhetoric are interesting points.

The Reading Recovery Council of North America and Schwartz push back on the lack of evidence on the sustained gains from Reading Recovery.[168]

Schwartz argues: "The critical research question is not whether Reading Recovery students maintain their gain, but rather what factors within the system maintain their intervention gains over time."[169]

Using this argument, any poor performance long-term can be attributed to 'poor' teaching after the intervention, which is outside the control of Reading Recovery.[170]

The opposing argument takes the view that an intervention should fix a fundamental impediment that is stopping a child succeed. Poor performance long-term is taken as evidence that the intervention has just papered over the cracks rather than address the root cause of the problem.[171]

About me

Several years ago, I left my comfortable government desk job as an economist to retrain as a primary school teacher. It was a difficult decision. On the one hand was the search for more meaningful work. On the other hand, large costs, including lost income, having to start my career again, as well as the thought of going back to university, with its lectures, assignments and exams.

Not long into my teaching qualification, I encountered my first major hurdle – the first teaching practice (practicum). Fortunately, I found myself in familiar territory. I was matched with the primary school that I attended as a child. Coincidentally, and to my delight, I found myself in a classroom with my first teacher. Impressive as almost 30 years had passed. At any rate, a supportive school, with a hint of nostalgia, meant that my first real experience of teaching was very positive.

Upon returning to university, I noticed that some of my classmates had not made it back. A lack of practical classroom behaviour management training was considered the main cause. We eagerly awaited the training, but it never came. Viewed as a positive, maybe those who had left happened to find out relatively early that teaching was not for them. Future practicums would bring new challenges, like countless hours preparing differentiated lesson plans from scratch. While autonomy was great, I often wondered what happened to the scaffolding for trainee teachers.

At the end of the year, with my head ringing with the theories of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, and a lukewarm confidence that my courses had equipped me with the practical skills I needed to succeed as a teacher, I started applying for jobs. While private and local schools were tempting, I decided to go where the need was

greatest. Somewhere I thought I could have the largest impact. My eventual destination was a small rural school, located on an idyllic peninsula. The residents were a diverse socioeconomic mix, from families living in poverty to millionaires (and even a Swiss billionaire!). Native Kiwi birds roamed the school grounds at night. The school itself had witnessed a phoenix-like revival under an inspirational new headmaster. From teetering on the brink with just six students, it had rapidly grown to 80 students when I joined. Because of the growth, my first classroom was temporarily housed in one of the oldest schoolhouses in New Zealand. The native wood floors and vaulted ceilings were beautiful, but made for terrible acoustics. Every chair scrape and whisper was magnified. Multiplied by 20 students who did not whisper, it was deafening, even disorienting. My class, like the peninsula's population, came from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds. It was also a mixed age class, with 7- to 13-year-olds, and the academic achievement level ranged from kindergarten to university. They were amazing children with massive untapped potential, but some also had external challenges that I could not begin to understand. Behavioural issues, special educational needs, and mental health issues all added to the inherent complexity of classroom life. It soon became clear that my initial teacher training had not given me the practical evidence-based tools I needed to succeed.

Unfortunately, the end result of long hours, perfectionism and a nagging frustration that I should have been making more progress with my students was that I became a teacher retention statistic. It was tough to leave my class as I hated the idea of being yet another unstable element in their lives. But in my mind, the small gains I was making did not justify the personal costs. One student commented that I was bombproof – I felt anything but. 'Practice Shock' is a very apt term.

I would ultimately return to teaching in a setting that was very different from my first. A private school in Denmark, with amazing teacher-to-student ratios and even more generous preparation time. Of course, the challenges of being a teacher never go away. While I have now left teaching again to work at The New Zealand Initiative, I hope to return to the classroom one day.[172]

Endnotes

1 IEA, "Six Subject Survey: Reading Comprehension," Website.

2 Steve May with Adam Jang-Jones and Alexandra McGregor, "PISA2018 New Zealand Summary Report System Performance & Equity" (Wellington: Ministry of Education, 2019), 38 and 45.

3 See Figure 2.7 in Productivity Commission, "Educating New Zealand's future workforce – Draft Report," (Wellington: Productivity Commission, 2020), 13.

4 Troublingly, no group seem to be immune. Girls, boys, high achieving, low achieving, high, medium, and low socioeconomic background – all have gone backwards. Although some have been better insulated than others.

5 Catherine Woulfe, "Ben can read," *The Spinoff* (16 April 2021).

6 Professional Learning standards "Inquire into and reflect on the effectiveness of practice in an ongoing way, using evidence from a range of sources" and "Be informed by research …" Education Council, "Our Code Our Standards: Code of Professional Responsibility and Standards for the Teaching Profession" (n.d.), 18.

7 "A look at the basic science suggests specific ways to promote reading success. These do not require more testing or new federal laws; they do not require vast infusions of money; they are not based on classroom computers that treat learning like a video game or other faddish uses of technology. What they require is changing the culture of education from one based on beliefs to one based on facts." Mark Seidenberg, *Language at the Speed of Sight: How We Read, Why So Many Can't, and What Can Be Done About It* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

8 Helen Abadzi, "Turning a Molehill into a Mountain? How Reading Curricula are Failing the Poor Worldwide," *Prospects* 46 (2016), 319–334.

9 Ministry of Education, "Briefing Note: Update on initiatives in Primary-Level Literacy," Website.

10 Ministry of Education, "How our education system is performing for literacy: Progress and achievement of New Zealand learners in English medium settings," Website.

11 "The differences in achievement across subpopulations largely reflect different starting points when proactively entering the school system and a systematic failure to accelerate progress for those who have started behind. In these circumstances, even when a learner's rate of progress meets curriculum expectations, their level of achievement may fall short of expectations." Ministry of Education, "How our education system is performing for literacy: Progress and achievement of New Zealand learners in English medium settings," op. cit. 12.

12 Corazon Miller, "Parents of children with reading difficulties want overhaul of methods as phonics books are printed," *1News* TVNZ (31 January 2021).
13 James Chapman, "Reading Recovery fails too many students every year" *NZARE BLOG* (21 August, 2019).
14 Mark Seidenberg, *Language at the Speed of Sight*, op. cit. 9.
15 The often-used quote "The plural of anecdote is not data" is a misquote of the original.
16 Ministry of Education, "How our education system is performing for literacy: Progress and achievement of New Zealand learners in English medium settings," Website (p.9); The e-asTTle assessment is not used by all schools.
17 PISA is famous for its ability to elevate top-performing countries to education superstar status. In the 2000s, it made Finland the darling of the education world, followed by the rise of the Asian tigers, like Singapore, in 2010s, and recent emergence of surprise packages like Estonia.
18 See Radio New Zealand, "NZ teenagers hit new lows in reading, maths and science tests" (3 December 2019).
19 Interestingly, Finland has fallen the most since it acquired superstar status. This is surprising as Finnish has a shallow orthography and can be learnt in six months. Stanislas Dehaene, "How the Brain Learns to Read," YouTube (25 October 2013). Finland is falling from the top, whereas New Zealand is falling from the middle. Australia's fall has seen it make major changes in teaching literacy.
20 See Jessica Long and Mandy Te, "New Zealand top-end in OECD's latest PISA report but drop in achievements 'worrying'," *Stuff* (3 December 2019).
21 The OECD has been working hard to change this – deemphasising rankings and instead promoting bands of similar achievement.
22 "PISA reports an overall mean reading score as well as a mean score for all reading processes except reading fluency. It also reports proficiency levels, which describe the types of reading tasks that students can do. Students at Level 5 and above are capable of the most complex reading tasks and those below Level 2 have difficulty with all but the simplest reading tasks measured by PISA. Level 2 is considered a baseline level at which students begin to demonstrate the reading skills and competencies that will enable them to participate effectively later in life." Steve May with Adam Jang-Jones and Alexandra McGregor, "PISA2018 New Zealand Summary Report System Performance & Equity" (Wellington: Ministry of Education, 2019), 9.
23 Data from Education Counts, " PISA 2018: Reading in New Zealand – Reading achievement and experiences of 15-year-olds," Website.
24 Andreas Schleicher "PISA 2018: Insights and Interpretations" (Paris: OECD, 2019), 14.
25 The previous PIRLS cycles were in 2011, 2005 and 2001. The next PIRLS is scheduled for 2020/21.
26 Briar Lipson, "New Zealand's Education Delusion: How Bad Ideas Ruined a Once World-Leading School System" (Wellington: The New Zealand Initiative, 2020).

27 IEA TIMSS and PIRLS International Study Center, "PIRLS 2016 international results in reading: Performance at International Benchmarks," Website, http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2016/international-results/pirls/performance-at-international-benchmarks/low-international-benchmark/

28 This analysis has some caveats. First, PISA and PIRLS do not test the same students and therefore are not student trajectories. We cannot say with certainty the students who score low on PIRLS also score low on PISA Second, historically, PIRLS and PISA cycles have not lined up. Students that have sat PIRLS have not gone on to sit PISA. The above analysis uses PISA 2018 (students born in 2003) and PIRLS 2015/16 (students born in 2006).

29 National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement (NMSSA), "Learning Area Reports," Website.

30 The study is organised in five-year cycles. The first cycle ran from 2012 to 2016. It surveys 2,000 students at each of Year 4 and Year 8. The curriculum expectations in English reading are Level 2 at Year 4 and Level 4 at Year 8.

31 Note: there are wide confidence intervals because of small sample sizes.

32 While sincere, such claims always sat uncomfortably with me. It seemed unfair to claim the successes of my students in the good times while blaming external factors in the bad times. I also knew deep down that my teaching often failed my students in optimal conditions.

33 I remember being told in my teacher training that because of socioeconomic disadvantage, teachers cannot really make a difference in the lives of their students. They were partially correct. I could not make a difference with the incorrect practices my teacher training had given me.

34 Mark Seidenberg, *Language at the Speed of Sight*, op. cit. 246.

35 Lev Vygotsky died in 1934. Lev Vygotsky's *Mind in Society* (trans.) was published in 1978.

36 See Mark Seidenberg, *Language at the Speed of Sight*, op. cit.

37 When I did teach content, I covered too much information or covered it too quickly.

38 Ministry of Education TKI , "Inclusive Education Dyslexia and learning," Website.

39 Lev Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Harvard University Press, 1978), 118.

40 This probably is not even true in Vygotsky's native language Russian, which has a complex orthography. See Eugenia Kerek and Pekka Niemi, "Russian Orthography and Learning to Read," *Reading in a Foreign Language* 21:1 (2009), 1–21.

41 Stanislas Dehaene, "How the Brain Learns to Read," op. cit.

42 Ibid.

43 British Library, "A history of writing: Where did writing begin?" Website.

44 "While only 12% of the people in the world could read and write in 1820." Max Roser and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, "Literacy," Our World in Data, Website.

45 Stanislas Dehaene, *Reading in the Brain: The New Science of How We Read* (Penguin, 2009).

46 Stanislas Dehaene, "How the Brain Learns to Read," op cit.
47 In one ingenious experiment, they compared MRI scans of literate and illiterate adults. By comparing the two, they were able to see how reading changes the brain. Stanislas Dehaene, "How the Brain Learns to Read", op. cit. 210.
48 Stanislas Dehaene, *Reading in the Brain*, op. cit. 210.
49 Ibid.
50 Stanislas Dehaene, "How the Brain Learns to Read," op. cit.
51 Stanislas Dehaene, "How the Brain Learns to Read," op. cit.
52 Mark Seidenberg, *Language at the Speed of Sight*, op. cit. 4.
53 "In adults, reading is automatized. We no longer realize how difficult it is. We have an illusion of whole word reading." Stanislas Dehaene, "How the Brain Learns to Read," op. cit.
54 Mark Seidenberg, *Language at the Speed of Sigh*t, op. cit. 115.
55 Louisa C. Moats, "What Expert Teachers of Reading Should Know and Be Able to Do" (The American Federation of Teachers, 2020), 11.
56 Mark Seidenberg, *Language at the Speed of Sight*, op. cit. 294.
57 Phillip Gough and William Tunmer. "Decoding, reading, and reading disability." Remedial and Special Education 7(1) (1986), 6-10.
58 Sometimes Decoding is replaced by Word Recognition. So, Reading Comprehension (R) = Word Recognition (WR) x Language Comprehension (LC).
59 Mark Seidenberg, *Language at the Speed of Sight*, op. cit. 118.
60 Linda Farrell, Michael Hunter, Marcia Davidson and Tina Osenga, "The Simple View of Reading," Reading Rockets, Website.
61 Jim Rose, "Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading – Final Report" (Nottingham, UK, Department for Education and Skills, 2006).
62 William Tunmer and Wesley Hoover, "The cognitive foundations of learning to read: a framework for preventing and remediating reading difficulties," *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*, 24:1 (2019), 75-93.
63 Hollis Scarborough, "Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory, and practice." In Susan Neuman & David Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook for research in early literacy* (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2001), 97-110.
64 A helpful way to regain a child's perspective is understanding the concept of working memory and the risks of cognitive overload. One of the parts of working memory is short-term memory. A child with slow decoding and poor working memory may forget what they have read at the start of the sentence (Helen Abadzi, "Turning a Molehill into a Mountain? op. cit.). I had automated many of the reading processes, so did not understand the cognitive stress reading puts a child under. I needed a model to help shed light on the different components of reading. Another helpful way to regain a child's perspective was to remind myself how complex the English language is. English is made up approximately 44 unique sounds (phonemes) and orthography with many irregularities. I relied on children absorbing the information without explicit teaching.

65 Alisa VanHekken, "The reading rope," Foundations in Literacy Blog (4 March 2021).
66 See Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH, DHHS, "Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read: Reports of the Subgroups" (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000).
67 The Science of Reading: A Defining Moment, "The Science of Reading: A Defining Guide," Website.
68 Louise Spear-Swerling, "Structured Literacy and Typical Literacy Practices: Understanding Differences to Create Instructional Opportunities," Teaching Exceptional Children (2018).
69 See Mark Seidenberg, *Language at the Speed of Sigh*t, op. cit.
70 Mark Seidenberg, *Language at the Speed of Sight*, op. cit. 303-304.
71 The length of the lessons is flexible, ranging from 5–6 minutes to 10–15 minutes depending on mood and concentration of the children.
72 "Reading to children serves a lesser-known function that is at least as important as introducing them to print: expanding their knowledge of spoken language." Mark Seidenberg, *Language at the Speed of Sight*, op. cit. 115. "Children learn a spoken language through exposure and use, but reading requires systematic guidance and feedback, more than occurs in casual reading to children. In short reading to children is not the same as teaching children to read. I emphasize this point because the mantra about reading to children makes it seem like that this is all that is required. A child who has difficulty to read therefore must have not been read to enough. Among the first questions that will be asked of the parents of a child who is struggling is whether they read to the child and if there are books in the home. Reading to children is important but not sufficient: children benefit from it, some quite a lot, but it neither obviates the role of instruction nor vaccinates against dyslexia. Children who are read to until the cow jumps over the moon can still have difficulties becoming readers." Mark Seidenberg, *Language at the Speed of Sight*, op. cit. 113.
73 Three cueing incorrectly encourages children to guess.
74 Even though Te Reo is a transparent orthography, there are advantages to structured literacy. Teachers having a plan, explicit teaching, and small steps, all make it easier for children to learn to read.
75 Hangananga Reo Matantini (Structured Literacy).
76 Pānui and Tuhi.
77 He Rauemi mot e Akokāki te Weteoro.
78 Stanislas Dehaene, "How the Brain Learns to Read," op. cit.
79 Helen Abadzi, Email (6 May 2021).
80 Helen Abadzi, "Turning a Molehill into a Mountain?" op. cit.

81 Christian U. Krägeloh and Neha N. Tia. "Taking Pride in Te Reo Māori: How Regular Spelling Promotes Literacy Acquisition," *New Zealand Studies in Applied Linguistics* 16:1 (2010), 65—75, 66.
82 Judy Parr and Rebecca Jesson, "Mapping the Landscape of Writing Instruction in New Zealand Primary School Classrooms," *Reading and Writing* 29:5 (2016), 981–1011.
83 The curriculum expectations for Year 4 is Level 2 and for Year 8 itis Level 4.
84 To get an idea of what is it like for a child who is struggling with handwriting "try writing a shopping list with your non-dominant hand." Helen Walls, Personal interview (17 May 2021).
85 Peg Tye, "The Writing Revolution" *The Atlantic* (15 October 2012).
86 Ibid.
87 While New Dorp is a high school, the formula is equally applicable to primary school teaching.
88 This chapter provides simple recommendations on improving on the status quo rather than starting with a blank page. I prefer convincing teachers about the merits of Structured Literacy rather than using compulsion – as the evidence of the Science of Reading is strong.
89 Ministry of Education, "Report of the Literacy Taskforce" (Wellington: New Zealand Government, 1999), 4.
90 Education Counts, "School rolls," Website.
91 Ministry of Education, "Shifting the Dial on Literacy (preliminary paper)" (Wellington: Ministry of Education, 2021).
92 Corazon Miller, "Parents of children with reading difficulties want overhaul of methods as phonics books are printed," 1News (31 January 2021).
93 Ministry of Education, "Ready to Read turns 50," *Education Gazette* 93:3 (2014).
94 Ministry of Education, *New Zealand Curriculum* (Wellington: 2007).
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
97 In 2021, the New Zealand Curriculum Framework will be co-designed. In 2022, the English content will be co-designed, trialled with schools and refined. The Curriculum Support English content implementation and support will also be co-designed. TKI will be progressively replaced by a new Online Curriculum Hub between 2022 and 2025. All schools will be using the refreshed curriculum by the end of 2025. See Ministry of Education, "Roadmap: Refreshing the New Zealand Curriculum for Schooling" (Wellington: New Zealand Government, 2021).
98 The ambiguity of balanced literacy has facilitated this.

99 William E. Tunmer and James W. Chapman, *Excellence and Equity in Literacy Education: The Case of New Zealand*, Chapter 1: The Development of New Zealand's National Literacy Strategy (Springer 2015), 1–22.
100 Ministry of Education TKI,"Inclusive Education Dyslexia and learning," Website.
101 Radio New Zealand, "Classroom kete for children with dyslexia not enough, advocates say" (28 February 2020).
102 Ministry of Education, "Dyslexia and learning," op. cit.
103 In the United States, some states have gone a step further, making it illegal to teach literacy that is not aligned to the Science of Reading. Within the Structured Literacy framework, it makes sense that schools to have some flexibility over the scope and sequence so they can match the student population they serve.
104 Ministry of Education, "Shifting the Dial on Literacy (preliminary paper)" op. cit. 10.
105 Ibid. 23.
106 Jennifer Buckingham and Linda Meeks, "Short-changed: Preparation to Teach Reading in Initial Teacher Education" (MultiLit, 2019).
107 Teaching Council, "About us," Website.
108 Jennifer Buckingham and Linda Meeks, "Short-changed: Preparation to Teach Reading in Initial Teacher Education," op. cit.
109 Ibid. 9.
110 Credentialing programmes were proposed in Ministry of Education, "Shifting the Dial on Literacy (preliminary paper)," op. cit. 16.
111 Teaching Council, "About us," op. cit.
112 Centre for Independent Studies, "Reforming Australia's Schools" YouTube (28 October 2021).
113 Ministry of Education, "Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1 to 4" (Wellington: New Zealand Government, 2003).
114 University of Canterbury, "Lifting Literacy Aotearoa" Website.
115 Ministry of Education, "Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1 to 4," op. cit. 78.
116 Handwriting is also mentioned. "However, students need explicit instruction in letter formation so that they do not develop habits that prevent them from writing fluently and legibly." Ministry of Education, "Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1 to 4," op. cit. 148.
117 For example, they may focus on processing strategies like "attending and searching – looking purposely for particular information … and information in pictures and diagrams." Ministry of Education, "Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1 to 4," op. cit. 38. *Effective Literacy Practice* also stresses the use of running records and guided reading.
118 Louisa Moats, *Speech to Print: Language Essentials for Teachers* (Brookes Publishing, 2020).

119 Ministry of Education, "Shifting the Dial on Literacy (preliminary paper)" op. cit. 7.
120 Ministry of Education, "Shifting the Dial on Literacy (preliminary paper)" op. cit. 13.
121 Victoria University of Wellington, "The Ready to Read Collection" (2016), Website.
122 "The books were unique because they used natural language. Although common words and sentence structures were introduced gradually, there was none of the contrived and limited text of earlier readers, such as the Janet and John series. Using natural language and authentic contexts helped to ensure that stories were interesting and engaging for children." Ministry of Education, "Ready to Read turns 50," op. cit.; Lift Education, "Better understanding of Ready to Read," Website.
123 Ministry of Education, "Ready to Read turns 50," op. cit.
124 The contract is managed by Future Learning Solutions at the University of Auckland Faculty of Education and Social Work, Epsom Campus. The Ministry of Education contracts us for specific training and quality assurance roles relating to the implementation of Reading Recovery in New Zealand.
125 "For example, choosing just one or two suppliers regularly can over the longer term erode the capability of other firms in the industry, leading to higher prices and reduced innovation." Deloitte Access Economics, "Economic benefits of better procurement practices" (UK: Deloitte Access Economics Pty Ltd, 2015) 49.
126 Ministry of Education, "Shifting the Dial on Literacy," (preliminary paper) op. cit.
127 Literacy Online, "Early literacy approach," Website.
128 GETS, "Ready to Read Series" (2019), Website.
129 Lifting Literacy Aotearoa, "Ready to Read Phonics Plus Initial Feedback Report," (Auckland: Lifting Literacy Aotearoa, 2021).
130 The Ministry's response was: "The Ministry plans to introduce more books to the series, particularly early in the sequence." Ministry of Education, "Briefing Note: Meeting with Lifting Literacy Aotearoa (via Zoom)," (Wellington: Ministry of Education, 2021).
131 The Ministry's response was: "We plan to discuss this feedback more fully with LLA because this was not a universal view. The inclusion of kupu Māori reflects the Ministry's policy of including te reo Māori in language and literacy learning. Early feedback from schools undertaking BSLA shows children adjust well to reading the Māori kupu and whānau appreciate their inclusion in the books. Ministry of Education, "Briefing Note: Meeting with Lifting Literacy Aotearoa (via Zoom)," (Wellington: Ministry of Education, 2021).
132 GETS, "Professional Support for Teaching Foundational Phonics Based Literacy" (2021), Website.

133 James W. Chapman, Keith T. Greaney, Alison W. Arrow and William E. Tunmer, "Phonics Use in Literacy Instruction: When Intention and Implementation Collide," Handout (Massey University, 2017).
134 GETS, "Professional Support for Teaching Foundational Phonics Based Literacy," Website.
135 Ministry of Education, "Better Start Literacy Approach Microcredential FAQs" (n.d.).
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140 The New Zealand Curriculum, "Reading Recovery and Early Literacy Support," Website.
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142 Ministry of Education, "How our education system is performing for literacy: Progress and achievement of New Zealand learners in English medium settings," op. cit. 26.
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147 Ministry of Education, "Shifting the Dial on Literacy (preliminary paper)" op. cit. 18.
148 Five from Five and AUSPELD, "Primary Reading Pledge" (2020).
149 Education Counts, "Reading Recovery Data Report," Website.
150 Sarah Appleton-Dyer, Angela Boswell, and Josie Reynolds, "Reading Recovery Evaluation," (Auckland, Synergia, 2019).
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152 The UK equivalent is The Education Endowment Foundation.
153 What Works Clearinghouse,"WWC Intervention Report: Reading Recovery" Website.
154 Jennifer Buckingham, "Reading Recovery: A failed Investment," (NSW: Five from Five/MultiLit, 2019).
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157 Ibid.
158 Reading Recovery Community, "i3 Scale-Up Evaluation," Website.
159 Jennifer Buckingham, "Reading Recovery: A failed Investment," (NSW: Five from Five/MultiLit, 2019).
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161 James Chapman and William Tunmer "Is Reading Recovery an Effective Intervention for Students with Reading Difficulties? A Critique of the i3 Scale-Up Study," op. cit. 1032.
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163 "While the impact estimate produced by this analysis was not significant, the available data were far too sparse to produce a conclusive finding." Henry May, Philip M Sirinides, Abigail Gray and Heather Goldsworthy, "Reading Recovery: An Evaluation of the Four-Year i3 Scale-Up" op. cit 3.
164 "Future research is planned to better address Reading Recovery's impacts on 3rd-grade test." Henry May, "An Efficacy Follow-Up Study of the Long-Term Effects of Reading Recovery Under the i3 Scale-Up, (Institute of Education Sciences, 2017).
165 James Chapman and William Tunmer "Is Reading Recovery an Effective Intervention for Students with Reading Difficulties? A Critique of the i3 Scale-Up Study," op. cit. 1035.
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167 Robert Schwartz, "Ideology and early literacy evidence: A response to Chapman & Tunmer (2015)," (Columbus, OH: Reading Recovery Council of North America), 1.

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New Zealand's reading light has been dimming for some time.

International assessments show New Zealand's reading performance has fallen, and that Māori and Pasifika students are particularly underserved.

Behind the statistics, our failure has a human face. Kids who label themselves as being 'dumb' because they are struggling to learn to read. Kids who withdraw from learning.

Despite the challenges, there are many reasons to be optimistic. A revolution in the way literacy is taught in New Zealand schools is underway.

Throughout the country, teachers and concerned parents have questioned the poor literacy rates among their children. Their questioning of the status quo has led them to an evidence-based approach called Structured Literacy.

Over the last year, I have seen many examples of outstanding teaching. Educators who have chosen to follow the science of reading. For these teachers, it was like the light had been switched on. And through their instruction, a light has also been switched on for the children they teach.

This report shares my personal journey. Hopefully it will provide motivation for teachers, principals, support staff, parents, politicians, and policymakers to start a journey of their own.

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