
Emergent Reading: Issues from Research and Practice

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It is interesting when looking at current issues in emergent reading in New Zealand to think also about issues in the past. This gives us the opportunity to take a broader and more critical perspective of current literacy initiatives, for example those resulting from the Literacy Task Force Report.

What were the preoccupations of educators in the past? If we look at the texts that children read over the last century in schools it gives us some insight into the beliefs about how children learned to read then, and also the challenges children might have faced in becoming fluent readers. We can access these old texts and find out something about how they were used in schools. We can also compare them to the texts of today and perhaps predict how current issues will affect future reading text development.

In the 1870's through to the early 1920's children were taught to read using texts such as the Irish National Readers, the Royal Readers, the Southern Cross Readers and the Pacific Readers. The names reflect growing need over time to provide material more relevant to New Zealand children. However, if someone who knew nothing about New Zealand at that time had used them as a source of information, they may have been astounded when they got a chance to meet a real New Zealander. There seemed to be little relevant to the daily life and concerns of pioneer rural children who would have formed a large proportion of emergent readers at the time.

The texts were structured to fit beliefs about how reading should be taught in the British Isles and other countries at that time. The readers were set out so that children started by learning single letters, and progressed to two and then three letter combinations. Hugh Price in his fascinating book, "Lo! I am on an Ox" discusses these texts. From a perspective formed a century later it appears that they were not constructed in a way that would entertain or stimulate thought in the reader's head. There was little notion of the

importance of capitalising on children's experiences, interests and prior knowledge, apart from knowledge of letter names. Because of the writer's need to stick to the rigid letter formula the readers appear practically meaningless.

Often children would buy or receive one book for the year, being tested at the end on vocabulary, spelling, oral reading and comprehension. If a certain score wasn't reached, they were fated to read the book for another whole year. Many did fail. We can guess at the reasons – there was limited access to the books, and children were taught in whole class sessions. The texts would have had little meaning for children and were often memorised. One can imagine the boredom for these learners – and the pressure to perform. Using the alphabetic principle, they would often chant the names of letters together in each word in a monotone as they read. For example if the new word to be learned was “teddy”, the children might chant;

“Here is a t – e – d – d – y spells teddy!”

The teachers appear to have had very few professional opportunities or forums to develop and refine their own pedagogy, so would have had to be reflective and innovative thinkers to cope with literacy issues. However the requirements of the literacy brief appear to have not rewarded reflective and innovative thinkers.

This changed to a degree in the 1920's with the publication of the Education Gazette. There was now a forum for literacy issues. Round this time the theory that many children might develop phonic knowledge in a more natural and less structured way, not only prior to but also while reading, became an important issue. Also, the need for “real stories” rather than exercises to develop decoding skills became a priority. The Ginn Readers were developed. These stayed in print for nearly three-quarters of a century and were based around a series of graded folk tales with accompanying phonic tasks.

Between 1950 and 1963 we inherited the “Janet and John” series. They were especially renamed for us, being adapted from an American series called “Alice and Jerry”. These are the readers I remember. The first were extremely dull by today's standards. I

remember we were only allowed to read a page a day. I would quickly read to the end of the book and try out the vocabulary list at the end. I don't remember any chances to take the books home. There was no direct phonic teaching, (contrary to Nicholson's experience mentioned in his description of his school days) so I suppose my teacher followed the method described as "Look and Say". I do remember sneaking down to the back of the room where there were some readers for older children and working my way through them whenever there was an opportunity. I still remember some of the stories, including the thrilling opportunity to struggle through a real chapter book with photos of a bunyip called "Timothy in Bushland". Even better, I was allowed to take it home and I would disappear for hours, into our front sitting room where it was quiet.

In 1963 because of a shortage of overseas funds and the current highlighting of the issue of providing text with more New Zealand content and a more natural vocabulary, Myrtle Simpson's "Ready to Read" series was developed. The vocabulary was controlled, and a chart with new words provided. Accompanying handbooks were developed. It was felt that there should be more books at each level, so the "Price Milburn" readers were developed. In a revised form they are still very popular with schools today. Beverley Randall attributes their success to a rigorous attention to four main criteria: - the use of traditional narrative story structure with a problem, climax and resolution, the careful grading of new vocabulary, stories with meaning for children (especially white, middle class ones) and that the illustrations matched the text. Randall mentions the considerable influence of Dame Marie Clay in her development of the series. All over New Zealand at that time, reading programmes underwent significant change as teachers, through nationally implemented courses, looked at issues about reading. It was a time of tremendous growth and development in teachers' knowledge and thinking about reading. A series of national in-service courses for teachers were developed. Clay's approach to the issues about reading could be described as an eclectic one, the essence of which is captured in the name of her text, "By Different Paths to Common Outcomes". The notion of a balanced language programme was defined and extended, the Reading Recovery programme was developed and the role of oral language and writing in reading development was profiled.

In the early eighties the issue of having texts which were “real stories” influenced the development of a new Ready to Read series. Subsequent criticisms say the lack of graded support disadvantages some children. These texts included more material which featured Maori and other cultures as a result of the issues highlighted in the seventies and eighties, in relation to stereotypes and cultural exclusion. There has been recent criticism of these texts - for example, that in order to be politically correct writers have sometimes developed bland texts which have their own formula which would discourage critical interpretation. Publishers often demand that texts are produced to fit a formula.

At present, publishers other than the Ministry are producing some texts which reflect the public debate which has arisen over the last few years about the role of phonics and phonemic awareness in learning to read. Some very strident parent and education groups have proposed that teachers ignore specific teaching which would accelerate reading development. They indicate that more specific decontextualized teaching should be employed to develop knowledge of phonics and phonemic awareness. Some publishers resources look as if they are similar to those produced over seventy-five years ago in their structure in that their main purpose seems to be to be used as a teaching tool for developing phonic knowledge. Some publishers have responded to publicity and research findings by importing videos and material. Schools can also now purchase “programmes” such as “Jolly Phonics” and “Letterland”.

During the last decade teachers have been criticized for their “whole language” programmes. It has been reported by the media that children are failing because of current teaching practices in reading. Many teachers find that a debate about whether to develop literacy in one way or another is not useful – their direct observation in class being that children learn to read in many different ways. Over-simplified reading models, which might be useful for researchers as a framework for debate perhaps don’t adequately reflect what really happens and why it happens in a reading programme. It is (and probably always has been) newsworthy to describe the shortcomings of programmes and teachers in light of the publicised debates about how to teach or how children learn.

The controversy has sometimes been fuelled by reporters and spokes-people for education quoting anecdotes or using research findings selectively to defend beliefs.

As mentioned above, there has been a proliferation of specific programmes developed by publishers which have a heavy emphasis on phonics and phonemic awareness. The Ministry has at present put aside money for a research contract to examine the use and role of commercially produced programmes in schools.

In 1999 perhaps the most significant development in literacy learning for some time was the convening of a Literacy Task Force which produced a report defining current issues in literacy and making recommendations to the Ministry for resources and in-service to support the changes. The issues they raised were as follows:

- The wide variation in performance in reading by particular groups of New Zealand children and especially the significance of low performance by Maori, children learning English as an additional language (especially Pacific Island students) and children in low decile schools
- The widening of the gap between lower and higher progress readers over the first four years of school
- The emergence of some evidence that boys were not doing as well as girls in reading (there is also some evidence which contradicts this finding)
- The need for ongoing useful research to document successful teaching strategies and approaches being used in classrooms
- The need for an explicit response to the phonics versus whole language debate from the Ministry
- That not only context should be advocated as a primary or only strategy for working out unknown words
- The examination of the need for more emphasis on teaching of the alphabetic principle and word level skills and strategies
- Concern that enough time might not at present be given to literacy and numeracy in early years of schooling

- Concern over the lack of use of quality materials and support from Ministry to advise teachers on the use of quality materials
- The variability in skills and knowledge of teachers, including beginning teachers
- The concern over the proliferation of teacher education providers and how they prove the suitability of their programmes for teacher registration purposes
- The need for ongoing, nationally co-ordinated regular quality professional development opportunities for teachers to develop their expertise in literacy teaching and learning
- The proposed policy of devolving funding currently used for Teacher Support Services and the need for co-ordination between educators
- The co-ordination and development of literacy leadership in schools
- The need for expert teachers in new entrant classes
- Concern over allocation of funding, flexibility, affirmation of culture and lack of ongoing New Zealand research in relation to the Reading Recovery programme
- The need for the development of an equivalent programme for Maori – medium programmes.
- The need for further co-ordination, education of providers, resourcing and funding in the Resource Teachers for Reading programme
- The education of parents through a public information campaign to support school-home links in literacy learning
- The increasing effects hunger, sickness and sporadic attendance have on literacy development
- The need to more effectively manage, analyse and use assessment data, including development of internal and external moderation of Maori and Pacific Island languages-medium programmes
- The concern over the development, purchase and use of programmes for literacy in schools which have not been carefully evaluated.

The taskforce had representatives from various interest groups within the education sector including classroom teachers.

Early in 2000 I decided I wanted to find out more about what teachers thought were crucial issues impacting on children learning to read in their classes. Recently, as part of a semester course in Reading Process for teachers we discussed the Literacy Taskforce recommendations. The group of 20 Auckland teachers on the course were invited at the beginning and the end of the course to list and prioritise main issues in literacy teaching and learning. The teachers were mostly from low decile schools. The issues were more to do with external factors rather than matters relating to philosophy, approaches, strategies, management and organisation although all these issues were discussed at length during the course. I have listed their concerns in the order of priority that they gave to specific issues below.

The main issues for them were:

- Class size. They mentioned aspects such as multiple levels, numbers of children from non-English speaking backgrounds, children from backgrounds with families who have low written literacy levels and children with learning and/or behaviour problems. With multiple challenges like this, they saw small numbers as a crucial factor in accelerating literacy development in their current classes
- Time – to run a balanced language programme within timetabling restrictions or competing curriculum demands, but most of all to allow them to provide intensive help to small groups of children or individuals at reading time
- Lack of reading resources – number of copies for groups, resources for older readers making slow progress, recommended resources for special purposes, reading and video resources in languages other than English, and the variety of reading resources to meet interests and reading preferences (for example boys)
- Difference in expectation between home and school in relation to expectations about learning in general
- Time and resource to develop effective partnerships between home and school
- Time to learn about individuals in their classes so they could value their backgrounds and diverse language skills
- Motivating children to read independently
- Managing assessment that is useful and meaningful
- Extra support for beginning readers

- Writing resources for both teachers and children which will enhance knowledge for writing for a variety of purposes

Other issues mentioned, but as lower priorities were:

- Lack of funding for language enrichment resources to support instructional reading
- Lack of knowledge about how to best support EAL children
- Managing behaviour so optimum learning occurs
- Children's health problems
- Parental expectations of children (this came from a high decile school)

It is obvious that when we compare the issues raised, there is some commonality.

However, recently another report was published by a different group of people called The Literacy Expert's Group. It is interesting that just four of the nine recommendations made in the Literacy Expert's Group report to the Secretary for Education are mentioned as concerns for the twenty teachers. It is also interesting that fourteen of the general recommendations made by the Literacy Expert's group to the Secretary of Education were not on the twenty teachers list of priority issues. Perhaps initiatives by the literacy task force will narrow this gap.

Another current perspective on reading issues was provided by a teacher who is working with special needs children in a low decile South Auckland school. This teacher is an expert in teacher education programmes, has a long history of successful teaching practice, is passionate and informed about EAL learners and has recent experience teaching a new entrant class in a high decile school. She discusses the strategies and approaches that have worked with children who have special needs and discusses not only her concerns but also her grounded experience in relation to the debates about whole language versus phonics debate.

In her school a commercially sold phonics programme is now used in classrooms daily. She believes it may be useful as an in-service for teachers themselves in that it may provide information they did not formerly have access to in relation to phonics and phonemic awareness. In the tradition of good New Zealand teachers, they will hopefully critique the programme and use elements in responsive teaching strategies such as guided

reading and shared reading sessions with particular children. I share her concern that programmes that are prescribed for use within a school do not reflect the New Zealand philosophy and that in education one size does not fit all. Well-informed teachers who are familiar with their learners and the content of a good reading programme must be given the opportunity to use resources and strategies flexibly. The Ministry states this, but her perception is that individual schools, anxious about closing the gap, are beginning to make their own inflexible rules about who will be taught what and when.

She observes that the children she is working with have multiple reading challenges – they have limited phonological knowledge and phonemic awareness, but also often fail to understand simple texts they read with her without considerable teacher support.

She discusses the fact that the school is using multiple ways to improve literacy standards, including help from SEMO (Strengthening Education in Mangere and Otago) where intensive help is provided for children in small groups. One of her concerns is that the desire to accelerate children's progress may be counter productive in that many of the children need extensive language experience opportunities, alongside the reading programmes, to enable progress to be maintained. The language experience approach is not mentioned in the Ministry's most recently produced handbook on reading. Her concern is also that the Literacy Task Force imperative; all children turning nine will be able to read, write and do Maths for success, may be misinterpreted. In their haste to reach this imperative teachers may not emphasise the importance of children "experiencing success".

In keeping with McNaughton's discussion about family – situated literacy tasks, she describes a simple but effective strategy which is being used to bridge the gap for children and parents prior to school entry. The pre-school children have a scrapbook that they draw or paint in. The teacher works alongside the child with the parent observing. The teacher writes as the child talks – not necessarily a story, but what the child can do. She notes down comments, such as "Sione knows red and yellow. She can make orange". The parent assumes the writing role. The scrapbook becomes a record that can be taken to

school. The teacher describes how one child talks about her “pink ofu”. She questions the mother, “What is a pink ofu”? “Pink clothes” is the answer.

Speaking personally as a teacher and teacher educator, I worry about the media hype surrounding literacy as in the recent phonics and whole language debate. Debate is healthy, but it must be informed debate. My concern is that even though we may have faith in our Ministry not being swayed into knee-jerk reactions to lobby groups who are on the latest literacy bandwagon, not everyone is a literacy expert. Teachers who are insecure in their own knowledge and expertise are probably not helped by either/or debates. Pressure from parents who respond to alarmist media reports may also result in inappropriate changes from schools in literacy programmes in the “Tomorrows” Schools’ climate where schools compete for pupils. We see daily evidence of this in the over-emphasis some schools have placed on assessment which is time-consuming and seems purposeless and threatening to teachers and children. None of us would deny that assessment and evaluation are important, but they are partial dimensions of good teaching and learning. The Literacy Task Force Report recommendations are relevant to this issue.

A last important issue for me is the crucial importance of having our best most knowledgeable and experienced teachers teaching new entrants. In the past most schools had a policy of not putting beginning teachers into Year 1 classes. In visiting schools I see that sometimes this is no longer the case. The Ministry decision to reduce funding for teacher education, so that students who have a degree can be in charge of a class after one short year at a tertiary institution, means some groups of beginning teachers could be fully responsible for at least twenty four new entrants’ literacy after a very short time focussing on literacy teaching and learning. Things are quite likely to go wrong however dedicated and energetic a graduate may be.

It is heartening to see things happening as a result of the Literacy Task Force report. However, we need to hear teachers’ voices loud and clear in telling us how effective the help is at grassroots level. The best results will be achieved if initiatives and the reading resources that accompany them are carefully thought out, trialled, and amended over time.

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