

A Reading of the Literacy Task Force Report (1999)

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This is a response to the recently published Literacy Task Force Report (1999) (LTFR). Although I was a member of the Task Force, what follows is a personal commentary on just two areas in the report : the question of identifying groups in standard (English medium) classrooms needing to benefit from the overall literacy strategy; and assumptions about 'best practice' for teaching 'phonics'.



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There are other important areas that I believe warrant further commentary. One is a detailed analysis of the assessment and resourcing needs of Maori medium and Kura Kaupapa Maori schooling. Another is a discussion about the role and optimisation of teaching reading and writing in a Pacific Islands language.

Both of these require extensive consideration that is beyond the scope of this commentary.

Identifying Groups

The Report adopts the view that there is much about the way we teach reading and writing that is worth preserving.

Warwick Elley has pointed this out on many occasions, most recently in this journal (Elley, 1998), and I too support this general conclusion. But the LTFR notes that the relative success of our teaching of reading in international terms should be qualified by another set of findings.

There are groups of children who make relatively low progress. These are Maori and Pacific Islands children in standard (English medium) classrooms and children in low decile schools. I want to discuss the evidence for needing to identify these children and draw some implications.

There are large significant differences on entry to school between Pakeha and Maori children, and between Pakeha and Pacific Islands children in conventional literacy knowledge and language associated with story retelling.

Similarly, there are significant differences on entry to school between children in low decile schools (decile 1-3) and all other schools on these same measures (Gilmore, 1998).

Available descriptions indicate that differences between Maori or Pacific Islands children and other groups in some areas of conventional knowledge reduce (eg identifying letters and concepts about print), but that other differences, particularly in writing vocabulary and text reading level develop over the first year (Clay, 1986; McNaughton, 1995). Again, there are differences between decile 1 schools and other schools indicated in several studies, but there is little systematic information (McNaughton, Phillips & MacDonald, 1998).

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These differences become even more noticeable after four years at school. The National Education Monitoring Project (Flockton & Crooks, 1996) indicated that approximately 20% of the national sample were below 'expected bands' on measures of decoding and comprehension. Significant differences between schools were found (decile 1-3 schools compared with other schools) and significant differences were found between Maori and non-Maori on all 10 oral and silent reading tasks and on 1 of 4 speaking tasks. Significant differences between Pacific Islands children and non-Pacific Islands children were indicated based on school comparisons with different percentages of Pacific Islands children.

These findings add weight to the earlier results from the International Association for the Evaluation of

Educational Achievement (IEA). On 3 comprehension tasks there were large significant differences between 9 year old Pakeha and Maori children, and Pakeha and Pacific Islands children. Differences were not present on a word recognition task (Wagemaker, 1992). A reanalysis of the IEA data by Wilkinson (1998) revealed significant differences between children whose home language was English versus children whose home language wasn't (many of whom were Pacific Islands children) on both comprehension and word recognition. Differences were present when socioeconomic characteristics of families were controlled for.

I have spent some time reviewing these data because there are alternatives to recognising these groups as at risk. For example, the argument can be made that the presence (of any) disparities should not distract us from seeing the overall robustness of our teaching practices. A part of that argument is that there will always be a distribution of achievement when one uses standardised or benchmarked measures, and that compared with other countries we do well. But to use this description of the obvious does not explain why the numbers of Maori and Pacific Islands children in the tail end should be so much greater than chance.

A rejoinder to this is to then argue that the relationships are primarily with poverty, for example, as indexed by decile levels of schools. Maori and Pacific Islands children are overly represented in low decile schools, and being Maori and Pacific Island is irrelevant in the presence of well-resourced teaching. Clearly, family practices, ethnicity and social context are closely interrelated. Governmental policies which make a positive difference to employment patterns, to housing, and to other aspects of the constraints on living can make a profound difference to language and literacy practices and this point is made in the LTFR. Governmental policies which provide resourcing

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for low decile schools also can make a profound difference.

But there is very little evidence to suggest that we do as good a job for these particular children under the current conditions as we should. What is necessary is that we recognise, identify and promote those aspects of teaching which will make a difference to these children. This is an important contribution of Wilkinson's (1998) reanalysis. It also provides a demonstration that there are properties of literacy instruction, which can be present in schools, which are associated with smaller differences between groups, over and above the effects of socioeconomic characteristics.

It is partly for this reason that I agree with the LTFR that 'more of the same' is not sufficient. The properties of effective instruction do not appear to be widely present for Maori and Pacific Islands children and children in low decile schools; and this is not because disparities in achievement are a recent phenomenon. It could be argued that they have arisen because of recent restructuring or a watering down of our best practices. However, the recent reforms are not to blame, although they may have exacerbated some problems. They began in the 1990s, after the most recent round of IEA studies.

Similarly, recent possible inadequacies in teaching expertise are not to blame. Certainly, it has been over 20 years since teachers received the national in-service development provided in 1976 by the Early Reading In Service Course (ERIC). But the Maori and Pacific Islands children who were identified in the low progress 9 and 14 year old groups in the IEA studies had been taught soon after that course, during the early and mid 1980s. For

example, the 14-year-olds entered schools in 1981. A review of the ERIC units reveals little focus on any special teaching for Maori and Pacific Islands children, or children in low decile schools. For some time our best practices apparently have not worked as well as they might in some contexts with significant groups of children.

Furthermore, the available international and national data suggest that differential achievement patterns at school, particularly of 'involuntary minority' groups (Ogbu, 1994) such as Maori and Pacific Islands children in New Zealand, are associated with characteristics of family practices and the intersection of these practices with school practices (Snow, Burns, & Griffen, 1998; McNaughton, 1995; Nash, 1995). That is, the issue is not one of neglect, deficit or inadequacy in family socialisation. Rather, the issues for effective schooling are to do with how we build multiple developmental pathways across sites.

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Implications for Teaching : Optimising the Transition to School

I agree with the general directions signaled by the report for more effective literacy instruction. My response to the needs for more effective instruction with Maori and Pacific Islands children in standard (English medium) classrooms in low decile schools has three inter related components.

(a) Awareness of diverse skills

One is the need to optimise the transition to school using strategies which increase the articulation between development, learning and teaching across sites (family, early childhood and Year 1 sites).

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There are a number of possible components to optimising this transition. One is the idea of teachers identifying and building on what children bring to school in the way of literacy skills. We have not fully exploited this part of effective teaching. Both formal procedures (eg School Entry Assessment) and less formal procedures (eg

nature of literacy and language as cultural and social practices.

Concepts such as these create a set to expect diversity in what children have learned in particular family activities. From these concepts a teacher knows the dimensions along which one child in a class **might** differ from another. Dimensions include not only the range in conventional knowledge, but also components of expertise in particular activities and ways of learning and teaching associated with social and cultural practices.

Alongside of this understanding of dimensions there is also a set to expect diversity within groups. In

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knowledge of the potential nature and parameters of diversity in literacy and language activities on entry to school, and have generic strategies for gaining the particular personalised characteristics of a child's strengths. Using this knowledge, teachers can devise strategies to build on children's skills and expertise.



enrolment descriptions) provide good descriptions of aspects of conventional school literacy at school entry.

But an effective strategy depends on also increasing the knowledge that teachers have about the diversity in children's literacy expertise that comes from family activities. My view is that it matters that a teacher is aware of how much they know (and do not know) about individual children's expertise in literacy, including family and community based forms and functions. Their awareness is based on having generic concepts of the

other words, because a child comes from a Pakeha family or a Samoan family, or because their parents are employed in low paid or professional occupations the generic expectation might be that the child is familiar with core Pakeha or Samoan literacy practices; but not necessarily. Children from the same cultural groups living in the same school community can differ markedly in aspects of conventional knowledge and in the experiences of particular literacy and language activities.

In summary: teachers need to have well developed generic

(b) Intensive literacy teaching.

Increasing teachers' capabilities for connecting with children's skills is one component. Another is making sure focussed and intensive teaching of literacy takes place from the beginning of school. I mean by this taking the best vehicles for teaching conventional reading and writing at school and intensifying their focus. The intensity and focus is needed to provide rich literacy instruction that guarantees early rapid progress in conventional skills and on texts. Currently, the evidence suggests that children in low decile schools make very little progress in

text reading (in English) over the first year. The evidence is also that they do not appear to make up the rate of progress compared with children in other schools.

This argument is inconsistent with some other arguments about good first teaching in Year One. For example, there is an argument that what children need is more language experience. An implication being that we should provide language (oral) experiences before systematic literacy instruction (eg Snow, Barnes & Griffen, 1998). There is no doubt that language skills in English such as vocabulary size and aspects of complexity will determine progress. But to assume that these cannot be acquired at the same time as beginning reading and writing instruction is problematic; a limited and limiting view of children's development. Moreover, children can develop their control of English through well designed reading and writing activities. Language experience activities can be functioning at the same time as literacy instruction.

A related argument is that children in low decile schools are not ready for literacy instruction. Children with few concepts about print, or with little experience with having books read to them need pre reading and writing experiences to provide a base for formal teaching. Again, this argument seems to assume that there are no bases that teachers could use. Overall, I am worried that a process similar to Matthew effects that operate within classrooms (between high and low progress groups) will operate between schools (between low and high decile schools). That is, low progress comes to be expected from the whole school, and teaching practices designed for the best possible reasons reinforce those expectations across the school. One contribution to counteracting this is the third component.

(c) Monitoring effectiveness

The third component can contribute to preventing the traps of teaching to low expectations. It is increasing the capabilities of schools to monitor, evaluate and modify

their literacy practices. Several of the LTFR recommendations are related to this need (e.g. about literacy leaders, or about monitoring). Recent reports associated with the Ministry of Education initiative Strengthening Education in Mangere and Otara have argued that schools collect a large amount of child-centred information (Robinson, Phillips, Bullard & Timperley, 1999). But they also argue that schools typically do not collate that information in ways that would enable them to know how effective the overall programme was, and how to judge whether modifications or added components make a difference. A simple example is knowing reading levels of different cohorts of six year olds, which are available immediately from the 6 year observation survey. What levels did this year's group achieve compared with last year's? How well did this year's groups do in terms of expected levels (defined in ways appropriate for the school with national indicators in mind). Schools need to make judgements about their programme in terms of progress by cohorts against internal and external benchmarks.

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Best Practice

There is a second area in the report worth commenting on here. I think the focus the LTFR places on those aspects of conventional literacy to do with alphabetic knowledge and word level strategies for solving words in text is appropriate. I do not intend to rehearse the research demonstrating that such skills as phonological recoding are a major component of early conventional literacy. However, what I do want to comment on is how this might be taught.

Appropriately, the LTFR does not make specific recommendations for how to teach, apart from pointing out the weaknesses of relying on guessing. In so doing it avoided the two major problems associated with drawing implications for teaching directly and only from evidence about the developmental significance of skill components. The first is that there is no necessary connection between needing to learn something and how it is best taught. The second is that acquiring the component skill in isolation is unlikely to lead to improvements in other aspects of reading and writing. Elley (1998) made this point in his recent discussion of New Zealand reading programmes.

Effective teaching which enables children to acquire phonological knowledge and word level strategies can occur in many different activities which go to make up different sorts of 'programmes' implemented in classrooms. Pressley, Rankin and Yokoi (1996) explored the characteristics of effective teachers of literacy in a national US sample who were in different programmes ('whole language', 'phonics' etc). There were many common features associated with all the teachers. They included creating highly literate classroom environments, with instruction for lower-order skills and higher order processes at the earliest levels. Basic skills were taught often in the context of actual reading and writing with some

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isolated skills instruction. Almost all the teachers taught decoding using a variety of procedures, overwhelmingly in the context of real reading. The authors summarise their descriptions of effective early instruction as a meshing of holistic literacy experiences and skills instruction – integrating the attractive features of whole language with explicit skills. The teachers described themselves as implementing different sorts of programmes (about half described themselves as ‘whole language’ teachers).

The variety of teaching acts available to teachers can be identified in a number of ways (McNaughton, in press). We can analyse teaching along an explicitness-implicitness dimension. This draws attention to how much information is detailed to the learner. Acts of teaching focused on phonics can be categorised along this dimension in terms of whether the information for the learner is embedded in literacy activities or foregrounded in detail. Similarly, we can categorise teaching along a second dimension - according to whether the act takes place at one extreme in connected meaningful text or at the other extreme in isolation from text.

Teaching can provide opportunities for learning phonological knowledge and decoding strategies in a number of combinations of implicit to explicit, in a variety of text (or non-text) contexts. Examples of explicit teaching outside of texts would be a specific instructional sequence for teaching vowel consonant blends or helping children to write letters that correspond to particular sounds outside of writing connected text.

Phonics teaching which is explicit and in a meaningful text might occur during guided reading when, on the basis of a child’s miscue a teacher provides information about sounds that go to make up a word. An example from process writing might be when a teacher guided a child to write a word sounding out the components as each letter is written.

Other combinations are possible. Implicit teaching in text takes place as children engage in reading and writing texts which exposes them to repeated sound-letter patterns. Implicit or incidental learning can take place from self generated feedback and inferences.

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An implication I draw from the LTFR is that we should not just assume that children will acquire word level skills and strategies implicitly through reading and writing texts. The excellent teachers in Pressley, Rankin and Yokoi’s (1996) study used a combination of explicit and implicit forms - mostly in text reading and writing. The point I want to emphasise is that teachers need to be armed with a good knowledge of the ways teaching and learning can occur and have the means for checking the opportunities they provide for learning in their classrooms. Blind faith that children will acquire the knowledge they need from immersion in rich literacy environments is not sufficient. Another form of blind faith is assuming that teaching isolated knowledge of some (basically meaningless) associations between letters and sounds is sufficient to enable children to learn to read and write connected text.



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