A perspective on New Zealand reading programmes

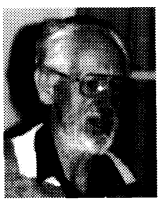
Warwick Elley

"New Zealand children are very good readers, relative to their counterparts in other countries."

I would like to address three questions, about which there seems to be long-lingering debate, and then make some suggestions about future emphases in reading instruction. My three controversial questions are:

- How well do New Zealand school children read?
- How effective are New Zealand reading programmes?
- What role should there be for phonemic awareness training in helping young readers in the early stages?

My natural self-effacing modesty prevents me from spelling out my qualifications for pretending to be authoritative on these key issues, but I can say that I have been around schools for over 60 years, that I taught my first reading class in 1949, and that I have taught and/or researched reading in many countries since then. While I was chairing the recent IEA survey of reading, I did manage to visit more than half of the 32 countries that took part and have spent many hours poring over their pupils' opinions and test scores. None of this frees me from a charge of bias, but I can claim to have changed my views as a result of these experiences. I used to believe in lots of systematic phonics teaching, and lots of grammar instruction. Not now.



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How well do New Zealand pupils read?

I have responded to this question many times, and see no reason to change my assertion that New Zealand children are very good readers, relative to their counterparts in other countries. By and large, they read quickly, they comprehend what they read, they have favourite authors, they talk confidently about books, they know their way around libraries, and they love to listen to stories. But these are just personal impressions. Where is my evidence?

IEA Surveys of Reading

First, I cite the IEA surveys. Surely all those connected with reading instruction have heard it said that New Zealand 14 year olds had the highest reading scores of all 15 countries that participated in the 1970-71 IEA survey (Thorndike, 1973) - well ahead of America, England, Scotland, Australia - all countries our government tends to admire when looking for ways to reform. We also had the best scores in comprehension and appreciation of literature. That, you say, is ancient history. However, the regular nation-wide checks on reading comprehension and vocabulary levels, conducted between 1968 and 1990, by NZCER, show virtually no change in our standards since then (see Elley 1993). Whatever we are doing well in 1970 seems to be just as effective in the 1990s.

Some critics claim that such results are irrelevant to current debates as New Zealand changed to a meaning-based Ready-to-Read phase, with only a minor role for phonics and "Look and Say" too late to affect those 14 year-olds in 1970. NO so. Myrtle Simpson wrote in her 1962 Department Handbook that phonetics had long been discredited when she brought in the first little readers. Furthermore, Marie Clay wrote in 1976, that "It has been unfashionable in New Zealand to teach phonics for the last 30 years" (Clay, 1976).

Language experience was common in the 1950s and book

experience was popular before Ready to Read began (1983).

What about the most recent IEA survey in 1990-1991? Certainly we are no longer top dog, at least when

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assessed by means of comprehension of extended prose, under test conditions. However, New Zealand 14 year-olds did have the highest scores of all English-speaking countries, and fourth highest average over all 32 countries (Elley, 1992).

That is still something to be pleased about. Furthermore, we had the most pupils in the top quarter. We produce more good readers than any other country.

At the 9 year level, our pupils were rated in sixth place, but only Finland's pupils were clearly ahead. The official results put USA second, at age 9, but that fact is clearly debatable because of a serious bias in their sample, which only emerged after we went to press. The US technical report shows that about 15% of their sample did not cooperate, and they came from the low socio-economic levels. A check on those left in the sample showed that 47% of them had fathers with university degrees (US Dept of Education, 1995, p.32). The expected figure should be about 30-35%. So the US sample of 9 year-olds, that achieved so very well, was not a fair cross-section. New Zealand was squeaky clean on its sampling, as were most of the other countries.

So, we may not do so well in Maths, but by the criteria of IEA, our children are very good readers. England did not participate in 1990, but they did so last year, using the same reading tests, and their pupils were well down on the international list. Yet we look to their model to reform our reading curriculum!

Comments of Overseas Experts

My second source of evidence about the quality of our children's reading comes from visiting reading specialists. Professor John Guthrie, former Research Director of IRA, spent 6 months here in 1981, studying the reading scene. He claims that Kiwi children excel in reading achievement, and our adults value reading highly and do it often (Guthrie, 1981). Professor Alan Purves, Director of the US National English Language Center, spent a year in New Zealand schools, and claimed that we were the most literate nation in the world. Similar comments have been made by Ken and Yetta Goodman, by Professor Arthur Goodfriend, by the US Department of Education, by the writers of Newsweek, (Dec, 1991) and by hundreds of teachers and school principals who have visited this country's schools in recent years.

I hear similar comments, too, from education authorities in England, Singapore, Brunei, Australia, South Pacific, Canada, and other places who hire our teachers when they travel overseas. Our reading teachers are very popular elsewhere. They must be well trained! And everyone seems to want our Reading Recovery scheme.

What about the regular criticisms we hear about our low reading standards? If we are so good at reading, how can Jenny Chamberlain write in North and South (1993) that New Zealand's a "illiteracy is a huge national problem bubbling away under the lid of our complacency"? How can Caroll du Chateau write in Metro about the myth of our high literacy levels? Why do people keep claiming that our reading programmes are failing because one in four "needs" Reading Recovery? Why did Ruth Richardson claim that we have a literacy crisis?

It is easy to say that these commentators have a personal or political reason for sounding off. We have always had critics of literacy levels, ever since Plato. I have been collecting the statements of Kiwi critics from as far back as 1916. There never was a golden age of literacy, when Chambers of Commerce congratulated the schools on the fine job they do of turning out highly literate youngsters.

But let's face it - reading is not easy to learn if you don't have regular access to good books and

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helpful adults. And that is exactly the problem I see in the Decile 1 schools I have been working in lately. These are the children who scored in the lower levels of our IEA study, who provide the ammunition for the recent Los Angeles Times reporter who wrote in a feature article (May 4, 1997) that there is real trouble in New Zealand, the 'Mecca of Reading'. These are children who come from bookless homes, they watch TV for 5 hours a day, they have parents who rarely read, or come near the school, and they see little point in bettering themselves. Some of them are first generation New Zealanders, who speak another language at home. Most have dedicated, competent teachers, but the school cannot easily make up for five years of neglect. More on that later.

My point is that most of our critics are professional wordsmiths, who deal with words every day, who have not been exposed to the full spectrum of New Zealand children, and who cannot believe that most kiwi kids are good readers - relative to their counterparts overseas. They have not seen how Johnny reads elsewhere.

How Effective are New Zealand Reading Programmes?

If we have a significant group of children who don't take easily to reading, then may be we should change our programmes? Is there a

better way? Personally, I think our reading programmes are excellent, and the principles behind them are sound and defensible. However, we should keep our eyes open for new ideas, and look closely at the claims of those who do it differently.

What is the evidence to support our kiwi style of teaching reading? First, let's clarify what a kiwi reading programme looks like - in the primary school. At the risk of over-simplifying, I would describe it as a child-centred, book-based programme, which stresses the search for meaning, at the outset. The main components of our methodology are:

- Language Experience in the Early Stages
- Lots of Story Reading Aloud by the Teacher
- Shared Reading of Big Books, and Lots of Talk
- Daily Silent Reading - both Guided and Independent
- Daily Writing, with and by the Children.

There are other features of typical programmes, such as peer tutoring, group reading, taped readalongs, and the like. But the contrast with most overseas programmes is to be found in the assumption that children do most of the work for themselves. We provide them with high-interest good quality books, with repetitive patterned language, lots of scaffolding (or adult support) and expect them to work out the letter-sound correspondences, and other word attack skills, as and when they need them. Overseas, this approach is less practicable, as children are taught mostly in whole class groups with a single textbook. They are often reading out of their depth, away from their level of challenge. This means that they more often face series of unfamiliar words and therefore need more systematic strategies for decoding, at the word level. It is no wonder that overseas teachers often feel the need for explicitly teaching as many of the rules as they can, beyond the context of a story, and children

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expect the teacher to tell them how to do it. Our kids learn to work it all out by themselves, using meaning cues, pictures, memory, analogy, syntax, phonics and any other cues they can find. And if the matching of pupil to book is right, and the teaching support is right, children do acquire their own individual strategies successfully.

How do we know it works? Ask most New Zealand junior teachers, and they will tell you it does. But I can quote more objective findings. Let's return to the IEA Survey again.

In one analysis we contrasted the methods of the 10 high-scoring countries with those of the 10 lowest scoring countries, after adjusting for differences in their social and economic development (Elley 1992). In other words we compared the countries whose pupils did better than expected, with those who did worse. Several key differences, relevant to my case appeared. It was clear that the countries with the best readers:

- Had larger school libraries
- Had larger class libraries
- Spent more time on silent reading in class
- Borrowed more library books
- Had teachers read aloud more often
- Stressed enjoyment of reading as a main aim.

These variables are all consistent with the view that book-based programmes are effective. Countries which stressed phonics were not in the vanguard.

Furthermore, when we asked the 9 year-olds in each country how to become a good reader, the contrast between the high scoring nations and the low scoring ones was very revealing. To make the contrast more telling, we focused on the brighter children, those 5% of readers who scored highest in each country. Most said that to become a good reader, you have to enjoy it. However the best readers in the top nations also stressed these factors:

- Having lots of good books around
- Having a lively imagination
- Learning many new words.

By contrast, the good readers in the low scoring countries had a very different picture of the process. They stressed:

- You have to learn to sound out the words
- You have to have lots of drill at the hard things
- You have to be told how to do it.

Which of these two contrasting sets of practices sounds more like a Kiwi reading programme? If a strong phonic emphasis leads to better reading, it is hard to see why the countries where phonics features prominently in the children's thinking produce so many poor readers.

Another source of evidence comes from follow-up study I undertook in New Zealand schools, after the IEA results were published. We identified the 20 schools (in the New Zealand sample of 177) where the pupils had achieved best, relative to their socio-economic status. What were they doing that enabled them to lift their achievement in reading about expectation? Did they have a secret to tell the rest of us?

I visited each of these schools personally - they ranged from Auckland to Dunedin, from small country schools to large state and private schools. I interviewed the principal and teachers of the relevant grade levels, looking for distinctive factors that accounted for their excellence. It was a very encouraging and exhilarating exercise. What did we find?

Teachers of the top 20 classes:

- Were all committed to a whole language style of programme.

- Had all seen the LARIC programme and supported its message
- Read to their class every day
- Had time for SSR every day
- Had frequent discussions about books
- Set reading for homework nearly every day
- Were enthusiastic about reading
- Had well-stocked class libraries
- Had regular classroom help from parents.

By contrast, the 20 lowest scoring classes (which I did not visit) reported in teachers' and pupils' questionnaires that they

- Spent more time on phonics (than the top classes)
- Spent more time watching TV at home
- Had more ESL pupils
- Borrowed fewer books from libraries
- Had fewer books at home.

These findings only confirm what we found in the 1980's when we assessed the impact of the LARIC Programme in 74 Christchurch primary classrooms (Elley, 1985). We assessed the children's reading comprehension, their vocabulary, their research skills and their attitudes, at the beginning of the year, and again at the end. Which classes showed up best? Those whose teachers:

- Supported LARIC principles
- Used shared reading the most
- Read daily to their classes
- Allowed more time for silent reading
- Used listening posts regularly
- Spent less time on phonics and round robin reading.

You may begin to see why I think our reading programmes are effective. I could elaborate at this point on our recent literacy projects in developing countries. I have now evaluated the impact of Kiwi style book-based programmes in Fiji, Niue, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and South Africa, and consistently found large improvements in children's reading, writing, listening, and vocabulary and in their

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attitudes. In Sri Lanka, last year, the children who shared their way through high-interest illustrated "Sunshine" books, for 20 minutes a day, during 1995, made three times the gains of those who followed a traditional textbook. Their writing skills were streets ahead (Elley & Foster, 1996). Last month I saw similarly exciting progress in Brunei classrooms, where teachers have also adopted a Kiwi programme. These Third World projects also provide good evidence of the success of our style of reading instruction. They seem to work in all cultures, with local adaptations, of course. A programme that capitalises on children's love of a good story, exploited successfully with shared reading strategies, embraces many more variables than are found in any artificial Phonological recoding exercise.

And while I am referring to the international scene, it is heartening to see a growing number of US studies which have evaluated shared reading and literature-based approaches, and found them very effective. We are including them in the revision of our reading text on learning to read (Smith & Elley 1997).

How should we respond to the needs of the pupils at risk in our classes? What role is there for phonemic awareness training for those who are disadvantaged through lack of access to good books and supportive adults?

Personally, I have been following with interest the research on phonemic awareness training, and the claims made by its proponents. It is clear from the research that:

(i) Young children can be trained in phonemic awareness - to become sensitive to the sounds and syllables of words, to identify rhymes, and alliteration, and to delete sounds from words, etc.

(ii) Children who come to school with such sensitivity to sounds in words tend to acquire reading skills quickly.

Therefore, say the supporters, we should train children in phonemic awareness at the outset, and they will learn to read more easily. Who could quarrel with such lucid logic? I do.

First, it is not surprising that children who are trained in phonemic tapping and sound analysis exercises actually show some improvements in these tasks. Tom Nicholson's Auckland experiments with 5 year-olds (Nicholson, 1994) showed clear increases in performance in blending, segmentation, sound deletion and the like over 5 weeks. Children tend to learn what we train them in. Skinner was even able to teach pigeons to play ping-pong.

The real issue is whether this is a good use of their time? I would argue that most New Zealand children will learn what they need of these kinds of skills from a rich programme of shared reading, incorporating lots of songs, rhymes, repeated favourite stories and frequent opportunities for inventive spelling. If the teacher makes frequent use of what Courtney Cazden calls "instructional detours" during a shared story or verse, to draw attention to words with the same sounds or initial letters as words in the current book, then artificial exercises outside the context of a real reading session will be unnecessary. Marilyn Adams (1990) puts it well. (She is the current American guru, who promotes a strong decoding emphasis in USA reading programmes). She points out that 'Don Holdaway's approach to whole language is packed with activities for developing phonological awareness, orthographical knowledge and spelling-sound relationships' (p.422). So American kids

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may need special phonemic training, but ours get it in shared reading and daily writing.

Another concern I have about special, out-of-context training, is that it gives children a misleading view of the reading process. Children who are read to daily learn important truths about the fantasy and excitement there can be in reading a book. Children who study isolated blends and phoneme deletion tasks are learning something else - which still has to be integrated into real reading. Most New Zealand children say they enjoy reading. That is an outcome we should cherish and cling to.

The second conclusion about the research on phonemic awareness is that children who are phonemically aware when they begin to read, tend to learn faster. This research is both correlational and experimental. The correlational studies show that children who do well on phonemic awareness tasks in the early stages of learning to read, for whatever reason, catch on quickly. Of course that is probably because the children who are phonemically aware have had lots of opportunities to come to grips with all the basic concepts about print. They come from literate homes. The phonemic skills are a consequence of emergent reading practices. We cannot argue from correlation to causation.

However, the experimental studies should give us pause for thought. A set of studies in Scandinavia, England, USA, Australia and New Zealand has set out to show that 4 and 5-year-olds who are trained in phonemic exercises "get off to a better start", as Tom Nicholson puts it. If this is true, we should take careful note. Could this be the solution for the non-readers in our Decile 1 schools?

In a typical study, "pre-literate" youngsters are tested on simple phonemic exercises. Then some of them are trained to identify and analyse sounds, using games and practice drills. They are artificial exercises, not meaningful reading sessions.

Subsequently the children are retested on the phonemic skills, to

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see if they have improved. They are also tested on word reading of familiar and unfamiliar words, to see if their special training helped them 'learn to read' faster than control groups.

For those who wish to learn more about such studies, there is a useful introduction in Ken Blaiklock's article in the NZRA Reading Forum (Blaiklock, 1994). He points out (p.37) that two of the most widely quoted studies are flawed, because the researchers did not control for initial differences in the children's reading abilities. Such differences could account for the faster learning of the phonemic training group.

In the famous UK study by Bradley and Bryant (1983), the

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authors used only a very coarse measure to control for initial ability, and made no attempt to control for differences in age, which can be crucial in such young children.

Blaiklock's own longitudinal study of 29 children found only low correlations between phonemic skills and word reading skills, while Nicholson's experimental studies in Auckland (Nicholson 1994) appeared to me to show that children training in phonemic awareness skills will improve their ability to spell pseudo-words, but there were no significant benefits in word reading, letter naming, book level, book concepts, or writing vocabulary. So far, I am not impressed enough by the local research to want to try it out myself. And even if some of the overseas experiments prove more successful, I would still be sceptical.

The problem is that New Zealand programmes are so different that we cannot generalise from the poor progress made by the control groups in other countries. Think about it:

- New Zealand children start at 5 years: US and Scandinavians start at 6 or 7
- Kiwis learn with Shared Reading and Language Experience: children in other countries rarely do
- Kiwis do daily writing from the outset: others rarely do
- Kiwi teachers tailor their teaching to individuals: most teachers overseas teach whole classes.

The point is that New Zealand children learn what they need incidentally, from frequent encounters with suitably patterned, absorbing reading materials, read and re-read for consolidation. If US or Scandinavian children who are trained in phonemic skills do better than local control groups, it may be that the control groups in those countries are not learning as much as children in our control groups would.

The case of phonemic training is not proven, as nobody has shown to my knowledge, that children training in such skills learn to read real meaningful extended prose, which is what kiwi kids do well. Word recognition skills and spelling of pseudo-words are hardly good indicators of real reading. There is

much more to this debate, but I wish to finish on a note of reconciliation.

Marilyn Adams argues strongly for phonemic training, but listen to this quotation. "...phonological awareness, letter recognition facility, spelling-sound relations and individual words must be developed in concert with real reading and real writing" (Adams, 1990, p.442). Perhaps the gulf is bridgeable!

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The way ahead

How then, should we respond to the needs of our under-achieving children, those from bookless, non-literate backgrounds?

Personally, I still maintain, with Don Holdaway, that more intensive doses of shared reading in school can help compensate for missed years of bedside reading at home. Whether the problem is different language, or a lack of book concepts, there is no substitute for a rich diet of fantasy stories to build up their language and whet their appetites. So I would still want our young teachers to be well versed in the basic components of the balanced kiwi reading programme. The children at risk need more attention to real reading, talking and writing than to artificial exercises, if they are to want to read. If they want to read they will search for strategies to solve their own problems. And in my experience, if certain children are not interested in learning to read naturally, with high-interest books, they will be even less responsive to phonemic drills.

(i) One promising initiative is Alan Duff's Books in Homes scheme for Decile 1 schools. It now donates free books for all pupils in 125 such schools. The assumption is that ownership of books is critical, more so than mere access to books. Most already have

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access to good libraries. I have been working in 30 of these schools and am impressed with the response of pupils, teachers and parents alike. Some teachers say it is the best thing that has happened to their schools in years. Pupils are reading the books and sharing them with family, and most believe it has given children a boost. The books come with a lot of promotional hype, from local sports heroes, community leaders and book people. That too, seems to be an enlightened strategy.

(ii) Another solution is the publishing of more books designed for Maori and Pacific Island children. The majority of children in the Duffy schools are Polynesian, and most of their teachers want more books tailor-made to their language and culture. We have some, but not enough.

(iii) The research findings on the benefits of Taped Readalongs, while children read the book, are also impressive. The Rainbow Programme in Nelson, for instance, has generated very good results, and there is supporting evidence from overseas.

(iv) Beginning teachers should also know about the benefits of peer tutoring, of TV subtitles, of parent help in reading with children in the classroom, of Reading Recovery, of Pause, Prompt and Praise, amongst others.

Such measures will help alleviate the problem of reluctant readers - but they will not produce a whole nation of avid readers overnight. There are too many counter-attractions to the book these days. And many of our most intractable cases are beyond the help of schools as we know them. We can support disadvantaged children with free books and free meals and emotional security during the school day, but in a period of our history when the rich are getting richer and the illiterate go to the wall, it will take much political change to solve all our reading problems. My plea is that we do not abandon tried and true reading programmes for artificial schemes of dubious short-term value. Our child-centered book-based schemes with shared reading and writing have been adopted in many countries and found to be very effective. Let's hold on to our strengths, and celebrate what we do well.

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