

New Zealand Reading Programmes in an International Context: Reflections on the IEA Reading-Literacy Survey¹

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It is no secret that New Zealand teachers have, for several generations, quite unashamedly followed an idealistic whole language approach in the teaching of reading. It is an approach which is strongly supported by our government agencies, by our teacher-training institutions, by our advisers and consultants, by producers of school reading materials, and by the vast majority of teachers. In this talk I would like to address two questions:

- 1 What shape does whole language teaching take in New Zealand?
- 2 How well does it stand up to the recent research findings from IEA²?

For some years, I have been claiming that New Zealand teachers introduce children to literacy somewhat differently from teachers in other countries. After four years with IEA, working with reading educators in 32 countries, I still believe this - but the differences are narrowing. If I were to say that others are now catching up, I would be prejudging the issue.

What is distinctive about New Zealand reading programmes?

As I see it, 'whole language' in our country means a strongly-held belief that children learn to read and write best if they place their emphasis squarely on meaning at the outset. It means learning to read and write in real, natural situations, calculated to foster a long-lasting love of reading.

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² The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.

It means that the cornerstones of good reading programmes are:

- 1 language experience;
- 2 shared reading with blown-up books;
- 3 regular story reading aloud by teachers;
- 4 frequent silent reading of self-selected materials;
- 5 guided silent reading with small group teaching of comprehension strategies;
- 6 regular discussion of good books;
- 7 an early emphasis on process writing; and
- 8 assessment mostly by miscue analysis.

What it does *not* include is the systematic teaching of phonics or phonological recoding skills; it does not include graded basal readers, or workbook exercises or flash cards, or ditto sheets or frequent written comprehension questions, or separate vocabulary-building exercises, or competency tests of basic skills. Nor does it mean whole class teaching. New Zealand children are mostly taught in small groups or as individuals.

This brief summary may provide some of the flavour, if not the detail, of our programmes. Of course, there are thousands of teachers around the world who support such a distinctive view of reading and how to teach it, but I would argue that New Zealand is unique in that our teachers have followed such a formula, more or less, since the 1960s, with strong support from the authorities, and a widespread consensus amongst teachers. It is true that there are some academics in the universities who are sceptical and I used to be one of them. It is true, too, that we have our share of critics in business and industry who complain about our literacy deficiencies. Nevertheless, the vast majority of teachers and teacher trainers preach and teach whole language principles. In a recent survey of 20 high-achieving schools last year, I did not find one with a different philosophy.

As a self-confessed data-based researcher, I would love to say that our reading philosophy is derived from a firm basis of experimental research by our best scholars. Alas, no! Certainly, Dame Marie Clay's Reading Recovery programme fits that formula, as does the growing practice of peer tutoring. But most of the inspiration for our teaching styles emanates from

gifted individuals, rather than from research journals. Indeed our methods predated the *Reading Research Quarterly* and the *Journal of Reading Behaviour*.

For instance, Sylvia Ashton-Warner is credited with developing the language experience approach in New Zealand Maori schools in the 1950s. It worked for her, it worked for Maori children from book-starved homes and, despite her own protests of official rejection and neglect on her home territory, her biographers insist that our government officials actually supported her as well as they could. By the early 1960s, most junior school teachers had child-centred programmes, where children's experience was paramount, where excursions were common and home-made books were plentiful.

Don Holdaway was another gifted teacher who had a major influence on our programmes back in the 1960s. He is credited with the shared book, or what he called cooperative book method - where children and teacher work through a story together several times, using a blown-up book, exploring and learning together, at the point of high interest. Children learned without threat or anxiety and without the need for graded vocabulary. Again, his convictions stemmed from classroom observations, not research journals.

Many New Zealand bibliophiles have enthused over the virtues of regular story reading - silently or aloud - and we have long been blessed with a talented group of children's authors and a government policy which promotes good authentic literature through our elementary school reading books and journals. High profile authors like Margaret Mahy, Joy Cowley, Tessa Duder and Dorothy Butler are regular visitors to schools, and household names amongst teachers - but the benefits of their wares in regular story reading have long been articles of faith rather than products of controlled research - until recently.

The emphasis on meaning and interest from the start, rather than decoding, was again attributable to reading specialists such as Myrtle Simpson and Ruth Trevor and Don Holdaway in the 1960s. Phonics had had its heyday in earlier generations. In 1962, the *Departmental Handbook on Reading* - our teachers' bible - was preaching the familiar Goodman gospel that

children come to reading easily and happily in a classroom where everything has been planned to stimulate their natural desire to read and write. The purpose of the handbook was to show teachers how to arrange classrooms so that children are stimulated to teach themselves. Meanwhile, exercises practised in isolation from real purposes were roundly condemned. Decoding skills were to be learned only in context.

There was one feature of our reading programmes which was subjected to experimental testing. New Zealanders start school at 5, on their 5th birthday. During the 1930s depression, however, many schools closed their doors to 5-year-olds, as an economic measure. The researchers of the day recognised an ideal opportunity to test the value of the 5-year start. So they followed up two cohorts of children, those who started at 5 and those who started at 6. What did they find? By Grade 6 (what we call Standard 4), there was no difference between the 5-year-old starters and the 6-year-old starters. The extra year was of no benefit.

So what happened? The authorities totally ignored the research findings, as well as those from the U.S. and continued with the more expensive policy of a 5 year start. Such was the healthy respect for research in New Zealand.

Time does not permit me to elaborate on the positive emotional quality of our reading classrooms, or the comments of the many overseas educators who have visited and observed our classrooms. I could quote you figures on the time teachers spend daily on shared reading and story reading and silent reading and process writing. I could quote the results of surveys which confirm my contention that New Zealand teachers generally approve of whole language principles, and claim to base their programmes on good children's literature. Perhaps another time. What I would like to do here is try to answer the natural question - How effective are these reading programmes? Do they work for all, or for most children?

How effective are New Zealand reading programmes?

One source of information on the effectiveness of our reading programmes is to be found in the IEA findings. As you know, IEA is an international

research body which conducts surveys of achievement on large cross-sections of children of comparable age in its member countries, using the same array of assessments, given under the same conditions. Such tests don't tell us *everything* about the quality of children's reading, but they can tell us a lot.

In 1970-71, Bob Thorndike chaired an IEA study of reading comprehension in 15 countries. New Zealand participated at the 14-year age level, and at the pre-university level. To our genuine surprise, New Zealand showed the highest mean score in reading at both levels. Surely we must have been doing something right. Very few children were not competent readers at the end of elementary school. About the same time, Alan Purves chaired an IEA project on interpretation of literature. Again New Zealand showed the highest means at both age levels. Once again, the news was good for our teachers. That was over 20 years ago. How does the record stand now?

In 1988 I was asked to chair another IEA project, assessing what we chose to call Reading-Literacy. This was a larger undertaking covering 32 countries assessing the 9 and 14 age levels, and included a wider range of reading outcomes - narrative, expository, documents, plus word recognition tests and questionnaires about reading habits and teaching practices. The survey took place in 1991 and the main findings were revealed in a book titled, *How in the world do students read?* - which is distributed by the International Reading Association (IRA).

What have New Zealand educators learned from this massive study of 210,000 students? Briefly, we have learned a great deal - more than I expected and I can only scratch the surface today. Personally, I learned how challenging it is to secure agreement amongst professionals in many countries in defining, testing and interpreting the results of reading assessments - and how satisfying it is when that agreement is reached. And I am much more sympathetic about the difficulties faced by the United Nations agencies than I used to be.

More importantly, we learned that our students' reading achievement levels are still very high - but not as high as those in Finland. At the 14 year level, where New Zealand had performed so well in 1970, our students had

the fourth highest mean, very similar to those of Sweden and France, but clearly lower than Finland's, in every domain of reading. Further analysis showed that we had the most good readers (in the top quarter), but also the largest standard deviation. From such findings, we can infer that our programmes seem to develop high levels of literacy achievement for many but not all of our students. There is a group at the low end of the distribution who are not coping well in reading. Who are they? And why are they struggling?

When we looked at our results for various sub-groups, we found three surprising results. First, at both age levels, 9 years and 14, New Zealand had the largest gap between our ESL students and our mainstream English-speaking students. In other words, many of those who are not coping well tend to be Polynesian children who have migrated to New Zealand from the South Pacific in the past two decades. Nearly 5 percent of our population are in this category. They come from Western Samoa, Niue, Cook Islands, Tonga; many speak their first language at home, and they have no strong literacy traditions. One might argue that we should teach them by different methods, and that is a logical suggestion. However, the typical New Zealand teacher claims otherwise. What they need is more appropriate reading material - suited to their culture and language. After all, there is very good evidence, from South Pacific countries that island children do learn quickly from a diet of high-interest illustrated story books. I say it is very good evidence as I was involved in collecting it in our Fiji and Niue Book Floods. It is probably premature to argue that our reading programmes do not fit the needs of our migrants. But we certainly need to develop more suitable reading material for them.

A second finding, totally unexpected, was that we have extraordinarily large gender gaps at age 9, favouring girls. As in all countries, girls achieve at higher levels than boys, but in New Zealand the gap is the second largest of all countries. Why? There are numerous theories around. For instance, our elementary schools are dominated by women teachers, who are excellent role models for girls, but not for boys. There is a grain of truth here, but the proportion of women teachers in New Zealand is much lower than in many European countries which had smaller gender gaps. The overall trends did support this view, but the effects were not strong.

Another theory is that our literature-based programmes might appeal to girls more than to boys. Perhaps the boys need more structured, systematic approaches. Possibly, but many of our best readers are boys. The evidence on this issue is incomplete, but has given us cause for thought. There is a recent call for more non-fiction in our programmes.

A more interesting hypothesis relates again to the starting age. The highest scoring countries, surprisingly, begin reading instruction at age 7. Those countries which begin formal instruction in reading at age 5, such as New Zealand, all had very large gender gaps, favouring girls, in the elementary school. The same pattern was found in the earlier IEA study. We all seem to have many under-achieving boys. One can envision a scenario where many boys are introduced to instruction at age 5, before they are ready, when they are still in the rowdy and restless phase; they rapidly realise they are not much good at reading, and their deficiency becomes part of their self-concept. Such feelings are hard to shake off. I have been putting this theory to experienced teachers and comparing it with other survey research, and find increasing support for it. Of course, it would not be easy to change such a long-standing policy, which is so firmly entrenched in our culture. But we could do more to sensitise teachers to the need to make better judgements about when children are ready to begin. That is part of my agenda. Meanwhile, we have too many boys who fail in reading.

The third unexpected finding was the high incidence of TV viewing in our student population. Again, our 9-year-olds' viewing hours were second only to those of the U.S. Why is this important? It is no surprise to most of us to see that in nearly every country, high TV viewing goes with low reading levels, and vice-versa. Our best readers watch little TV; our worst readers are addicted to the box. Back in 1970, this was not a problem for New Zealanders. We had only one channel, we had restricted viewing hours, and we had very few children's programmes. More students in those days found escape in a good book, and it showed up in high achievement levels. Not so today. About 15 percent of our 9 year olds watch for over 5 hours per day, and they are the students who crowd into the tail end of our distributions. TV must accept the blame for some of our low achievers.

Of course, not all TV viewing is bad, but a school reading programme

designed to foster a love of reading cannot be considered entirely successful if more than half of our students do not read regularly at home, as the figures suggest. There is a clear message here, that we must continue to allow more time for reading at school.

Another unanticipated finding was the fact that in Scandinavia, and several other small European countries, the best readers watched 3-4 hours of TV per day. In these cases, the heavy viewers scored better than the light viewers. Why? On further investigation, we were led to an intriguing finding. Such countries import many TV programmes from the U.S. and Britain, and show them with subtitles in their own language. So children in Finland and Sweden and Norway are getting lots of practice at reading high interest material, with visual supports, under speeded conditions, and apparently improving their proficiency. This lends strong support to the comprehensible input hypothesis. Those countries who do not dub their imported TV programmes are missing a golden opportunity to reap an incidental benefit of TV.

Of course, there is now a small but promising body of experimental evidence to support the linguistic benefits of captioned television, but I'm getting off the track. Suffice it to say that our TV authorities now run a daily children's programme which capitalises on this research.

What else have we learned from the IEA survey about the effectiveness of our reading programmes? In line with our diet of good literature philosophy, there was supportive evidence - both nationally and internationally, for the following policies:

- 1 Large school libraries are associated with higher achievement;
- 2 Large classroom libraries are also linked to better performance;
- 3 More time spent on silent reading in school is characteristic of high achieving programmes;
- 4 More time spent on story-reading aloud by teachers is also positively indicated.

This is very comforting news for New Zealand teachers, but not necessarily the last word on the value of these policies. We do have other evidence.

We could not test the virtues of language experience or shared reading in an international survey, as these terms were neither known nor understood in most places. This was one of several disappointments for me. However, it was interesting to note that the mean scores for Singapore children were unexpectedly high, relative to their socio-economic levels. It was interesting because Singapore is another country which now introduces its students to reading with book-based programmes, shared reading, language experience and book floods. Indeed I was pleased to be involved in this change in their national policy back in 1984, and their high achievement levels in literacy were a major source of comfort to the Singapore Minister of Education. The Singapore results were especially interesting also as over three-quarters of their pupils were taught from the outset in English, and tested in English, which was their second language. That is a surprise. Conventional wisdom has it that children learn better if they are taught first in their home language. It must take a very powerful methodology to overcome this handicap. In other words, there is nothing to suggest here that shared reading and language experiences are ineffective, and much to suggest that they produce many high achieving readers.

There is considerably more to be gleaned from our huge IEA data base. For instance, it was encouraging to discover that Maori children, who now make up 21 percent of our elementary school population, are achieving at levels well ahead of all children in all the developing countries, and also in several OECD countries. Yet they are regularly berated for under-achievement when compared with other ethnic groups in New Zealand. In these respects, an international study can be most revealing. Other countries provide a framework, a backdrop against which our results can be interpreted. As IEA advocates claim, the world provides us with an exciting international laboratory, with potential to reveal the unexpected and to identify new insights. Surely we all have much to learn from each other.

I cannot leave our data base without one more finding which intrigued me. This was based on the question which asked students in all countries to express their view on how to become a good reader. In this analysis we focused on the responses of good readers (the top 20 percent). In the high-achieving countries these high-scoring 9 year olds more often referred to such activities as 'Having many good books around' and 'Having a lively

imagination'. In the low-scoring countries, the good readers believe they became competent because they learned 'to sound out the words' and 'to have lots of drills of the hard things'. Such programmes sound anything but exciting. It is probably true that most children will learn to read by any reasonable method. However, this finding suggests that in countries where reading is typically seen by students as a lively, interesting activity, conducted in schools with many good books, most children will succeed. Where it is seen as an unexciting series of structured exercises, many will not. This, again, is surely good news for the idealists.

Conclusion

I have focused here on the IEA findings and how they bear on some of our favoured reading policies in New Zealand. We have identified areas of strength and of weakness, and developed some ideas on where to put our emphasis in future. When put alongside our other growing body of data about the effectiveness of shared reading, story reading, and SSR - we see no good reason to change direction. Most of our findings do confirm our teachers' beliefs in whole language principles.

As an eclectic elementary teacher of the 1950s, I have personally been persuaded by our own data, that high-interest book-based programmes, which appeal to children's love of a good story, offer a firm basis for reading acquisition, that children do learn much incidentally as they read, and are read to and talk about what they read. We have seen this happen, with evidence from the whites of our children's eyes, and in the teachers' expressed enthusiasm, as well as the results of our analyses of variance. We have seen it work dramatically in our book-flood studies in the rural schools in Fiji, in the orderly, crowded urban classrooms of Singapore, in the liberal, child-centred classrooms of New Zealand - and last month I read about the way it is working in the tiny Islamic nation of Brunei. For the past three years, my friend, Dr Ng Seok Moi, has been successfully implementing a book-based integrated language programme in a very traditional and sceptical teaching environment - with very pleasing results. Barbara Moore, Sereima Lumelume and many others are carrying on the same tradition in the South Pacific.

I believe that there are many developing countries where a similar formula would be effective, where young people might acquire their literacy in a natural and enjoyable way capitalising on their instinctive love of narrative. Capture their interest through fantasy, humour, conflict, rhyme, adventure, fun, novelty or surprise - and learning comes easily.

We do not have all the answers yet by any means, but the improvements that are already possible in the lifting of literacy levels in the third world should not be neglected. Our IEA survey showed that there continues to be a huge gulf in literacy achievement between children in the developed and the developing worlds. If the International Reading Association is to live up to its charter, we cannot ignore these differences. There is much more to be done.

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