

**PRIMARY TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON FINDINGS FROM
PROGRESS IN INTERNATIONAL LITERACY STUDY (PIRLS) 2005-2006**

**A report to the NZEI National Executive based on NZEI primary teacher focus group
discussions in New Plymouth, Hamilton and Nelson, October 2008**

Background

In May 2008, NZEI National President Frances Nelson hosted a symposium including representatives from Government education agencies, literacy and assessment experts and school principals. Priorities for literacy were identified by individual participants at the symposium.

In October 2008, NZEI facilitated discussion by three focus groups of primary teachers on the results of an international assessment study, Progress in International Literacy Study (PIRLS) (2005/2006). The priorities for literacy identified at the May symposium were also part of the focus group discussion.

The purpose of both the symposium and the focus group discussions was the same. NZEI wanted:

- to have an open and frank discussion on why the results from PIRLS 05/06 are as they are
- to explore New Zealand's results considering a range of possible factors, for example infrastructural, organisational and teaching practices from broad perspectives
- to identify areas where further investigation or change is required.

The questions which framed the discussion were:

- Does PIRLS reinforce lessons we have learned from our own extended evidence base?
- How does it relate to other major New Zealand research findings?
- Which findings do the PIRLS results reinforce?
- What results appears counter-intuitive?
- How can we ensure improvement so that all students meet their learning potential?
- What further opportunities can be identified? What needs to be changed?

NZEI was not seeking consensus, although it was expected that consensus may be evident on some issues. Neither was NZEI seeking a 'silver bullet'. NZEI wanted to:

- create teacher confidence in strategies and programmes that are currently in use
- provide a realistic picture of literacy strategies - what teachers do and why
- acknowledge the contribution made by teachers and empower them
- identify issues that require further investigation.

NZEI believed current literacy practices in New Zealand schools were on the right track and was not advocating wholesale change. NZEI wanted to listen to make sure its position continued to be based on robust evidence and good practice.

This paper collates the responses from two of the main teacher discussion activities at the focus groups' meetings. The activities sought to get classroom teachers' perspectives on priorities for literacy teaching and learning and to provide advice for NZEI's National Executive.

It is appropriate for NZEI to collect data on how primary teachers perceive the findings of PIRLS 05/06. It is equally important to ensure that the perceptions of a relatively small group of primary teachers are not seen as defining the situation for all New Zealand primary teachers. The comments on literacy priorities and the advice provided by teachers give an initial indication of where further information and/or action is needed and where a more systematic review of the issues underlying the teachers' responses is required.

Acknowledgements

The participating teachers appreciated being given the opportunity and time to discuss their issues and where necessary to seek advice. The teachers participated in a frank, open manner: they were prepared to listen and reflect on the evidence and to apply an intellectual analysis to their own classroom and school experiences.

Alison Gilmore (Canterbury University) and Megan Chamberlain (Ministry of Education) were extremely helpful. They supported the work of NZEI by running sessions at each meeting, providing research, clarifying issues and offering comment. Their availability and willingness to help was greatly appreciated.

Priorities for Literacy

Each focus group of teachers broke into smaller groups and discussed the priorities that had been identified by individual policymakers and literacy and assessment experts at the NZEI symposium. The purpose was not to rank the priorities but rather to see where there was consensus and where teachers' priorities differed from those identified at the symposium.

OVERWHELMING SUPPORT

From the perspective of the NZEI focus groups, there was overwhelming support for giving priority to:

Student motivation

It is **very important that early reading is enjoyed by children** and that they enjoy good levels of success. Texts should be relevant to the children's interests and the vast majority of words should be ones they are familiar with orally, or that they have been introduced to before they are asked to read them. In some cases, enriching oral language in preparation for reading should take precedence over formal reading programmes in the early weeks after school entry.

At all levels, we need to pay more attention to **helping motivate children to read** and encouraging reading 'mileage'. This could include making available a well-considered range of reading material that addresses the knowledge and interests of

class members and providing support for weaker readers (such as tape-assisted reading resources).

Teacher content and pedagogical knowledge

It is critical that teachers at all levels of the system have strong pedagogical and subject knowledge in literacy. This might include such actions as: increasing the focus on English as a subject and on literacy in teacher training; having a sustained and iterative process of teacher professional development, and running conferences on what constitutes the professional literacy knowledge of the teacher.

Positive relationship between teacher and student

Recent research (for example, Te Kōtahitanga) highlights **the importance of a positive relationship between teacher and student in engaging and empowering Maori students**, encouraging motivation and improving overall outcomes throughout their schooling.

Focus on literacy teaching and learning

Ensure realistic expectations with regard to literacy by **avoiding adding other distractions**, for example Mission On, Financial Literacy (for five-year-olds). Schools and teachers are subject to an avalanche of new initiatives, and ever-increasing compliance demands are placed on them. It is vital **that key initiatives are introduced in ways that are manageable**, that ensure effective and comprehensive implementation, and that allow improvements to teaching and learning within schools to be genuine as well as enjoyable.

Initial and continuing teacher education

Thorough initial teacher education and the national provision of teacher education in literacy is essential to provide support for classroom teachers and principals.

Linked to initial teacher education was the **importance of the systemic conditions in supporting effective teacher professional learning and development**. Opportunities for professional learning and development should be expanded so that it is sustained and consistent.

Professional leadership and support in schools was seen as critical to further developing literacy teaching practices that meet the diverse learning needs of the students in our schools. While the Ministry of Education provides excellent free literacy resources through the Ready to Read and School Journal series, the instructional materials and teachers' manuals alone are not sufficient to ensure that excellent literacy teaching practices are used. Professional learning and development support is required.

Reading Recovery

Increase funding for Reading Recovery to ensure that all schools that wish to are able to mount the intervention and that there are enough teaching spaces for all children who need this second wave of teaching effort to get underway with early learning. Participants were clear that Reading Recovery should not be replaced but increased, with alternative programmes offered to support those students (third wave) who have not been successful (see below).

Hardest to teach students

Recognition that there is a need for **individual instruction for the hardest to teach by the most skilled teachers** and that these teachers need to be **internally employed** and not external to the school **and fully supported** by literacy advisers, RTLits, RTMs and RTLBs.

A comprehensive third wave of teaching effort and strategy has to be readily available for those children who need further help after Reading Recovery, who miss out on early intervention or who begin to have difficulty with literacy learning further on in their schooling.

OTHER AREAS OF HIGH PRIORITY

- **Synergy between school and home** is very important. We need to do all we can to recruit parent support for their children's reading and offer suggestions and examples of how they can best help their children to progress well.
- **Better engagement with the community** is another aspect that requires effort by the school.
- **It is vital that NEMP be recognised as a particularly important New Zealand vehicle for monitoring** the achievement and attitudes of students at a national level in literacy and other curriculum areas; it also provides an important national contextual frame for interpreting data from other sources.
- **Maori teacher supply and the need to improve programme quality are at a critical stage.** Demand for fluent Te Reo Maori teachers is outstripping supply. At present, hard-to-staff areas of the country with predominantly Maori students are being forced to employ 'Limited Authority to Teach' staff. These employees are not trained teachers and do not have the expertise to provide the best literacy teaching and learning environment needed by all students, and particularly by struggling students. New Zealand goals for Maori student achievement are clear: to improve literacy levels for Maori students in both mainstream classes and kura kaupapa Maori. Teachers in training need to be given support and made aware of the research available that can inform their own practice.
- **Poverty and limited access to early childhood education requires systemic support.** This includes support for whanau to ensure all children participate in high quality early childhood education.
- At a strategic level, there needs to be a **collective plan for a national approach to put pressure on politicians.** Such a plan would identify the priorities for learning (more explicitly than the NAGs do now) and ensure alignment of all the parts – for example, initiatives, the new curriculum, new professional standards, planning and reporting, and data and assessment. It should not be up to schools to make sense of all this; nor should it be left to good luck or chance as to whether schools get the extra funding available through various initiatives to do the vital work. The Government has a responsibility to ensure that this approach is consistent and funded.
- The second level of work needed is to then look specifically at literacy and numeracy to **develop clear messages about the success of the current system in language that parents and the public can understand.** It is not fair to schools to expect them to make sense of all the research and the various and often conflicting messages from the so-called

literacy experts. The confidence of the public should be sought, along with their support for the teaching profession.

ONGOING PRIORITIES

Classroom teachers in the NZEI focus groups maintained that some of the priorities identified by the policymakers, literacy and assessment experts were part of the ongoing literacy priorities of their schools. These included:

- opportunities to reflect on PIRLS benchmarks, including what they look like in practice and how they compare to the New Zealand curriculum
- researchers and academics in schools observing teachers working with the hardest to teach and both groups being prepared to learn from each other
- the drive for evidence on what factors make the biggest difference for positive student outcomes is important to inform decision making but should not lead to practices of over assessment
- increasing the capacity of National Reading Recovery to monitor the implementation of Reading Recovery in New Zealand, conduct research and contribute to the ongoing work of the international network of researchers and educators who evaluate and continuously up-date the intervention.

Advice to NZEI National Executive

Systems responsibilities

The focus group teachers saw high quality literacy teaching and successful literacy learning as being a national expectation, a national drive and a national priority. The government, therefore, has a significant role to play in the resourcing of literacy teaching and learning in schools. Teachers commented that:

- *resourcing of literacy professional development should be on a larger scale ie national or at least regional*
- *there needs to be more funding to obtain remedial help for more students. The current level of funding is inadequate; it is only available for the very lowest achievers. This problem goes across all deciles; resourcing is required for students who are not in the bottom 5% but the next lowest 10-15%*
- *funding should be expanded for Reading Recovery so that all schools wishing to take it up can access it*
- *there also needs to be funding for programmes for students for whom Reading Recovery was either not successful or need further support. Supplementary programmes should be investigated; it must be emphasised that what works for one group does not necessarily work for all*
- *the importance of leadership cannot be overestimated. This means leaders need to be included and supported so that they understand the literacy strategy, its intent and what will best help classroom teachers*
- *tutor teachers need more time to work with beginning teachers*
- *resource teachers must have access to continuing professional learning and development; this is not always the case.*

Other areas identified as requiring a systems response included:

- *co-ordinating and reducing the introduction of new initiatives for schools. implementing the number of new Government initiatives becomes problematic for schools and distracts from literacy teaching and learning.*

Pre-service education and training

It is the responsibility of pre-service education to provide the best possible introduction to literacy teaching and learning was seen as critical by the focus groups. Highly qualified and skilled teachers are seen as the key to high quality teaching of literacy in schools. The experience of schools across the country is that students' learning opportunities to benefit from the literacy strategy is inconsistent because not all teachers have access to the literacy professional learning. The focus group teachers made the following comments:

- *Consistency in pre-service education and ongoing professional learning and development programmes across the country is vital because highly-qualified and skilled teachers are the key to teaching literacy in schools*
- *By their third year, student teachers should have learned about and had experience in literacy teaching and learning; they should know what a literacy programme looks like.*
- *The priority given to literacy, literacy knowledge, literacy teaching and literacy learning should parallel that given to numeracy in pre-service education and training.*
- *Those who facilitate pre-service education and training (or continuing education) need to be up to date with classroom practice.*

Professional learning and development

Focus group teachers also argued that professional learning and development should have a nationwide emphasis. Literacy professional learning and development programmes should run across the school over two to three years with all staff required to participate including principals and other leaders. For some schools it might just be a maintenance exercise in some areas.

The Numeracy Development Project was seen as providing an excellent infrastructure to support teacher professional learning and development. The focus group teachers all had experience with the Numeracy Development Project and highlighted aspects of the model worth considering in a literacy context, including:

- *The coaching (mentoring) model used in numeracy is a successful professional development approach already evident in syndicate organisation.*

Opportunities for teachers to network was seen as a critical part of professional learning and development. Teachers commented that:

- *opportunities should be provided for networking with the aim of facilitating an intellectual exchange of ideas and resources*
- *networking and discussion with teachers from other schools is a vital component of professional development*
- *it is useful to go beyond the school environment and work across a cluster of schools.*

Focus group teachers called for the dissemination of examples of good practice in literacy teaching and what it looks like in different contexts. They recognised the importance of discussing, reflecting on, and using the NEMP reports and PIRLS information. Their suggestions included the following:

- *Discussion of NEMP results need to be timetabled into staff meetings or term meetings, or perhaps clusters of schools could get together and talk about results and then take the discussion back to their schools.*
- *NEMP administrators could be part of training, although there are implications for the classroom. But involving administrators would help overcome the problem of the extensive time required to read the reports.*
- *The NEMP summary, the Forum Comment, is very useful but has too much in it, perhaps each Learning Area assessed could be on a separate A4 page. It is important that the NEMP layout does not get lost.*
- *PIRLS information could be disseminated through a brochure from the Ministry, including practical advice on how to get started.*

Focus group teachers were keen to build student confidence by getting students to talk about their experiences. They saw this as an effective way to support students' self concept and provide an opportunity to highlight the student voice.

Teaching resources

Focus group teachers argued that schools had a variety of assessment tools to use but insufficient professional development around how and when to use them. Their comments and suggestions included:

- *Teachers use assessment tools but do not understand them fully. They can 'mine' the data but do not always know what to do with it.*
- *One page summaries are helpful, for example brochures (PIRLS).*
- *Practical advice for teachers and principals to support more use of the NEMP Forum Comment.*
- *Encourage use of the data provided from NEMP particularly at staff meetings; may need to provide kits.*

The younger or more recently trained teachers said the Internet was their preferred tool for accessing information when they want to find a resource, for example a task or report.

Technology in the form of multimedia approaches (for example, DVDs) is used to motivate students, particularly boys.

The draft learning progressions appear helpful as they are reflective of what is happening in reading and writing but the focus groups felt more information was needed. The progressions appear clear at an early age but then they become broad statements. The gap is too big after six months compared to other points.

Teaching practice

Focus group teachers agreed that there was no need for a massive overhaul of current literacy practices in schools, however, the challenge is how to improve achievement for all students. In their groups they questioned what could be done differently. The teachers suggested the following:

- *The practice of ability grouping should be scrutinised and other ways of grouping (for example in themes) could be tried.*
- *Links with oral literacy must be acknowledged.*
- *Effective practice should be shared (for example, what tends to work for boys).*

- *Dissemination of good practice examples where students feel able to say they are 'good' readers would also be useful.*

Focus group teachers acknowledged that teachers do make a difference and the fact that students come from diverse backgrounds presented a challenge but was not an excuse for low achievement results. It simply acknowledged that sometimes there are other matters a teacher has to take into account when understanding the experiences and prior knowledge a student brings to a task.

School organisation

Issues relating to school organisation and the likely impact on literacy arose from the focus group discussions. Of critical importance were:

- *student attendance at school*
- *increased valuing of teachers' professional judgement along with opportunities for teachers to reflect*
- *training experienced teachers to give literacy tutoring to beginning teachers*
- *continuity as students move from junior reading into middle school programmes.*

Findings and comment

The matters raised in discussion by Focus Group participants can be divided into three categories: those that

- *are the heart of good teaching practice* eg student motivation, teacher content and pedagogical knowledge, positive relationships between teacher and student
- *form part of the National Executive's ongoing monitoring and advocacy* eg focus on literacy teaching and learning; initial and continuing teacher education, professional leadership, Maori Teacher supply, poverty and limited access to early childhood education, synergy between school, home and better engagement with community
- *require further consideration*; increased funding for Reading Recovery plus alternatives; third wave intervention strengthened with most skilled teachers internally employed for hardest to teach, a collective plan for a national approach with clear messages

Interventions

Second wave: Reading Recovery

The teachers in the Focus Groups were unequivocal in their recognition of Reading Recovery as a quality intervention programme and rejected one expert's recommendation at the symposium that Reading Recovery should be replaced with an alternative. The teachers recognised, however, that Reading Recovery does not necessarily suit all students. They argued that Reading Recovery should be available to all schools that wish to take it up and alternative programmes should be available for those schools that do not wish to take up Reading Recovery.

Third wave

Currently alternative programmes, of a similar calibre to Reading Recovery, are not available and the students who are not successful or do not have access become the "third wave" or

seen as “the hardest to teach” students. There just was not enough specialist support for ‘third wave’ interventions.

Focus Group teachers believed that only the most skilled teachers should be used to work with those students identified “the hardest to teach” and these teachers should be part of the school staff and not ‘resource’ teachers. Schools also make a significant investment when employing teacher aides but often the teacher aide without sufficient training was used to assist those “hardest to teach” students.

Monitoring

The Education Review Office released its findings¹ regarding school monitoring of students who have received some form of literacy intervention. The Review Office found that the majority of schools could adequately identify students at risk of not achieving, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy, but nearly half the schools reviewed had yet to evaluate the extent to which their programmes resulted in improved outcomes for ‘at risk’ students.

Ministry action

The Ministry has commissioned an internal paper to inform and develop further its policy on Literacy Interventions. It believes that there are a large number of specialists available to schools including the Literacy Development Officers. While the Ministry has a limited control over resource teachers and advisers, these groups are not employed by the Ministry. In comparison the Literacy Development Officers are employees of the Ministry and part of the Literacy and Numeracy strategy. Ironically their role appears to be developing more like an ‘inspector’ who had both the power to give formative and summative advice.

Conclusion

The focus group model reflected a level of intellectual engagement which the teachers engaged, and revelled, in. As one of the Focus Group principal’s commented

Here is the power point that A. used with our staff as a result of her attendance at the NZEI PIRLS focus group. She asked to do it and it was fantastic, creating a lot of discussion. She did her presentation on a smart board using lots of tricks and made the whole presentation very interactive. Thanks for making the learning opportunity available to her.

The value of A.’s work was the teacher voice. How she linked the work to her practice as teacher inquiry/reflection and questioned the usual pattern of her teaching focuses in her reading programme. The prompt cards she has put into the classroom to keep her focused on the bits that are underdone in her guided reading programme. But her workshop style was very engaging and hooked every teacher into thinking at 4.00pm on a long staff meeting day in the week reports were due.

The meetings gave them an opportunity to see NZEI in a policy-making arena with a genuine attempt to seek their voice and advice on the links between international assessment results and their own practice. The teachers were appreciative of the opportunity to have their expertise acknowledged and voice listened to.

¹ Education Review Office. (2008) Schools provision for students at risk of not achieving. An Education Review Office Education Evaluation Report. Wellington:ERO

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