



31 August 2020

To: Hon. Minister Chris Hipkins  
From: SPELD NZ Board  
Re: A call to action following *The literacy landscape in Aotearoa NZ*  
by Professor Stuart McNaughton

Dear Minister

The Board of SPELD NZ has read the recently released report *The literacy landscape in Aotearoa NZ*. We welcome the focus on the teaching of literacy in NZ. However, SPELD NZ is disappointed that the report failed to address the need for well-established, evidence-based programmes that reflect the Science of Reading. SPELD NZ believes these are vital if New Zealand is to turn around its declining literacy levels.

As a not-for-profit charity, SPELD NZ has spent nearly 50 years advocating for a greater emphasis on teaching decoding and encoding skills to all learners, particularly those with dyslexia and other specific learning disabilities (SLD). We were therefore concerned to see *The Literacy Landscape in Aotearoa NZ* continues to emphasise Reading Recovery. Reading Recovery does not effectively diagnose or address gaps in reading knowledge. It is an historical intervention which is not grounded in science<sup>1</sup> SPELD NZ professionals work with many students who, despite completing the Reading Recovery intervention, are unable to decode words without guessing. These students have not been taught effective strategies to support rapid, accurate, and effortless word reading.

As one mother wrote to us:

*“My son had Reading Recovery and did quite well but then as soon as he was back in the classroom he continued to struggle until we had him tested for dyslexia. My son continues to struggle greatly at school and as a result cannot wait to leave. He has had tears and lack of confidence right up until now. He is 14. Luckily he manages to just get on with it most days but the school model as it stands*

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<sup>1</sup>Chapman, J.W., (2019) NZ Association for Research in Education

<https://nzareblog.wordpress.com/2019/08/21/reading-recovery/>

Kilpatrick, D.A (2015) Essentials of assessing, preventing, and overcoming reading difficulties (pp296-297)

John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey

Education Review Office's Evaluation at a Glance: A Decade of Assessment in New Zealand Primary Schools – Practice and trends <https://www.ero.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/Evaluation-at-a-glance-assessment-practice-and-trends-2020.pdf>

Slavin, R.E., Lake, C., Davis, S., & Madden, N.A., (2011). Effective programs for struggling readers: A best-evidence synthesis. Educational Research Review, 6, 1-26. doi:10.1016/j.edurev.2010.07.002

Chapman J. W., & Tunmer, W. E. (2015). The Literacy Performance of ex-Reading Recovery Students Between Two and Four Years Following Participation on the Program: Is this Intervention Effective for Students with Early Reading Difficulties? Invited address at the 39th Annual Conference of the International Academy for Research in Learning Disabilities (IARLD), Vancouver, Canada, July 8, 2015.

Prof Stanislas Dehaene, How the Brain Learns to Read <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25GI3-kiLdo>

*does not serve my wonderful and very capable, hard-working and problem solver son at all. It has been totally heart-breaking. I don't understand why schools have not adapted and changed based on the facts. SPELD was the best thing ever for my son and we are so thankful for that."*

Teachers in Aotearoa NZ, as in many parts of the world, are not well prepared for the teaching of literacy. Most graduate and in-service teachers lack current knowledge and understanding of the process of learning to read and write. Many schools are now looking to private providers for professional development in evidence-based, structured literacy programmes. As one of New Zealand's key providers of training in dyslexia/specific learning disabilities (SLD), SPELD NZ has been inundated with inquiries from new Learning Support Coordinators looking to upskill. This is in addition to huge growth in interest in our courses from teachers, SENCO, RTLB and teacher aides who feel poorly equipped to offer support and hope to those who struggle with literacy.

Meanwhile, parents of children with learning difficulties often must go outside the school system for specialised, user-pays literacy support. This is an inequitable situation, as only those with access and the financial means can benefit from this critical help. This creates huge distress for families – something SPELD NZ deals with on a daily basis. SPELD NZ's philosophy is that no child or adult should miss out on our support because they can't afford it. We are constantly fundraising to help subsidise our assessment and tuition costs for those suffering financial hardship. Despite that assistance, many families despair that they still cannot afford to access support for their struggling children. A desperate mother recently emailed us, perfectly encapsulating the dilemma:

*"It is deeply distressing to have a child with dyslexia and to watch him continue to struggle through a basic day at school despite being a very bright and articulate boy. Although I had concerns for well over a year, it took for him to fall into a deep depression and strongly resist going to school before I could get anyone to take my concerns seriously. It took time to come up with the funds I needed to pay for him to have a test with the SPELD assessor as I had worked out myself that he was mostly likely dyslexic. He is – severely. Despite all the evidence about the benefit of early intervention there is NO help available. The best the SENCO can recommend is that I pay for private tutoring. I have no doubt that this would be beneficial, but it is completely unaffordable for our family. I am just doing my best to teach him myself at home, but as he is exhausted after a day at school, it is very difficult to fit this in on a regular basis.*

*"I know that there are MANY children in my son's position, many undiagnosed who will just withdraw or drop out or believe the lie that they are stupid or lazy. Many who have parents who are unable to pay for the support they need even if it is identified that they need it. What a terrible waste of precious human potential.*

*"THANK you for caring, thank you for advocacy – we need change. Our Kiwi kids deserve a chance to thrive."*

Even those fortunate enough to be able to afford literacy support may now struggle to gain access. In the last two years, SPELD NZ has experienced an exponential increase in inquirers seeking assessment and tuition. While we certainly welcome the growing awareness of dyslexia/SLD, the pressure on our services is unprecedented. In Auckland, it is not unusual for families to be waiting 12 months or longer for a SPELD NZ Teacher.

The fallout from our schools' deficient teaching of literacy weighs heavily on SPELD NZ. As one mother told us, *"Well done SPELD - it's time to be bold. You have been picking up the pieces of our flawed approach to teaching reading for far too long."*

Minister Hipkins, ours is call to you for action. You have started the journey with the Learning and Disability Support Action Plan and the new dyslexia and learning resources for TKI. But a great deal more is needed to address New Zealand's falling literacy rates.

### **In summary, SPELD NZ would like to see:**

- Early, reliable, evidence-based identification and intervention for literacy difficulties
- All teachers in training develop in-depth knowledge about the Science of Reading including implementation of structured literacy practices
- All in-service primary teachers provided with compulsory professional development about the Science of Reading including implementation of structured literacy practices
- All schools (Years 1 – 13) employ a literacy specialist trained (theory and practical) in the Science of Reading
- Structured, explicit literacy teaching embedded in all levels of education including teacher training
- All English curriculum teachers have comprehensive knowledge and understanding about the Science of Reading
- All schools and all educators recognise the impact low literacy has on all areas of an individual's life, and that they take responsibility to provide evidence-based and relevant intervention programmes in order to remove any barriers to learning.

### **It is essential that the teaching of literacy in New Zealand:**

- Recognises that English is written according to a sound code. The teaching of decoding and encoding skills needs to focus on the sounds in language and the ability to connect sounds to written text
- Acknowledges that all students need and benefit from a structured and systematic phonological based programme in their early years of education. This needs to continue for those students who find learning basic reading and spelling skills difficult
- Highlights the importance of word level reading and writing as well as comprehension and written expression. All elements need direct and systematic teaching **throughout** all levels of education
- Takes responsibility for literacy education regardless of students' varying backgrounds and differing levels of preparedness for learning.

## Comments relating to specific points in the report

### Emergent literacy period

While we agree that reading to/dialogic reading/shared reading, telling and retelling stories and progress and quality measures are important, **it is vital that there must be a focus on developing early phonological skills** (e.g. initial sounds, recognition of rhyme, clapping syllables etc.).

### Starting school

The idea of incorporating formal and informal assessment tools is valuable. However, the tools need to focus on phonological awareness as this is an essential building block for literacy.

### Years 1-3

The present emphasis on Reading Recovery is the wrong focus. Reading Recovery does not effectively diagnose or address the gaps in reading knowledge.

There must be consistency among all New Zealand schools, in relation to literacy programmes, so that there is a seamless system that meets the needs of all students.

Synthetic phonics must be a focus area in its own right. Synthetic phonics is proven to provide the foundation for all literacy.

### Years 4-8

It is often at this stage of formal schooling that the gaps in literacy knowledge are revealed. This is the time when literacy demands increase, and the students do not have either the foundational or functional word level skills to cope with this increasing demand. By now, three years of ineffective diagnosis and teaching presents as “slower literacy progress”. The drop off is seen in many students. It is not just confined to those from low socio-economic status (SES) communities or Māori and Pasifika students, and it is unrelated to any summer slump.

Poor self-belief coupled with a lack of motivation is the breeding ground for a downward spiral (see *The Matthew Effect*).

The recommended activities outlined in the report all focus on comprehension. Comprehension is important, but for students with literacy difficulties decoding comes first. As long as an individual’s cognitive capacity is devoted to decoding the text, comprehension will suffer. In other words, reading (decoding) is not yet an automatic behaviour. Consequently, there is no cognitive energy to invest for meaningful comprehension to occur.

### Secondary school

In terms of secondary school students, there needs to be an awareness that:

- Not all students arrive at Year 9 with a solid literacy foundation.
- All students can improve their literacy if they are provided with good quality teaching that is grounded in effective evidence-based programmes.

All secondary schools need:

- A literacy specialist.
- All English curriculum teachers need knowledge about the acquisition of literacy skills and targeted intervention.
- All schools need to provide appropriate accommodations for students with literacy difficulties
- Appropriate resources (easy to read texts, speech-to-text, etc.), coupled with effective teaching.

Kind regards



Peter Scanlan  
Board Chairperson  
SPELD NZ