



SPELD NZ Response to *The literacy landscape in Aotearoa NZ* by Stuart McNaughton

SPELD NZ welcomes the focus on the teaching of literacy in NZ.

From SPELD NZ's experience, the number of students receiving additional assistance is not representative of the level of need in the community. Effective literacy teaching in the school setting must include evidence-based programmes that directly reflect the Science of Reading. Currently, due to a variety of factors (cost, availability, remote location, etc.) there are many families who are unable to access effective literacy teaching for their children. We do know that SPELD NZ teaching works – SPELD NZ students become readers.

It is essential that the teaching of literacy in NZ:

- Recognises that English is a sound-based language. The teaching of decoding and encoding skills needs to focus on the sounds in language and the ability to connect sounds to written text (letters and letter patterns).
- 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.

It is also essential that:

- The education system takes responsibility for literacy education regardless of students varying backgrounds and differing levels of preparedness for learning.
- There is early identification of students who show delayed literacy skills.
- Effective interventions are put in place early.

Teachers in Aotearoa NZ, as in many parts of the world, are not well prepared for the teaching of literacy. Graduate and in-service teachers lack current knowledge and understanding of the process of learning to read and write. This is especially evidenced in the school-based programmes frequently offered to students with learning difficulties.

- SPELD NZ recognises that the current focus in teacher education is a significant barrier to student literacy development. Our organisation has always advocated for a greater emphasis on teaching decoding and encoding skills and on the teaching of SLD students in general.

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. Reading Recovery is an historic intervention which is not grounded in science. 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 their ability to decode words, rapidly, automatically, accurately, and effortlessly.

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.

There needs to be understanding by all educators (primary to tertiary) that Specific Learning Disability impacts on all aspects of learning. When there is a lack of understanding by teachers and those in senior management roles, the student's ability to reach his / her true potential is undoubtedly impacted on, across the curriculum.

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.