

SPELD NZ'S response to the Education Hub report:

Now I don't know my ABC. The perilous state of literacy in Aotearoa New Zealand

“There is a moral imperative here which we should be ashamed to ignore”

SPELD NZ thanks The Education Hub for its comprehensive report on the crisis in literacy in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, this is hardly “breaking news”, and we are concerned that the report barely addresses the one thing that would have the greatest impact on reversing the crisis – Structured Literacy. The report calls for systemic change, with Structured Literacy as just one part of that. SPELD NZ says no. Put Structured Literacy at the centre of the change, and most of the systemic elements will improve as a consequence. Structured Literacy is about the science, but it is also about equity. It can go a long way towards addressing the cultural gap, the socio-economic gap, the gender gap, absenteeism, lack of reading for pleasure. Efficient reading leads directly to the development of vocabulary and background knowledge. It opens up the world of complex texts and critical thinking. Most importantly, it forms the absolutely essential Tier 1 of an effective Response to Intervention (RTI) process.

At The Education Hub's webinar panel discussion following the report's release, thankfully Professor Gail Gillon stated that the strongest predictor of reading success is phonological awareness skills coupled with phonics knowledge. She stated that a Response to Intervention model must involve quality instruction, early identification of problems, and intensive intervention. In combination, this was her “one thing” that would make a difference.

School principal Barbara Ala'alatoa also went straight to the heart of the matter. She saw a problem in her school, she started with literacy, and focused on quality teaching, evidence-based practice, and learning relationships. She didn't wait for more data. She didn't wait for systemic change. “It's not hard,” she said.

Professor Stuart McNaughton, on the other hand, said “fixing one part (of our literacy problem) won't do”. If he means the part about how we teach reading, then SPELD NZ would like to disagree. Putting Structured Literacy at the forefront of change can achieve a great deal. It can lead to students being empowered to make choices in their lives. It can avoid the devastating consequences of illiteracy for many. There is a moral imperative here which we should be ashamed to ignore.

SPELD NZ has been picking up the pieces from a flawed education system for more than 50 years. We may need more research but not at the expense of action. Systemic change is the absolute goal, but we cannot wait for that to happen. What we can do now is move towards teacher training, classroom practice, informed assessment and a full RTI system based on Structured Literacy. Surely it is time for the Government, the Ministry of Education, the Teaching Council, teacher educators, and many more school leaders to acknowledge the science around literacy and take direct action.

SPELD NZ is a not-for-profit organisation that specialises in assisting people with dyslexia and other specific learning disabilities (SLD). Since the 1970s, we have helped many thousands of children and adults nationwide. SPELD NZ has always advocated for a greater emphasis on teaching decoding and encoding skills to all learners, especially those with SLD. In 2020, we called for a sea change in the way literacy is taught in New Zealand schools: <https://www.speld.org.nz/8059-2>

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