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A Contemporary Guide to Literacy Teaching and Interventions in a Global Context
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The provision, practice and policies of early literacy in New Zealand

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PART II

Early literacy around the world

This editorial summarizes the key issues discussed in the 14 region portraits included in this section. The authors contributing to this section were given the brief to cover the early literacy situation within some society or language community according to seven dimensions: phonological/lexical features of the language and orthographic representations; early literacy, including educational policies in relation to multilingual issues; policy implementation in practice; principal methods and content areas of literacy instruction; provision for children with special educational needs; variety of literacy resources available; and the major challenges for current and future early literacy provision.

Together, the chapters display a remarkable degree of variation across countries/societies on several dimensions. In some places, policies and practices for early literacy instruction are highly centralized, whereas in other places local educational authorities have considerable autonomy to select approaches, materials and curricula. Some language communities confront enormous regional or sociolinguistic variations of the national language, creating instructional challenges not present for countries where the variation in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar is less salient. Some countries insist that young children should be protected from any formal instruction, whereas others start literacy training with children as young as three. In some places, play- and narrative-based approaches to early literacy dominate, whereas in others the focus is more on mastering the code rather than the meaning. All these dimensions of variation offer the researcher and the theorist rich fodder for considering the conditions that make literacy development easy or hard, universal or elitist, and enjoyable or laborious.

All chapters cover the fundamental principles of orthographic and associated phonological representation of the languages in their countries and the implications of these variations for literacy instruction. It is striking to see the varied definition of early literacy success in the individual countries’ early years policies. While in some countries the focus is on code-based skills, in others it is more of a balance with meaning-construction skills. These policies are directly reflected in the documentation of early learning outcomes used, assessment and evaluation frameworks available; provision of professional training, funding and allocation of early years professionals.

Despite the many global factors contributing to the need to support multilingual literacy and language learning, educational policies concerning early literacy for diverse groups vary
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enormously. Traditionally monolingual societies, which during the last few decades have experienced large-scale immigration, have developed very different language and literacy policies to meet the learning needs of children who do not speak the language of instruction at home, varying from reception classes for children who have newly arrived to (transitional) mother-tongue education or bilingual programmes. To add to the variation, these policies may be designed differently in early education and in schools within the same country, as well as inside or outside of the public educational system. The process of learning to read and write may be different depending on the country region a child lives in and whether it is a region where one or several languages are spoken and historically recognized. Several chapters also address the language and literacy education (or lack thereof) offered to the country’s aboriginal groups.

It is also striking to note the different levels of provision of early literacy resources for children from special populations in the individual countries, including the ways in which children with special needs are identified, and the interventions that are available for children who are failing. All authors stress that the issues for current and future early literacy provision in the countries are influenced by the shifting literacy practices within young children’s lives, shaped by the presence of new technologies at home and at school.

The selection of the individual countries reflects our focus on interesting contrasts and countries with successful literacy instruction. The editorial selection was, of course, also influenced by the availability of literacy researchers and high-quality research concerning development and instruction of language and literacy in the respective countries. We were also mindful of the fact that additional content about well-studied contexts would not be as illuminating as covering new orthographies or different educational settings.

The editors found it very difficult to order the chapters according to any single principle. Some of the chapters deal with shallow and others with deep orthographies, but in some cases within a language/country the young children confront a shallow orthography that turns deep only after a few years of schooling, when diacritics signalling pronunciation details are deleted (Arabic, Hebrew). Some describe systems that have been successful in generating universally high levels of literacy, whereas others show high failure rates even in the first years of schooling. Some rely heavily on local and international research to guide their instructional decisions, whereas others follow traditional methods. In short, we ultimately decided simply to put the chapters in an arbitrary order, recognizing that readers are very likely to pick and choose those most relevant to their own educational contexts and concerns. There is, thus, no implicit expectation that these chapters will be read in order or in their entirety by any particular reader. Nonetheless, we urge everyone to sample the range of challenges and supports associated with different languages, orthographies, schooling systems, assessment approaches and ministries of education, in thinking about ensuring universal success in literacy for young children across the globe.

These chapters reflect something important about the state of knowledge about literacy development in each of these regions. However, the reader might also note that some chapters are focused on smaller and much more homogeneous groups than others. For example, Korean and Japanese readers are relatively small in number as compared with all Arabic or Chinese speakers. India and Africa both have very large populations but a great diversity in languages and scripts, both traditional and adapted. A homogeneous population, language and script as found in Korea, which uses Hangul, has afforded researchers the opportunity to focus more on cognitive and social aspects of literacy development in Korea in a more carefully controlled way. Many more questions remain about the situations involving literacy development in Africa or India simply because the populations, and their
corresponding languages, beliefs and scripts, are complex in their heterogeneity. There is much research that remains to be done in such areas, which represent among the most populous in the world. We hope that these chapters collectively highlight the many factors that must be integrated in order to have a clear picture of early literacy development around the world.
New Zealand has a history of high engagement in literacy practices. Historical record shows very early adoption of literacy by Māori (the indigenous population), and an enthusiastic tribally based teaching programme, which meant that by the later 1800s over half of adult Māori could read in their own language (Simon, 1998). By the 1990s when the first of the international comparisons of literacy achievement across countries took place, New Zealand 9-year-olds and 14-year-olds were ranked highly (Elley, 1992), and this has been attributed to the presence of widespread literacy practices and high volumes of reading among both adults and students (Guthrie, 1981).

The societal and literacy context

New Zealand shares features of its traditional success in literacy with other small developed countries. But there are also unique features and specific challenges facing the population of 4.5 million in its provisions, practices and policies. These reflect a particular context created by its colonial and social context. For example, there is legislative and institutional recognition of the special status of the indigenous population and their language, so that there are three official languages (Te Reo Māori, English and Sign Language). Currently, 21 per cent of the population are Māori speakers (Statistics New Zealand, 2014). However, despite this history and recognition, what the international comparisons and national data have revealed are ongoing persistent disparities in literacy achievement for Māori and now also for the newer immigrant groups from Pacific Islands (Pasifika communities) and children from low socioeconomic status (SES) communities. Children from diverse Anglo/European backgrounds make up 53 per cent of the current school student population of 767,258 students, and a further 23.3 per cent are Māori students (Education Counts, 2014a). In addition, 9.8 per cent of students are from the growing Pasifika student populations and 10.2 per cent from Asian communities. There are both Māori/English bilingual and full Māori immersion schools and classrooms. Children in these classrooms receive systematic literacy instruction in Māori, but represent a small group of students (2.5 per cent). However, 19.2 per cent of the total school population currently are involved in some Māori language in English-medium classrooms, which provides limited instruction in reading and writing in Māori. The exposure to both languages and any associated bilingual literacy experiences is wider in
early childhood: 11.5 per cent of all services provide the majority of their instruction and care through the Māori language, and 5 per cent of enrolled children are in full immersion Kohanga Reo (Māori early childhood language nests) (www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics). The smaller numbers receiving systematic literacy instruction in Māori in schools represent ongoing concerns by parents about the quality of schooling choices and how best to promote the language through literacy provisions.

The educational system context

The education system contains a diverse, non-mandatory early childhood sector catering for children from birth through five; children can and mostly do enter the primary school on their fifth birthday. Over 95 per cent of new entrants to schools have participated in an early childhood educational centre within the six months prior to starting school (www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics).

The early childhood and school sectors are both administered under a centralized Ministry of Education, but each has its own national curriculum, and there is a parallel curriculum statement for Māori-medium schooling. These are broadly specified and open frameworks; teachers have considerable autonomy and are expected to be flexible problem solvers engaging in teaching as inquiry (Ministry of Education, 2007: 35). This autonomy is reflected in a history of innovation and initiatives in language and literacy practices arising from local problem solving (McNaughton, 2002).

The valued autonomy is present also at a school level in that each is managed by a locally elected board of trustees. Within this high-autonomy environment, quality is assessed by an Education Review Office which provides publicly available reports (see www.ero.govt.nz/). This autonomy at teacher and school levels has produced a tension with the need to take effective interventions to scale, or to mandate practices in ways that reduce contextual variability between teachers and schools (Robinson et al., 2011).

Policy, curriculum models and assessments

National Standards introduced in 2010 define success in reading and writing in English-medium and Māori-medium schools at the end of each school year and on which schools are required to report (Ministry of Education, 2009, 2010). The standards were designed to increase accountability to parents, and through greater shared goals and consistency of practices to raise achievement and address disparities of outcomes between groups.

The National Standards require school teachers (but not teachers in early childhood settings) from the first year to make a formal judgement using a four-part scale called an Overall Teacher Judgement (OTJ) and to report twice a year on how each child is meeting the standard. The judgement is based on multiple and ongoing sources of information from daily activities including formal assessments. There are detailed resources with exemplars of the standards, and some professional development to support schools in implementing the standards. However, the dependability of the OTJs has been criticized as having inadequate school-to-school consistency and too much variability across time and year levels (Ward and Thomas, 2014). In response, an online tool with anchoring exemplars is being developed by the Ministry of Education to support teachers’ judgements, thereby improving the reliability and consistency of judgements over time (see http://assessment.tki.org.nz/Assessment-tools-resources/Progress-and-Consistency-Tool).
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Definitions of early literacy success

Before school

The early childhood curriculum reflects an explicitly constructivist view of learning that emphasizes child agency. There are no formal definitions or criteria for literacy success; rather an expectation of increasing ‘competence’ in dispositions such as curiosity (Ministry of Education, 1996).

The prescribed orientation to literacy practices and development is ‘meaning construction’. For example, ‘adults should read and tell stories, provide books, and use story times to allow children to exchange and extend ideas, reinforcing developing concepts of, and language for, shape, space, size, and colour as well as imaginative responses’ (Ministry of Education, 1996: 73). The curriculum employs descriptors of children moving to school as ‘likely to’ have developed features such as enjoyment of books and concepts about print and knowledge of relationships (unspecified) between written and spoken words.

Research-based descriptions of practices support the intent of the documents. For example, observational data describe the nature of teaching as creating ‘possibilities’ within which teachers follow the lead of children as initiators of their learning, based on their interests and experiences (Dalli, 2011). Similarly, qualitative descriptions of children’s learning highlight the development of their ‘working theories’, which researchers argue are indicative of what can more widely be recognized as knowledge, skills, attitudes and expectations (Hedges and Cooper, 2014).

Early years at school

The school curriculum has a view of development that assumes the need for more deliberate and direct instruction from school entry than that described in early childhood curriculum statements. The deliberateness is embodied in, and made accountable to, a government goal of 85 per cent of the national cohort of students achieving the expected standards at each year level (up to year 8 of schooling when students are approximately 13 years old).

The standards explicitly adopt a ‘balanced text-based’ framework, which incorporates both code-based and meaning construction foci, with success defined by specifying the level of texts able to be read and written across curriculum areas. For example, the national standard for reading at the end of the first year, when children are six years old, states: ‘students will read, respond to, and think critically about fiction and non-fiction texts at the green level of Ready to Read (the core instructional series that supports reading in The New Zealand Curriculum)’ (Ministry of Education, 2009: 19). Features of texts at this level are described. They have a single storyline or topic, with content mostly explicitly stated but with opportunities to make simple inferences. They contain high-frequency topic and interest words likely to be in a reader’s oral vocabulary, strongly supported by the context or illustrations. The text sentences run over more than one line but do not split phrases, with a range of punctuation.

The standards after two years at school (seven-year-olds) continue the ‘balanced text-based’ approach. Now texts have settings and contexts that go beyond immediate prior knowledge and incorporate visual language features such as labelled diagrams, inset photographs and bold text for topic words that are linked to a glossary. They can contain more varied sentence structures, with frequent use of dialogue where multiple characters speak.

The Ready to Read series of texts are professionally graded (rather than using formulae such as lexiles) initially taking into account the range of text features, including length,
incidence of high-frequency words, sentence complexity and length, familiarity of themes and support for meaning-making offered by illustrations. Texts are trialled by teachers and students, based on which final levels are assigned (Literacy Online, n.d.).

More detailed breakdown of the knowledge and skills that students are expected to draw from to meet the standard is provided in a set of Literacy Learning Progressions (Ministry of Education, 2010). This professional resource describes the code-based learning expected, such as phonemic awareness sufficient to identify and distinguish individual phonemes within words, and to segment phonemes; and knowledge of graphemes and phonemes and morphology to write and to solve unfamiliar words while reading.

Like the reading standards, writing standards also incorporate both code-based and meaning-based criteria for judging texts, to engage with curriculum content. The standard for writing emphasizes the expectation that students after one year will:

create texts as they learn in a range of contexts across the New Zealand Curriculum within level 1 . . . use their writing to think about, record, and communicate experiences, ideas, and information to meet specific learning purposes across the curriculum.

(Ministry of Education, 2010: 20)

In the professional resources there are descriptions of the expected code-based skills needed: for example by the end of the first year being able to segment words into syllables, and one-syllable words into phonemes, to write all consonants, accurately spell some key personal and high frequency words, and use capital letters and full stops. There are also descriptions of the process as well as the texts. After one year, students can be expected to plan for writing, using talk or pictures, as well as independently write simple texts to achieve their purposes. Texts will contain several sentences (some compound sentences with simple conjunctions) and will be based on transfer from their oral language and from their reading.

After two years, the writing standard specifies increasing ability to engage with curriculum content, with a continued emphasis on understanding purposes and audience as well as on the basis for writing in oral language and reading. There is more focus on linguistic, particularly grammatical, features.

These definitions formally establish what have been common beliefs and practices in reading and writing (McNaughton et al., 2000), but especially in the explicit emphasis on code-based details also reflect a response to debates and evidence-based recommendations from the mid-1990s. In 1997, a national Literacy Task Force supported by an expert group of literacy academics provided recommendations for change which included more focused instruction on component skills and knowledge such as alphabetic and phonemic awareness (Literacy Task Force, 1999). Researchers in the experts group provided evidence that beginning readers were taught strategies that relied too much on the semantic and syntactic context for identifying words and for decoding in general. While categorizing the New Zealand system as having a ‘whole-language’ approach to instruction was rejected by the full group as overly simplistic and unhelpful, specific evidence-based concerns, such as the over-reliance on context in word reading, were acknowledged and addressed.

Following a National Literacy Strategy in 1999, new guidelines for and descriptions of effective early literacy teaching were introduced (Ministry of Education, 2003). The identified practices included deliberate teaching of component skills and knowledge through guided and shared reading and writing.
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Developmental patterns

Before school

Studies that have assessed children on entry to mainstream (English-speaking) schools indicate that, on average, children can identify (through naming, sounding or mentioning a word starting with) almost half of the letters in English; they know 10 of the 24 tested concepts about print (such as knowing the front of the book and the back of the book, and left to right directionality); and are able to write a word, usually their name (Gilmore, 1998; McNaughton et al., 2003).

As in other countries, there is wide variability in these general measures of early literacy on entry to school. This variability is associated with both SES and ethnicity (Tunmer et al., 2006). The results from mainstream school entry measures suggest an overall effect size difference of $d = 0.64$ on measures of concepts about print between Māori and Anglo/European five-year-olds. There are similarly sized disparities in achievement at school entry based on SES (Gilmore, 1998).

This variation can be attributed to unequal access to at least three sources of literacy practices and literacy resources that relate to school readiness. One is the styles and frequencies of family practices, such as reading to children and talking with children with more literate and school language, which are known to vary both between and within SES and cultural groups (McNaughton, 1996). A second is variations in access to and quality of early childhood provisions. A third is access to and use of resources such as books and writing materials, including new digital technologies.

Recent longitudinal research provides more detail about differences in frequency of literacy practices in the home (Morton et al., 2012). At nine months of age half of a cohort of 6,500 mothers reported reading once or several times a day, and only 16 per cent reported seldom or never reading to children, although higher percentages of Māori (22.3 per cent) and Pasifika mothers (18.8 per cent) reported infrequent reading. These differences were not apparent in singing or telling stories. Rates of ‘reading seldom’ were noticeably higher at two years (34.6 per cent), and both ethnicity and SES were independently related to reported rates.

The New Zealand research is consistent with international research in showing significant associations between high-quality ECE and school readiness as well as progress over the first years at school; and that high-quality ECE can mitigate the effect of low SES on school readiness and subsequent achievement at school (Dearing et al., 2009; Mitchell et al., 2008). Participation rates vary by ethnicity and SES, although importantly the differences are shrinking (www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics), and the issue now is one of equal access to quality and impact on literacy.

There is considerable variation in both structured activities and informal opportunities for literacy development in early childhood settings, and overall there is limited deliberate or direct fostering of specific literacy knowledge and skills (Education Review Office, 2011). While shared reading is common with a focus on concepts about print, observations show participation in structured literacy activities is for the children often voluntary. Some commercial phonics programmes are used and writing activities are often focused on letter formation. The limited deliberate promotion observed is consistent with the theoretical position and direction afforded by the curriculum. In addition, it is also attributed to teachers not having a well-articulated understanding of progressions in literacy and not being aware of how their programmes and practices support ongoing development.
There is little research into the development of literacy in Māori educational contexts, either before school or over the early years. The research that exists is consistent with international developmental research, that more advanced Māori oral language on entry to school is associated with early higher rates of progress in Māori across reading text levels and writing (McNaughton et al., 2006). Children with Māori immersion early childhood experience and advanced language also typically score more highly in word recognition and letter and sound identification, likely attributable to Māori having a very regular phonological system.

Early years of school

The 2013 national standards data (www.educationcounts.govt.nz) show that two-thirds of students could read texts at the expected level required after one year, and eight out of ten attained the required standard at the end of the second year. In writing, eight out of ten children could write texts at the required level. But disparities continue to present. Children in high SES schools had a 4.3 times greater probability of achieving the standard at the end of the first year than children in schools serving the lowest SES group. In writing, the odds were even higher (4.7 times). The figures for children in the Māori medium as judged against the Māori-medium standards are lower in both reading and writing, around six out of ten children achieving the standard.

After one year at school (when students are six years old) an early intervention literacy programme supplementary to classroom instruction is available funded by the New Zealand Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2014). Reading Recovery (Clay, 2001) was designed to accelerate the reading and writing achievement of six-year-old children who are identified as having made less-than-expected progress after one year of classroom-based literacy teaching and also through a Response-to-Intervention process to identify the students who will need continued additional specialist literacy support. It provides daily one-to-one teaching which continues for about 12 to 20 weeks with a specially trained teacher.

Schools decide whether to implement Reading Recovery, and in 2013 the programme was provided by two-thirds of state schools (for 76 per cent of the total six-year-old population). In a Reading Recovery school, the lowest progress students from that school are selected based on a suite of assessments given at the end of the first year (Clay, 2005), and 10,933 of the six-year-old cohort in 2013 received the programme (around 20 per cent of the students in those schools).

Annually, around 80 per cent of Reading Recovery students make accelerated progress and are successfully ‘discontinued’ having reached the National Standard text level expected after two years at school. These rates reflect the international evidence base that Reading Recovery is highly effective in the short term (Jesson and Limbrick, 2014). What the most recent large-scale evaluation reveals in addition to confirming large positive effect sizes on a range of literacy measures, however, is the considerable site by site variability, indicating that contextual influences such as school and district leadership and resourcing influence effectiveness (Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 2014).

Issues facing New Zealand

Three major issues are pressing for New Zealand’s literacy policy and practices:
1 Achieving more equitable outcomes

The issue of more equitable outcomes is longstanding and, although achieved in specific intervention programmes, has proven to be largely intractable at a national level. In upper levels of primary and in the middle secondary school years the international comparisons have consistently shown large SES and ethnicity differences (www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics).

There are two developmental explanations. One focuses on differential access to literacy practices before school and outside of school that contribute to development in school forms of literacy. Trajectories of development reflect the ongoing impact of this differential exposure and schools have been unable to make up the difference. A recent addition to the focus is the cumulative effect of the summer break on the disparities which are as apparent in New Zealand studies of reading (McNaughton et al., 2012) as they are elsewhere (Allington et al., 2010).

The second explanation focuses on mismatches between the teaching practices and curriculum in schools and the learning needs of underserved groups. This explanation takes several forms which hold differing implications for policy and practices. One assumes that the text-based framework does not provide the detailed code knowledge that Māori, Pasifika and children from poor communities need exposure to (Tunmer et al., 2006). An alternative position is that more direct teaching of the text-based approaches which capitalizes on children’s incipient knowledge of texts and builds the language base necessary for school practices is needed (Phillips et al., 2004). A third position argues for the widespread expansion of Māori immersion schooling and bilingual teaching for Pasifika students (May, 2011; McCaffery and McFall-McCaffery, 2010). The latter would require a change in New Zealand’s current languages policy and major changes to schooling provisions.

Evidence in support of these explanations draw on studies demonstrating the effects of developing and using texts that are more closely matched with the language and event knowledge of Māori and Pasifika students (McDowall and Parr, 2012); of changes in the core instructional designs of guided reading and shared reading to become more deliberate and explicit in how children are taught strategies (Phillips et al., 2004); of more deliberate and direct teaching which builds phonemic awareness (Tunmer et al., 2006); and of shifts to a more contextualized approach to designing literacy instruction (Jesson et al., 2011; Si’ilata et al., 2012).

To some extent schools have received support to use this range of evidence through professional learning and development, and the provision of new resources, and the national evidence indicates that gains in early accuracy and fluency of reading have eventuated. But more generalized changes in literacy achievement have not occurred (detailed further below). What now is needed is more deliberate scaling up of what the various studies have shown. To counter the existing constraints associated with autonomy at school and teacher levels, a new national policy is developing communities of up to ten schools to solve their achievement problems through the identification and sharing of effective practices (Ministry of Education, 2015).

Another area of development in policy and practice is about the transition between early childhood education and school. The design and implementation of measures of development through the early childhood years is needed (McLachlan and Arrow, 2011). Additionally, greater articulation between the curriculum statements should be created. Few studies have examined possible teaching approaches which could add value to the strengths of the meaning-construction approach before school. Nor has there been widespread testing, use and scaling of early childhood practices such as oral language exchanges which develop
school-related vocabulary, well-planned reading with children and guidance in creating texts for different purposes to examine their impact on school success. As an initial step, more design-based research (Anderson and Shattuck, 2012) that systematically examines variability to identify sites of effectiveness, tests the design and redesign of instruction, and takes evidence-based designs to scale is needed.

The third area of policy development is the provision of guidance and access to resources for families. As in other countries there are programmes to increase access to resources, which in the case of literacy has mostly meant access to books (National Library of New Zealand, 2014). Like the international studies (Neuman and Celano, 2006), some of these have used libraries, with mixed success (Allpress and Gilbertson, 2014). Others use a ‘book flood’ approach, in which books are given to families or children and these have had some important effects (Tran et al., 2011). As noted earlier, the activity of reading to preschoolers is relatively widespread so a shift in focus from access to effective interactional styles and equitable patterns of usage is needed.

2 Comprehension and content literacy

The second general issue is a concern for how to build complex language uses with texts through early literacy practices that have significance for continued development through school. The developmental issue concerns how early literacy learning provides a basis for the literacy capabilities needed in the middle school years, including reading informational texts and critical literacy across content areas.

There are several sources of evidence for this concern. One is low achievement patterns in comprehension relative to increasingly higher achievement levels in fluency and accuracy of reading. A National Education Mentoring programme which examines the performance of nine-year-olds across the curriculum areas showed that the percentages of nine-year-olds not able to read with fluency and accuracy at expected grade level dropped from a high in 1996 of 19 per cent (fiction) and 27 per cent (non-fiction) to 7 per cent and 15 per cent in 2004, and remained at these levels in 2008. By contrast, the levels of comprehension at nine years have if anything declined. While gaps between ethnic and SES groups have dropped in the overall reading assessments at nine years (they are still above effect sizes of 0.4 on various comparisons), this is largely due to substantial changes in accuracy and fluency and the national data support the research evidence that while these are necessary for increased comprehension, they are not sufficient. The contrast between fiction and non-fiction reading signals a concern for wider reading too (Crooks et al., 2009). The picture for writing achievement is similar. At nine years children are significantly better in surface versus deep features of their writing and there has been little change in overall achievement or reduction in the large differences between groups (National Education Monitoring Project, 2010).

These data signal a need to change the balance of the instructional design foci in the early years of school and in the articulation between curricula. The instructional design in the early years needs to have a stronger component focus on language acquisition at the word and supra-word levels through the reading and writing instructional approaches.

3 Digital access to and guidance for literacy

There are two sides to the third issue. On the one hand, there have been repeated reports claiming that students need to learn new skills and digital competencies to participate in and contribute to a rapidly changing twenty-first-century economy and society (21st Century
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Learning Reference Group, 2014). On the other hand, there is little developmental evidence for just what the new literacy skills and competencies are, and what the new effective pedagogies might entail. The issue is a need for better research evidence and tested designs for literacy development in digital environments.

Currently, there is only limited use of digital technologies in early childhood services (Education Review Office, 2011). Thus impacts on literacy through early childhood settings are likely limited. But the most recent survey of the school sector shows that almost all schools report high levels of engagement with e-learning activities. Despite this widespread adoption there are challenging patterns. The ratio of students to school-owned computers has remained, since 2011, one computer per three students, and fewer than a quarter of schools report all their students have access to a personal digital device. Cost and network infrastructure issues mean there have been SES disparities in this picture (Research New Zealand, 2014), although these are rapidly reducing. Increasingly, the challenge for low-SES schools developing new forms of teaching and learning with 1:1 devices is to overcome the risk of a second digital divide in which the cognitive challenge of digital activities and what they might afford for literacy development is limited.

There are mixed predictions in the research literature about early literacy development in digital environments and the effects of digital teaching and learning platforms on early literacy development. The evidence to date shows that digital environments vary greatly in the depth of learning afforded, and that e-learning is often used as a powerful motivator for teaching traditional skills (Wright, 2010). However, as Attewell (2001) cautions, there is the danger that differential digital usage might exacerbate existing divides if low-SES students received a diet of lower order digital practice. In line with the history of local innovation, digital programmes are currently being developed by schools and groups of schools (see, for example, www.manaiakalani.org). Such local innovations are supported nationally by the development and sharing of digital resources to support Māori language (see http://elearning.tki.org.nz/Teaching/Resources2/Maori-resources) as well as Pacific languages (see http://elearning.tki.org.nz/Teaching/Resources2/Pasifika-resources).

Conclusions

The historical context in New Zealand has meant that New Zealand has many unique features that influence the nature and outcomes of literacy instruction. Historically high levels of ambient literacy with widespread literacy practices, a relatively open curriculum, a traditionally meaning-based approach to literacy instruction and a history of teacher-led innovation combine to result in context specific approaches that work well for many students. But ongoing evidence of educational disparities has resulted in an increased policy focus on reducing achievement gaps, and explicit inclusion of code-based criteria in policy documents. In parallel, schools and researchers have continued to seek approaches that meet the needs of target groups. While some reduction of inequities is noted in the areas of accuracy and fluency, disparities continue in the reading comprehension which is required if students are to use their literacy skill to access the curriculum. The increasingly digital environment has added an additional literacy challenge for low-SES schools. In line with the historical New Zealand approach, school-led innovations seek solutions for addressing equity challenges using digital learning approaches.
References


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