

The New Zealand Story

An island nation, a diverse population, no basal texts, one of the world's highest literacy rates—New Zealand shares some secrets of its educational accomplishments.

It is a pleasure to share with readers of *Educational Leadership* the significant features of New Zealand's language and reading instruction. We're proud of our record of success in literacy; as I look back on the last 20 years, I can see some of the factors and strengths on which we must continue to build.

New Zealand is an island nation in the South Pacific with a population of 3.3 million people. The first settlers were Maori from Polynesia; in present-day New Zealand they make up about 12 percent of the population. People of British, Yugoslav, European, Asian, and Pacific Island descent have also settled here, bringing with them a rich diversity of cultures and perspectives on life.

New Zealanders—and 85 percent of us were born here—grow up in small neighborhood schools that serve all the children in the community. Well over half the primary (elementary) schools have fewer than 120 children, so mixed-level teaching is the norm. These community schools have always had parents involved in various ways: in home-school associations, helping with class outings, and the inevitable fund-raising. In recent years parents have become even more involved with class programs, particularly those in reading, language, and art.

Photograph courtesy of Richard C. Owen Publishers, Inc.



The cover of the teacher's handbook Reading in Junior Classes (from Richard C. Owen Publishers, 1985) features this photograph illustrating a child's bappy encounter with books and symbolizing the New Zealand philosophy.

Photograph by Randy Wyatt, courtesy of Fairfax County Public Schools



"Big Books" are just the right size for reading aloud to small people: everyone can see the pictures—and the words.

Our Background

New Zealand mandated free compulsory schooling in 1877. Our national curriculum is delineated in syllabuses that describe the aims and objectives for each subject, some ideas for various teaching approaches, and suggestions for evaluation and assessment.

We have never had basal texts for any subject in New Zealand; teachers decide on resources that suit their children's needs and on the teaching methods that work for them based on the syllabus. There has always been this strong element of teacher choice. The Department of Education publishes and provides all schools with a number of exemplary materials. In addition, schools have grants that enable them to choose a variety of books and other resources.

The last 20 years have seen important developments. Exciting work was done in the '60s by Don Holdaway (1972, 1979), Warwick Elley (1981, 1985, 1987), and Marie Clay (1972, 1985) among many, many people who combined research and practical application. Holdaway saw the way we liked reading to children, so he elaborated on the "Big Book" idea. He emphasized the importance of sharing reading, both in school and out. Elley, in his investigations of the development of facility in language, documented the need for a good rich diet

of books with diversity and choice. Clay, known especially well in the United States for her work in reading recovery, refined techniques for observing and monitoring children as they read. Her work led to the development of the "running record" as a diagnostic teaching tool. I could name many others.

By the '70s we were ready to offer some key principles involved in learning to read. Our friends in the United States will recognize the influence of the work of Frank Smith (1978) and Ken Goodman (1986) in these. We learned from their work and from that of other fine researchers around the world. Some of those principles include:

- Reading, talking, and writing are inseparably inter-related;
- The foundations of literacy are laid in the early years;
- Reading for meaning is paramount;
- Books for children learning to read should use natural idiomatic language that is appropriate to the subject;
- There is no one way in which people learn to read. A combination of approaches is needed.

Recent Developments

We have taken every opportunity to enable teachers to become familiar with

the new philosophy of reading. We've had inservice meetings, teachers' conferences, workshops of all kinds, where ideas have been shared, explored, and worked through. I've had many productive sessions during holiday times when teachers have come together to learn from each other and from researchers and librarians. These gatherings help build confidence in our language development expertise. The conferences always have great book displays, too, which help us become more alert to the features we need to look for in choosing books for children. We believe that good teaching follows naturally if we really understand what we're trying to do. Our handbook, *Reading in Junior Classes*, describes the philosophy so that teachers have a readable reference from which to absorb the ideas. But we know that there is no substitute for our conferences and exchange of ideas. The quality of language programs depends on what is happening inside the teacher's head—not on a set of instructions or guides.

We've learned to be very attentive to what children do in classrooms. We've become more and more observant, watchful, and responsive, ready to stand back at the right moment and to move forward when the child needs a little extra help. Our teachers let the children explore and try out ideas and are skillful in encouraging classroom discussion. They help children to express themselves fully.

Our appreciation for the vital role that parents play has grown, and we recognize the importance of interaction between home and school. A reform of 1989 placed a majority of parents on every school governing body. Twenty years ago we were not so much at ease in having parents fully involved with classroom programs.

We have the very best of materials! I have a special interest in this, because I work in the Ministry of Education, which is responsible for our Ready to Read books. These are the 65 or so books that form the framework for our early reading program. They're "real books" that can take their place alongside the best children's books on any market. They were written in response to a nationwide invitation for scripts, and a selection was made of titles to try out in

classrooms. Afterwards, we discarded, revised, edited, and developed them, until finally we had a group which met all the criteria for production. Now these books are used in all our schools, and we are continuing to add to their numbers. The teachers augment them with a huge variety of other titles from publishers around the world, ensuring that children have access to the best of writing from a diversity of sources. But Ready to Read is the heart of the early reading program.

Continuing to Learn

We are confident that our children's reading instruction is based on a sound program. We are also confident that we can keep on learning and improving. We continue to read research that is international in scope and to welcome visitors to our classrooms who can compare what we are doing with what they find productive. We don't pretend that we have all the answers.

We delight in watching our children talk, read, write, paint, and model, and we love to see their colorful work going up on the classroom walls, even hanging from ceilings. I recently negotiated my way around a 6-foot high dragon that occupied the center of a "sole charge" (one teacher) school. The 25 5- to 12-year-old children there were all talking, writing, and reading about beasts of myth and legend. Lately I've read the opening chapter of Bleak House to 17-year-olds and then read their vivid accounts of 19th century Chancery Lane. Our children talk and write and write and laugh, and read ... and read ... and read. □

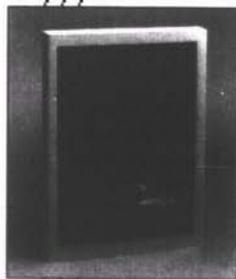
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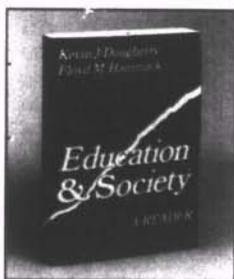
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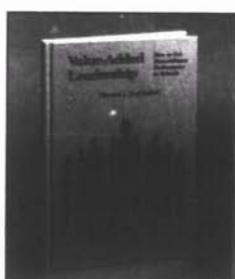
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