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DCSA FORUM MEMBER REPORT: The literacy landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand- At a glance

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At a glance:

The literacy landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand

What we know, what needs fixing and what we should prioritise

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At a glance: The literacy landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand

What we know, what needs fixing and what we should prioritise

This summary outlines the evidence for how to improve children's and young persons' literacy development in Aotearoa New Zealand. Among 15-year-olds, literacy achievement levels have been dropping and wide disparities remain unchanged. Changes are required to produce equity and excellence outcomes for all students.

We propose that better outcomes will result from optimising learning and development across all ages, rather than focusing on isolated, limited or piecemeal solutions. Changing one variable at one point is unlikely to make an overall difference. Instead, multiple changes during sensitive periods and at transitions are needed.

Knowledge gaps

Evidence is lacking in some areas. For example, we know very little about what literacy activities actually occur in the everyday experiences of children and young people, and what outcomes eventuate from these activities. Even less is known about literacy progress through kura kaupapa Māori, but many of the recommendations here that focus on English medium education could be extended to Māori medium schooling.

Constraints and enablers for change

There are constraints on and enablers for greater success in equity and excellence objectives. These range from the preparation of teachers, through to the limited funding for research and development in educational science. Disparities in living circumstances, or structural inequalities and discrimination, also contribute to our challenges in equity and excellence. The recommendations proposed here would be more powerful if these conditions were improved.

Recommendations by period/transition

The evidence we do have means we can identify periods and transitions where specific improvements can be made. Across all periods, experimental evidence suggests we can use digital tools and platforms to improve literacy.

1. Emergent literacy period

At the point of starting school, children vary markedly in their literacy and language profiles. This reflects different experiences with early learning services and family/whānau. During this period, literacy development can be positively affected by:

- reading with children,
- telling and retelling stories, and
- using progress and quality measures in early learning services.

At a system level, we know very little about the quality and outcomes of activities in early learning services.

2. Starting school

During the transition to school, formal and informal assessment tools are needed. These should provide detailed profiles of new entrants' strengths and learning needs.

3. Years 1-3

Initial differences in literacy knowledge and skills continue and may be exaggerated once at school. We currently use a three-tiered 'Response to Intervention' model to help students who are struggling. Ideally, this should provide high-quality instruction, interventions to overcome low progress, and identification of severe learning needs that require expert resources. However, our current system has weaknesses – especially in provisions for learning needs after the current Tier 2 intervention, Reading Recovery. Five high value instructional activities need to occur frequently and with precision over the Years 1-3:

- shared reading that incorporates conversations;
- guided reading with systematic phonics (sounding out words);
- shared and instructional writing;
- personalised high quality dialogue; and
- home reading and writing.

4. Year 4

Literacy progress slows around Year 4. Around 8% of children in regular classrooms can read individual words accurately but have language skills that limit their holistic reading comprehension. By this time, differences are very apparent between students from low socioeconomic status (SES) communities, Māori and Pasifika students, and other students. Recommendations for Year 4 include:

- Shift focus onto language and comprehension strategies for a range of different subjects and purposes.
- Screening and diagnostic tools to inform effective teaching and resources.

5. Years 4-8

During this period, achievement drops in science and mathematics. This may be due in part to an increasing need for subject-specific literacy skills. In addition, critical thinking must be developed in this period, especially for digital and social media contexts. Advanced forms of critical literacy are not taught well across countries, and Aotearoa New Zealand is no different.

A 'summer slide' is apparent for some, contributing to ongoing low rates of progress and achievement levels.

Given the importance of language, culture and identity to achievement, it is concerning that about one quarter of Year 8 students say they have never had the opportunity to read books that reflect their identities.

Social and emotional skills also grow in importance – especially those related to self-regulation. We recommend three high-value activities that can reduce disparities and increase overall levels of achievement:

- critical reasoning across subjects;
- a high literacy 'diet'; and

- summer learning programmes.

6. From primary to secondary school

A dip in achievement as students transition from primary to secondary schooling has been documented in different countries and occurs in Aotearoa New Zealand. Social and emotional skills related to wellbeing impact the adjustment to secondary school. Activities that would make a difference to the transition and subsequent achievement in literacy include:

- accessible student records for a range of purposes, including data discussions to support effective teaching;
- a combination of school-wide policies and specific teaching to promote wellbeing (on either side of the transition); and
- the continuation of summer learning programmes.

7. Years 9-11

From Years 9-11, aspects of collaborative reasoning (argumentation) and critical literacy become even more important, in addition to developing high level subject-specific literacy skills. From Year 9 onwards, students' motivation and social and emotional skills make a major contribution to achievement. For Māori, living with whānau with strong Māori identity, language and culture enables greater achievement. Additionally, attending Māori medium schools or having teachers who are Māori increases the odds of achievement even more. High-value activities recommended include:

- a new RTI system for early identification of and systematic interventions for students with ongoing learning needs;
- research and development programmes to determine culturally appropriate designs; and
- continued summer learning programmes.