

Abandon our literacy myth

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Of all professions, teaching epitomises the tensions between scientific approaches to learning and myths about how children learn. As American educational researcher Jim Kauffman noted, myths (and “stupid” thinking) keep education “in a chronic state of denial of reality”.

An entrenched myth in New Zealand education is that the whole language emphasis in literacy teaching is best. This approach is based on the false view that learning to read is like learning to speak, with both abilities developing ‘naturally’. As [Smith and Elley wrote in 1994](#), “children learn to read themselves; direct teaching plays only a minor role” (p. 87). Children are said to learn written language like they learn spoken language, as long as the emphasis is on meaning. Literacy instruction, therefore, should focus on meaning construction, not on word analysis activities.

This whole language approach came mainly from Ken and Yetta Goodman in the US and Frank Smith in Canada. It’s based on a philosophy, not on empirical research. Forerunners to Goodman who were influential in the development of whole language in the early to mid-20th century include John Dewey in the US, and Sylvia Ashton-Warner and Myrtle Simpson in New Zealand. They championed constructivist approaches to knowledge creation and making meaning through reading ‘natural’ language texts.

New Zealand teachers have been taught the whole language approach for decades. It is deeply embedded in literacy instruction and in the Ready to Read series of texts. The development of word analysis skills is downplayed or totally rejected. Instead, word identification is based on the ‘multiple cues’ theory of reading. When beginning readers come across an unknown word in text, they are encouraged to use the context of the sentence, cues such as pictures, or as Marie Clay wrote, some of the letters in the word “as a last resort”. If all that fails, children are told to guess a word that fits the story. Ministry (and former Department) of Education publications have promoted this approach to literacy teaching since the 1960s when the Ready to Read texts were originally introduced. *Reading in Junior Classes* in 1985 was the first of a number of whole language orientated teacher texts, which include the woefully out of date *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1 to 4* (2003).

The whole language approach has been discredited by scientific studies of literacy for nearly four decades. Extensive research shows that achievement in reading depends on two processes: the ability to recognise the words in text accurately and quickly, and the use of language skills such as vocabulary and syntax (see [Turnmer & Hoover, 2019](#)). Progress in learning to read words requires the ability to translate letters and letter patterns into phonological forms (i.e., letter-sound relationships). This enables beginning readers to develop sight word knowledge, which in turn frees up cognitive resources to focus on sentence meaning.

Comprehensive research shows that explicit, systematic instruction in relating spellings to pronunciations positively influences reading achievement, especially during the early stages of learning to read. Lack of these skills impedes reading development. Explicit attention to alphabetic coding skills, alongside explicit attention to vocabulary, is helpful for all children and crucial for some.

The Ministry of Education funded research at Massey University that involved a year-long PLD program for teachers of New Entrant/Year 1 children that focused on the use of explicit, structured and systematic instruction in the development of effective word identification skills. By mid-Year 2, children whose teachers participated in the PLD (intervention group) generally had higher scores on reading and spelling assessments than children in a comparison group whose NE/Y1 teachers carried on 'business as usual'. Especially significant was the finding that low-decile intervention children had mean scores on some key assessments that were close to or equal to those of children in higher decile schools ([Chapman et al., 2018](#)).

Another example of New Zealand research is the University of Canterbury's Better Start Literacy Approach, which has been effective in accelerating the phonological awareness, phonic knowledge, listening comprehension, vocabulary, word reading and spelling ability of a diverse range of 5- and 6-year-old learners across school communities in New Zealand (e.g., [Gillon et al., 2019](#)).

So, what does this all mean? We have to stop the steady decline in our children's literacy performances that has occurred over the last 40 years. If we continue to teach the same way based on a myth, we will get the same



unsatisfactory results. The status quo especially disadvantages Māori and Pacific children, children in low-decile schools, and children with or at risk for dyslexia. That is simply unacceptable. Adopting the principles of structured literacy and teaching children to develop effective word-level decoding skills and strategies, explicitly and systematically, is a necessary foundation for literacy development. It's time to abandon our literacy myth and to lift literacy in Aotearoa New Zealand!

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This article originally appeared on the [Lifting Literacy Aotearoa blog](#).

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