What happens to reading progress in New Zealand Year 7-8 classes? The plateau, literacy leadership, and the remaining tail

Janinka Greenwood, Jo Fletcher, Faye Parkhill,
with Sue Bridges and Mick Grimley
University of Canterbury

Introduction: Focus and context of the research

A *dip* or *plateau* in students' literacy learning progress is reported internationally to occur between the ages of 9 and 13. In New Zealand, concerns are raised in the media and in political debate about the underachievement of children in terms of literacy. In particular, it is frequently cited that 20 percent are failing in reading. The most recent NEMP Report (Crooks, Smith and Flockton, 2009) indicates little or no improvement statistically in reading achievement, despite extensive funding of professional development during the last four years in many schools.

This discussion is grounded in a research study, funded by the Cognition Education Research Trust, which examined school practice in teaching reading in Years 7 and 8. It briefly reports the findings, discusses the nature and causes of the dip, and offers an emerging theorisation of factors that lead to successful reading development.

There is a growing body of research evidence internationally (Brozo, Shiel, & Topping, 2007; Farstrup, 2005; Hattie, 2007) to support the proposition that reading progress drops off as students move through the schooling system and that reading is often not effectively taught at the 9 to 13 year old age level. For example, recent research in New Zealand (Hattie, 2007; McNaughton, Amituanai-Toloa, & Lei, 2007) indicates that there appears to be a 'tapering off' or 'plateauing' of progress in reading for a significant number of students in low socio-economic schools, despite successful interventions at an earlier level.

Methodological approach

Our project reviewed the analysis of reading development and the factors that impact on it in national and international literature. Developing a questionnaire based on the core concepts within the literature, we then surveyed teachers and leaders in the schools of the upper South Island. This yielded quantitative results about classroom teaching assessment practices, choice of instructional materials, and teachers' perceptions of their students' progress. Next, drawing again on the conceptual framework developed from the literature and the recommendations of our Advisory Group, we selected five schools that have a reputation for effective teaching of reading, and studied them closely to identity key features of their practice. In these case studies we observed reading classes, examined results obtained through nationally standardised tests, and interviewed teachers, students, principals, syndicate leaders and parents. The case studies gave us rich qualitative data that allowed us to build models of effective practice.

Short overview of significant literature

Reading theorists focus on a variety of approaches. Some theorists (see, for example, Pressley et al., 2002) variously discuss the need for children to develop phonological awareness, word level strategies, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension strategies. Others (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Leu et al., 2004; New London Group, 2000) argue the importance of critical literacy approaches, especially in terms of the needs of this age group. Numerous researchers (Taleni et al., 2007) emphasise the need for socio-culturally relevant reading resources, contexts and tasks. Alton-Lee (2003) and McNaughton (2002) stress that successful literacy instruction builds on the knowledge and understandings that children bring to the learning environment from their diverse cultural and language backgrounds. Allington (2003), Hattie (1999) and Nuthall (2007) emphasise that all children need explicit instruction about some aspects of literacy processes, and not every child 'gets it' after a single lesson.

A body of literature talks about the importance of the school environment, particularly student-teacher relationships (Barber & Olsen, 2004).The importance of effective leadership, collaborative teams of teachers, a school-wide reading plan, and focused professional development are highlighted (see, for example, Fisher & Frey,
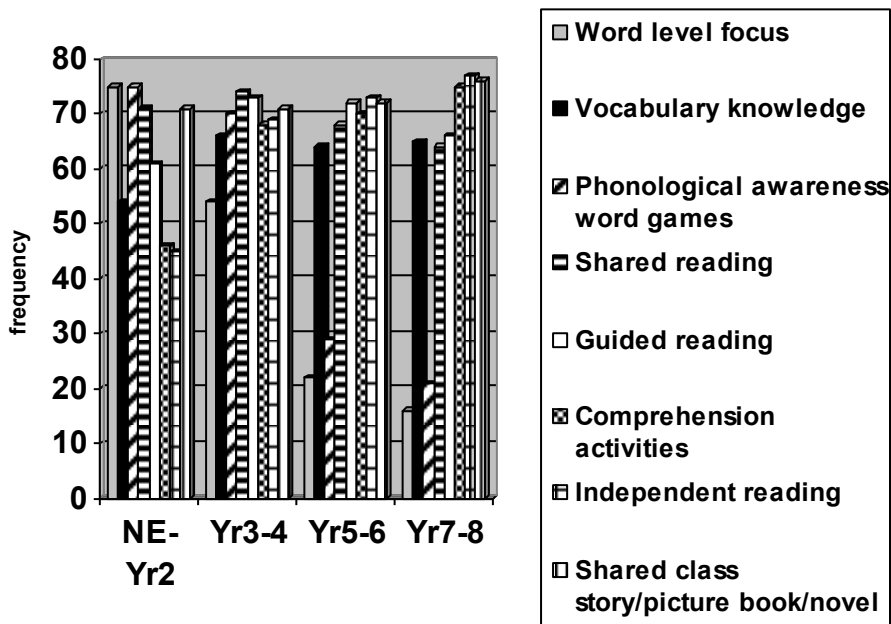
2007; Timperley et al., 2007). Recent studies, particularly, emphasise the social nature of reading (DeZutter, 2007), highlighting the importance of family and community influences and the need for alignment between school and family.

The regional survey

The survey yielded a range of information. Here we highlight four items. First, it showed a wide spread of practices in reading instruction at Years 7 and 8. These included word level focus, vocabulary awareness, phonological awareness and games, shared reading, guided reading, comprehension activities, independent reading and shared class stories, picture books and novels. It is of note that across the board, many teachers identified explicit acts of teaching as less important at this age level than at Years 3 and 4. Of particular concern to us was the drop in the use of *guided reading* approaches.
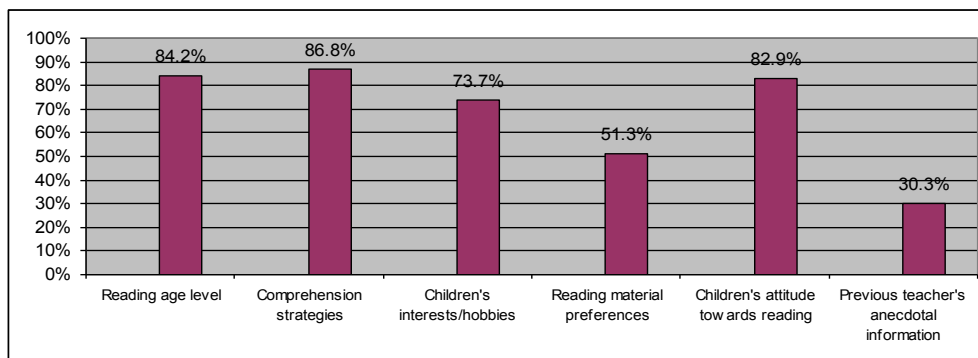
An inherent part of a guided reading session is the discussion that supports comprehension, critical responses and deeper thinking (Ministry of Education, 2005). Explicit instruction is therefore important for developing reading comprehension; but teacher-led explicit teaching strategies were less frequently identified than independent reading, comprehension activities and shared class story/picture book/novel approaches. Comprehension activities, usually in the form of worksheets, tend to test comprehension, rather than teach it. There appear to be contradictions here between the reported valuation of comprehension assessment and the actual teaching of comprehension strategies.

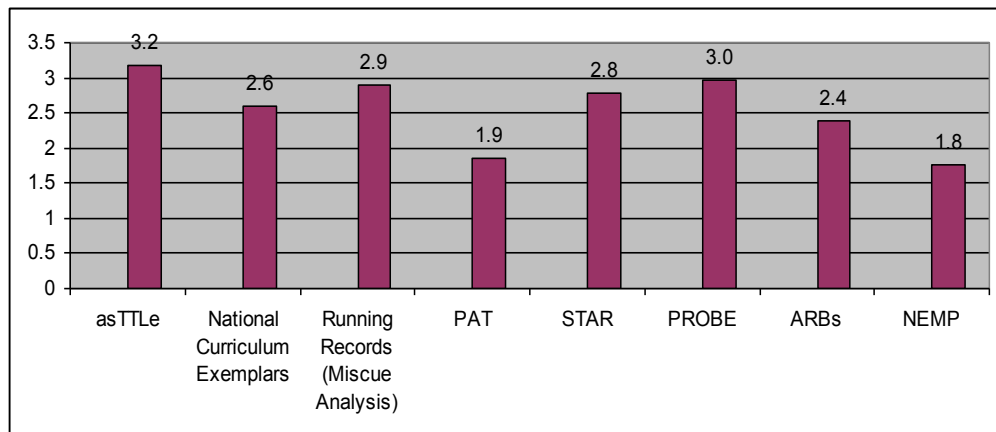**Figure 1 :Practices in reading instruction**

Respondents indicated that they believed that information about children's comprehension strategies, reading age level, and attitude towards reading were essential factors in establishing a Year 7/8 reading programme. Fewer rated the children's interests and hobbies or reading material preferences as essential.

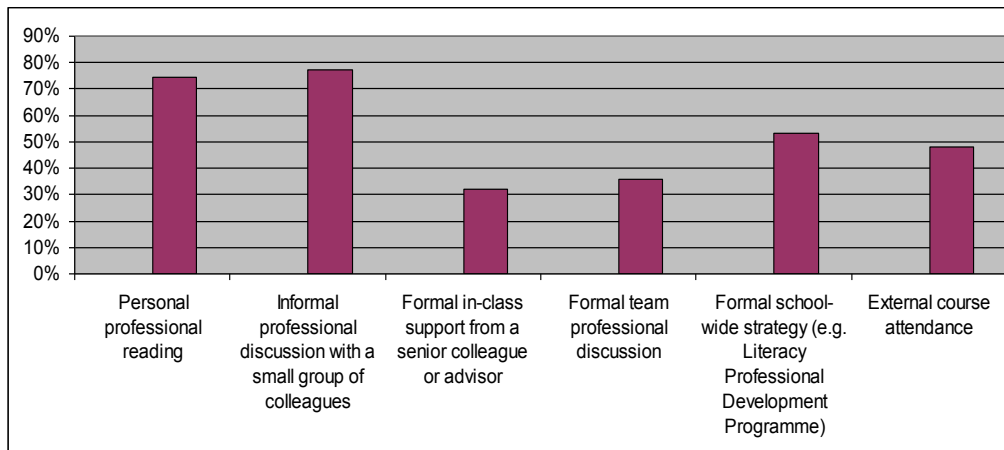**Figure 2: Information valued by teachers**

While a majority of teachers indicated that they would rely more on test results than on previous teachers' evaluations, the survey revealed that a wide range of assessment tools are utilised by individual schools. This makes it difficult to track students' progress from one school to another, and compare across schools.

Figure 3: Use of assessment tools

A further significant spread of responses showed that while a majority of teachers stated that they engaged in informal professional discussions about reading, fewer than half indicated that they took apart in formal seminars or professional development (PD) courses. There is of course overlap between the choice of responses, as many of the professional discussions might have occurred as a result of sustained school-wide professional development. Overall, a shift from individual or syndicate-based PD to a more integrated whole-school approach was also apparent. Timperley et al. (2007) acknowledge that professional learning and development can have an effect on student learning and outcomes; but the actual conditions for this to occur are more complex than merely providing the time and resources for teachers. Other factors, such as active leadership and engaging in professional communities of practice, impact on students' outcomes.

Figure 4: Professional development activities

Case studies of schools with reputedly effective literacy practices

Differences of approach were evident in each of the five case study schools, as were differences in demographics.   For example, one West Coast school had a 'boys only' class with a group of boys who had been identified as needing special motivation in learning, particularly reading. The teacher had developed a programme of work with sophisticated text picture books. Nevertheless, some strong common themes emerged across all of the schools. We discuss these in greater depth elsewhere. (Fletcher et al., 2009; Greenwood et al., 2009). Here we would like to comment on the impact of leadership, programmes of explicit instruction in reading, professional development, and especially on the impact of these factors on the *dip* reported in the literature.

A picture emerged in these schools of teachers with knowledge of effective reading instruction, of whole school leadership focusing on reading literacy and the differing needs of learners, and of consequent improvement of *all* students' achievement in reading as measured against nationally standardised test scores, followed by mitigation of the tapering off within the age group that is reported internationally. In other words, we found that literacy learning is strongly impacted on by the leadership demonstrated by teachers and by school organisations. However, it needs to be noted that all students did not progress at equal rates or to equal levels of achievement.

The impact of leadership in literacy learning

The study showed that schools which could give evidence of improving their students' literacy achievements also had clear and rich instructional reading programmes and strong leadership within the field. Although we are primarily discussing the leadership features within the case study schools, some of these features were reported by other schools in the survey; in those cases, too, there was a match with reported achievement.

All these schools had literacy leaders, and the development of their focus on literacy was supported by the principal. They all had extensive professional development programmes in literacy, and these were sustained over a period of time. Most of the school literacy leaders were supported by external facilitators of literacy professional development. The schools took an active role in reviewing their external professional development provision, and one of the schools changed to an alternative provider which, they felt, better met their school's specific needs.

All the principals had a strong passion for raising literacy achievement, and worked in a collaborative ongoing manner with their staff. All the teachers in the classes we studied (these were ones who were reported to be effective leaders of literacy) had a strong passion for raising literacy achievement. Some of the principals and literacy leaders were actively and consistently addressing the problem of how to support and shift the teaching attitude of staff in their school who were perceived to be stuck in outdated practices.

All the schools used norm referenced assessment of reading achievement to ensure that there was a continuing improvement in achievement. Assessments were analysed on a whole school basis, to ensure that the school as a whole was positioning itself to better meet the needs of all students, with particular attention to gender and ethnic groups.

Teachers as classroom leaders

Within each of our case study classrooms, the teacher was an overt and strong leader of literacy learning. All of the teachers had specific times in each day when reading was actively taught. All had established a positive classroom environment and developed interactive processes which ensured that disruptions by unacceptable behaviour were kept to a minimum, and quickly dealt with.

All had a rich range of instructional processes that involved students in interpretive and analytical approaches to the text as well as in decoding and comprehending. They drew on a wide range of reading resources, aiming to meet the various interests of students in their class, and they used a range of whole class, group and individual processes.

All the teachers showed evidence of detailed prior planning, which identified not only the key features and possible implications of the texts they brought to the lesson, but also the specific teaching opportunities the texts offered and the deliberate acts of teaching they would engage in.

All the teachers talked about the importance of vocabulary for reading comprehension and had developed strategies for explicit contextualised instruction. Each had developed their own style of questioning, but evident across the group was the strategic use of both closed and open questions, facilitating in turn a focus on particular parts of the text, and an opportunity for students to bring their own understandings and their own questions.

Regular and timely feedback and reinforcement from the teachers we observed were evidenced in all case study classrooms, and they impacted on the focus and confidence of the students. In different ways that reflected their own personalities, all the teachers used the reading texts they had chosen to engage critical thinking and to explore wider life questions, and to encourage students to bring their own experience and evolving questions to the text.

Finally, all the teachers expressed and demonstrated both a strong enthusiasm for reading and a sound knowledge of young adult fiction.

Impact on learners

In broad terms, the impact on learners involved the development of enthusiasm for reading, and continuing improvement in their assessed literacy achievement. The students also expressed an enjoyment of literature, and were actively willing to make connections between the texts they read and their own lives.

Figure 5 offers a summary of the relationship between literacy leadership, classroom programmes and student reading achievement.

Figure 5: Leadership, programmes and reading achievement

Literacy leadership
- literacy leaders
- support by principal
- sustained professional development
- supported by external facilitators
- active review of professional development provision
- choice of provider
- passion for literacy achievement
- collaborative support
- working to shift stuck attitudes
- use of norm referenced assessment
- whole school analysis
- attention to gender and ethnic groups

Rich classroom literacy programmes
- targeted instructional reading
- positive classroom environment
- good classroom management
- varied processes
- varied resources
- group and individual focus
- strong planning
- deliberate acts of teaching
- development of vocabulary
- purposive questioning
- feedback and reinforcement
- using text to explore wider life questions
- enthusiasm for reading

Student reading achievement
- enthusiasm for reading
- continuing improvement in assessed achievement
- enjoyment of literature
- making connections between text and own life

Further areas to research

In the schools that informed our case studies, due to the continued active teaching of reading processes, there was no evidence of a tapering off of progress in reading achievement. There were, however, still some students who were achieving at significantly lower levels than others. Overall, in the schools which responded to the survey, there was evidence of a significant *tail* in terms of reading achievement.

In further stages of our research we are interested in examining that tail further. First, we would like to further distinguish between the occurrence of a plateau in reading achievement across the age group as a whole, and the increased visibility of particular learners who are struggling with reading. Secondly, we would like to examine further the factors which impact on the particular students who underachieve in reading.

Some of our yet unanswered questions about the students who constitute the tail in testing results include the following:

- Is their underachievement caused by a failure of the teaching strategies used at Year 7 and 8, or is it that what was learned earlier had a threshold of usefulness which runs out when more complex reading demands occur? Are we perhaps introducing critical responses in literacy too late?

- Is it competency in reading that tapers off, or is it interest? If it is interest, is that because of competing social pressures of community, peers and even puberty, or is it because of the choice of instructional materials? How can schools better bridge the gap, where it occurs, between what motivates students socially and socio-culturally, and what motivates or doesn't motivate them to read? Can success in reading alienate a student from significant peers, or community? And if so, how can schools reconcile the tension?

- Do our schools have access to a sufficient range of culturally relevant materials to cater for all students, particularly for Maori, Pasifika, and new immigrants and refugees? How can a teacher, or a school, overcome a shortage of culturally relevant materials? How can a teacher, or a school, overcome their gaps in understanding the cultural background of their students? What happens when family and school values do not align?

- Are the tests of reading achievement we use at primary and intermediate level good indicators of the kinds of reading students will need for success at secondary school and in their adult lives? How does success in reading at intermediate level align with success at secondary level, or with success in the workplace?

We strongly encourage further research into these questions, in order to help us be more specific when we discuss the success or failure of our schools in developing readers and in raising reading achievement, and permit us to develop policies and practices to cater better for the needs of *all* learners.

Key policy implications

Although this project represents only the first stage of an investigation into what happens to reading progress at Years 7 and 8, and, as shown above, we still have

many unanswered questions, the patterns and the questions that emerge suggest a number of important considerations for the development of policy.

Policy needs to be informed not only by the statistical data in national and international test scores, but also by a closer analysis of where the difficulties lie. For example, to what extent is the tail of underachievement an intrinsic component of norm referenced spreads? To what extent does the current apparent lack of improvement in scores reflect the impact of increased numbers of non-English speaking immigrants, particularly refugees? What other factors influence difficulty with or disinterest in reading? Strategic focus and funding are needed to support the development of:

- schools which cater for difference and which collaborate with their communities
- culturally relevant and culturally interesting instructional materials
- whole family literacy programmes
- relevant programmes of instruction reading at secondary level
- greater liaison between primary, intermediate and secondary schools
- better understanding of the correlation between secondary literacy needs and the teaching of reading in intermediate schools.

Conclusion

This project has laid a useful foundation for better understanding of what occurs in reading achievement and in reading instruction at Years 7 and 8. It shows that there is a wide range of practices, and that, across the group, teachers give less attention to specific acts of teaching the complex skills of reading than they would at a lower year level. It also shows that in schools where there is a strong leadership in literacy, a continuing programme of instructional reading, and on-going professional development on a whole-school basis, there is continuing improvement in reading progress for all students. In these schools, however, there is still a significant variation in rates and levels of progress.

These results suggest that leadership, professional development and well-targeted programmes do make a significant difference. They also suggest that we need to further investigate the needs of those who are at the tail end of the range of

progress, and, on the basis of our findings, develop a raft of teaching approaches that will lead to improvement in reading for these students.

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