

DYSLEXIA IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

An Issue Both Old and New

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Aotearoa New Zealand has been home to its indigenous people (the Māori) and their language (te reo Māori) for over a thousand years. Colonisation practices beginning in the mid-1800s, which included the purchasing of land from Māori, and political and educational policies that actively restricted the use of te reo Māori, resulted in the subjugation of Māori and their language and culture. Revitalisation practices have sought to change governmental policies and practices. These have been underpinned by recognising the importance of te ao Māori (Māori ways of being) and Māori peoples and their languages (see Seals et al., 2019). However, they have conflicted with Eurocentric practices (Harris, 2008), including within education. This conflict has led to the need for frameworks that bring together Eurocentric and Māori epistemologies: For example, he awa whiria/a braided rivers (Macfarlane, Macfarlane & Gillon, 2015; see also Gillon & Macfarlane, 2017). However, the conflict between indigenous and Eurocentric practices has also meant that lower achievement among ethnic groups can make the identification of those with specific learning difficulties more challenging, and as much a political issue as an educational one.

The regular finding of a ‘tail’ of underachievement in reading among New Zealand students has been most clearly exemplified through international assessments such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). Over successive assessments, New Zealand has shown one of the largest variances between good readers and those who have struggled. More highly represented in this underachievement ‘tail’ have been those from Māori and Pasifika backgrounds (Pasifika is a term used to encompass those aligning their background with a range of Pacific Islands, such as Samoa, Tonga and Fiji), as well as children from low socioeconomic status families.¹ Underachievement has been seen as an issue for general educational practice, rather than special education, even though a large number in this tail would be likely to demonstrate signs of dyslexia. It has led to a tendency to avoid using terms such as disability and learning difficulty due to the potential to stigmatise specific ethnic groups; and the aim to provide support in general education to improve the achievement of those in the ‘tail’ rather than move those with difficulties into other classes or schools. The primary focus, understandably, has been on inclusion and supporting all children in mainstream education, rather than develop special education provisions for those with specific difficulties. The effect of such an approach has been an education community that has avoided assessments that emphasise difficulties in achievement and instead

have attempted to focus on valuing strengths, despite this potentially leading to problems identifying specific difficulties. Therefore, despite the length of time that reading problems have been recognised within education, there has only more recently been a focus on terms such as dyslexia and ways specifically to support such children.

Dyslexia Definition

As stated above, dyslexia has been officially defined in New Zealand relatively recently. The first formal ‘working’ definition was developed around 2007–2008 (see discussions in Tunmer & Greaney, 2010). This does not mean that there was no support for struggling readers before this time (see the section on Reading Recovery below), just that the assessment practices associated with dyslexia and the training of teachers specifically about dyslexia were not a feature of the government education system. However, a number of organisations advocating for dyslexia, such as the Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand,² grew in influence leading to a reconsideration of dyslexia in the early 2000s, and the formal recognition in the 2007/2008 definition. Unfortunately, this working definition was also somewhat controversial as it defined phonological awareness as a reading (rather than language) skill, and suggested that an individual could have dyslexia if they had problems reading numbers or musical notation. Although this was a well-meaning outcome, it did not lead to acceptance across all schools and education providers, including teacher education/training organisations. More recently, these problems with the working definition, and the need for early phonological/decoding-related support, have been recognised leading to more widely accepted perspectives on dyslexia being developed.³ This shows a shift towards perspectives on dyslexia that are more consistent with the international organisations, such as the International Dyslexia Association.⁴ Such recent developments have also acknowledged the arguments of New Zealand researchers, suggesting the opportunity for clearer links between research and policy.

Supporting Struggling Readers

There have long been supports for children identified as having difficulties in reading. Children recognised by their mainstream teachers as struggling with reading were eligible for special support through a remediation programme called Reading Recovery (see Clay, 1979, 2005). This programme was developed for children who, after a year of schooling (usually six-years-old), were falling behind curriculum levels sufficiently to warrant individual and intensive support. The bottom 20% of a school population (typically up to four children at a time) would be provided with a period of government-subsidised Reading Recovery, implemented within the school by trained staff, during which the child would also continue with their normal mainstream schooling (though refer to further information and recent, 2020 changes⁵).

The period of Reading Recovery would be based on improvement in performance: If the school considered that performance had improved enough (e.g. based on New Zealand Curriculum levels in reading), then the programme would be successfully discontinued. The programme was also time-limited, meaning that support would rarely go into the child’s third year of school education, i.e. the programme would be unsuccessfully discontinued. This process, though, can lead to instances where support may be given only to those that a school felt would benefit from Reading Recovery – and only around 55% of government/state schools with six-year-old students offer Reading Recovery.⁶

Selection procedures, and differences in achievement represented in the lowest 20% of achievers across schools, have also meant that some children may start Reading Recovery at the same instructional level that children from other schools exit the intervention. There is also evidence that Reading Recovery is more beneficial for some children, including females, and children from European and Asian backgrounds, than other students, including boys, Māori and Pasifika children, and children from low decile schools.⁷ This has led to major differences in the use of support procedures across schools: Schools in lower socioeconomic areas have been found to use these additional resources less (see Tunmer & Chapman, 2015).

Although the use of strategies such as Reading Recovery has maintained the inclusion ethos, it has meant that Reading Recovery has been the only subsidised option for those with reading difficulties. If the programme was ‘unsuccessfully discontinued’, it was then often left to the ability of the mainstream teacher to support learners with reading difficulties. Given that training on specific learning difficulties has been rarely provided to mainstream teachers, this meant that many children were left to struggle – and appear in the ‘tail’ at ten years old (Chapman & Tunmer, 2016). Also, Reading Recovery is based on a more ‘whole-language’ perspective on reading, which may not support those with more specific difficulties, say in phonological awareness (see Tunmer & Greaney, 2010; Tunmer & Hoover, 2019). This has meant that many with dyslexia were less likely to benefit from this targeted intervention than might be expected from alternative interventions targeted at decoding strategies (and hence the 2020 changes to incorporate more of a range of early literacy strategies⁸).

Beyond Reading Recovery, schools can access additional supports for students with continuing difficulties. For example, since 2001, New Zealand has developed a group of specialist literacy educators, Resource Teachers of Literacy (RTLits), to supplement the work of teachers in mainstream primary schools.⁹ These RTLits have been, primarily, mainstream teachers who have taken postgraduate level courses, recommended by the government, specialising in literacy. RTLits have typically operated across a number of schools in their area. Although they have the aim of directly supporting individual children with literacy difficulties, much of their time has been focused on indirect support, through the child’s teachers. This has included giving advice and strategies related to struggling learners, although these strategies will not necessarily be specific to those with dyslexia. However, the number of those specialists means that their time in schools is limited, and their ability to support special cases will be limited too, e.g. often the demand for support has exceeded what RTLits can provide. A related group of specialists, Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour (RTL&B), may work across the same schools, but they have focused primarily on issues related to behaviour, and their time per individual child/school has also been limited. In recognition of this, there has been a move by the New Zealand government to hire trained Learning Support Coordinators who will provide support within each school (see Ministry of Education, 2020¹⁰). Again, this is a relatively new, but potentially useful initiative.

Educational Policy, Legislation and Inclusion

Education policy related to supporting those with special needs stems from 1996 and the aim of achieving ‘a world class inclusive education system’ (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 5). This focused on inclusive education and aimed to make it easier for students with special needs to enrol at their local mainstream school (see McMenamin, 2011). It was also consistent with international views of the time that inclusion of all children with special education needs

in mainstream educational settings should be the goal of a successful education system (see Ministry of Education, 2005). The Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Scheme (now Ongoing Resourcing Scheme, or ORS) was also a major feature of policy. ORS provides individual, portable funding for students with the greatest needs. Eligibility for such funding was assessed through a centralised process managed by the Ministry of Education, with students being considered as having ‘high’ or ‘very high’ needs based on the amount of additional assistance needed in order for the student to participate in their local school. The funding provided for additional mainstream teacher time, as well as specialist and teacher-aide support, though the amount of support was fixed (e.g. equivalent to a tenth of mainstream teacher full-time for those with ‘high’ needs) and the complexity of the application process would potentially put schools off applying.

In secondary schools, the focus often shifts from remedial programmes to accommodations. Schools can make applications for Special Assessment Conditions (SAC) to the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) on behalf of students who have specific learning difficulties. These accommodations can include the use of a reader, writer or the provision of extra time for New Zealand’s National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) assessments (the main qualification for secondary school students in New Zealand). A school’s application can be based on either school-collected evidence or an educational assessment written by a registered professional. Educational assessments have been more commonly used to support SAC applications for students in higher rather than lower socioeconomic communities. This may be due to the cost of educational assessments, which have typically been met by parents.

This policy, funding system and a focus on programmes such as Reading Recovery have meant that special schools were not a major part of the focus of the government, though many still exist in the private sector. Despite a national review of special education around 2010 (Ministry of Education, 2010) suggesting that special schools were needed for students with high levels of need, there are not many government-funded special schools across the country.¹¹ Support, therefore, has been based primarily on the ability of mainstream teachers. This need not be a problem with the right resources, but there has been a lack of training in practices enabling teachers specifically to support students with a range of difficulties, including those with dyslexia. For example, a 2011 survey sent out to schools, and reported in Dymock and Nicholson (2015), found that 96% of those responding recognised that they had students with dyslexia in their school but only 12% felt that their school was equipped to teach students with dyslexia.

Policy and Teacher Preparation

There has been a growing awareness within education and government circles of the problems outlined above (for example, the report to parliament from the Education and Science Committee, 2016, *Inquiry into the identification and support for students with the significant challenges of dyslexia, dyspraxia, and autism spectrum disorders in primary and secondary schools*). This has led to a number of initiatives to provide teachers with appropriate resources to support students with dyslexia.¹² Such goals have also led to changes in initial teacher education. For example, it is now a government policy that students taking an initial teacher education course prior to working full-time in New Zealand schools should be provided with classes on dyslexia, dyspraxia and autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). This is required for courses starting from 2021; all Initial Teacher Education programmes must be approved by the New

Zealand Teaching Council¹³ and students with non-approved qualifications alone cannot teach in government schools. There will likely be a period of adjustment for providers, and it will take some time before students trained in these areas become a regular feature of mainstream schools, but again, this is a positive move.

A teacher in New Zealand will have successfully completed the equivalent of three years full-time study on a bachelor degree-level course. This will have been either a three-year teacher education degree or a first degree that could be used to enter a graduate teacher education course. The latter would typically comprise a further one/one-and-a-half years of teacher education courses. Graduating students and in-service teachers might take post-graduate (typically masters-level) courses as further professional learning, though these have not been necessary to enter the teaching profession up to the time of writing. The three-year teacher education bachelor degree has been one of the main routes into the teaching profession in New Zealand, particularly for primary school teachers. This will be a mix of learning on the campus of the teacher education provider plus periods of professional placement in schools. Although placement requirements have varied over the years, most teachers will have experienced placements across a number of schools during their teaching qualification.¹⁴ However, consistent with most countries, the amount of experience of working with children with a learning difficulty during such pre-service placements has been highly variable. Therefore, despite the good quality of teacher education, many teachers starting their work in schools will have had little practical experience of working with children with dyslexia.

Concerns have also been raised about the level of teacher understanding of how to support early literacy development. For example, consistent with other English-speaking countries, teacher's knowledge of phonics has been found to be quite limited, arguing for a need for teacher training to include instruction in phonemic awareness and related word decoding strategies (Washburn et al., 2016). Hence, although there is a growing awareness of the need for teachers to have developed skills specifically to support early reading and writing, there are still continued calls for changes to pre-service teacher education. Furthermore, there have been calls for a change in Ministry of Education resources provided/emphasised for early literacy, along with calls for further professional development to support change. This recognition has led to funding for the development of decodable texts for use in mainstream primary schools with beginning learners to support the teaching of word decoding strategies. Currently, wider changes to the supported early literacy approaches are also being implemented, all of which recognise the need for more explicit and systematic instruction for students with learning difficulties, including dyslexia.

Hence, there have been a range of changes to teacher education and student support happening within New Zealand that hold the promise of better outcomes for those with dyslexia. Many are still in their infancy, so further challenges to their implementation and success may lead to the need for further development of procedures and resources. For example, a recent focus on flexible learning spaces (see OECD, 2015, on *Innovative Learning Environments* for similar initiatives) that include larger, multi-teacher classrooms holds the potential for groups of teachers with differing experience and expertise to work together to support a range of students with differing needs. However, such environments can lead to students becoming 'lost' within large numbers of learners, or 'hiding' from challenging learning opportunities (see Everatt & Fletcher, 2019; Fletcher & Everatt, 2021). Such collaboration between groups of teachers will also need to be managed and potentially form part of additional modifications to teacher education programmes.

Dyslexia Assessment

Another potential issue that teachers in New Zealand have faced when considering learning difficulties such as dyslexia has been the lack of tools available to identify specific difficulties. Standardised measures can be found in New Zealand; e.g. the Wechsler scales and the Woodcock–Johnson batteries have Australasian norms that have been obtained primarily from Australian students, but these are likely to be useful within New Zealand if treated with informed caution. However, these have restrictions as to who can use them, and most mainstream teachers will not have been trained to the level necessary to access these tools. Government-supported websites¹⁵ have provided lists of assessment tools, but many of these are also restricted to trained assessors. Such assessors would likely work for one of the associations around the country that have been set up to identify and support those with learning difficulties, for example, those registered with Specific Learning Difficulties New Zealand (SpLD–NZ¹⁶) or the Learning Disabilities Association of New Zealand (LDANZ¹⁷). However, accessing these assessors has often been left to the family of the child with suspected dyslexia, and such private assessments have been costly. A small number of groups provide funding to families with low-incomes to obtain assessment, but accessing such support can be difficult as well. Standard forms have been developed that assessors use as part of the evidence that a child (or adult) has a learning difficulty, so there has been good development in standard practice.¹⁸ However, the knowledge of mainstream teachers about how to interpret such assessments has been variable, meaning that an assessment can be costly but does not always lead to positive outcomes in the form of school support.

Mainstream teacher's own assessments, or government curriculum-based tools, have been useful to identify struggling learners, but few have aimed to identify the potential cause of problems. There have been attempts to develop procedures for teachers, as in the websites developed by the education ministry discussed above.¹⁹ These have often provided more general information about educational issues, or have presented checklists of possible characteristics and few have provided mainstream teachers with measures aimed at determining effective support. In recognition of this, Sleeman (2021) has attempted to identify a small number of tests of decoding, language comprehension and phoneme awareness ability that can be used by teachers to identify the primary cause of students' reading difficulties. Preliminary data has indicated that scores produced via these tests align closely with those found with standardised assessment tools, such as the Woodcock–Johnson battery. Although they may not be useful for formal government funding, they may provide a further area of support and understanding for mainstream teachers.

Selected Dyslexia Research

There has been an increasing amount of research carried out looking at supporting learners with difficulties and building teachers' knowledge and ability to meet the needs of a varied group of students within the mainstream classroom. That which has been specifically targeted at school practice has focused more on the development of teacher resources (such as the websites and texts discussed above) and Response to Intervention methods. The latter may be best exemplified by²⁰ the *Better Start* project,²¹ which is a government-funded project that involves research undertaken in universities across New Zealand. The literacy learning part of the project has involved working with children and teachers in a number of primary schools across New Zealand. Teachers were provided with professional development in word decoding strategies, as well as methods to develop phonological awareness



to support reading/spelling skills and approaches to vocabulary development. Whole year one classes were taught using these techniques, consistent with the first tier of a Response to Intervention framework, though those children with low language/literacy scores at the start of the study were the focus of assessments in the initial research. Methods employed also supported the learning and assessment of some te reo Māori words, which provided a means by which Māori concepts and language could be incorporated in the research. Those provided with the whole-class intervention methods improved in their basic literacy skills more than a waiting control group (see Gillon et al., 2019) indicative of the potential benefits of such methods. Those still struggling to meet literacy levels after the whole-class methods were then included in small-group intervention procedures, this time provided by trained practitioners. Those that did not catch up with assessment levels following the group work moved on to more intensive (individual or small group) support procedures. Consistent with New Zealand's ethos of inclusion, the aim has been to maintain children working within their mainstream schools, only taking them out of their typical classroom teaching when required for specialist support.

One of the arguments for avoiding labelling students as disabled has been that this focuses on deficits rather than strengths. This might have led to a body of research in New Zealand looking at positive features of dyslexia. Again, though, the variation in educational achievement among different ethnic groups in New Zealand has (rightly) led to more of a focus on looking at positive features among such groups, rather than among those with difficulties/disabilities.

There has been an awareness of issues related to twice-exceptional learners, and the Ministry of Education's 2015 National Administrative Guidelines²² have included gifted and talented students under the special needs umbrella. However, this has not yet translated into a body of systematic/empirical research. Advocacy organisations (such as the Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand) have argued for talents as well as difficulties among those with dyslexia, but these have typically been based on anecdotes rather than research evidence. The controversy surrounding the concept of dyslexia has not helped to develop such research, but disagreements about what constitutes gifts/talents has also led to a lack of empirical work. A specific New Zealand example of this is that while skilled reasoning, good memory and accelerated learning may be seen as characteristics of giftedness through a European perspective, Māori concepts of giftedness may consider more non-academic perspectives, such as a focus on traditions/values, relationships and spiritualism.²³ In recent years, growing cultural responsiveness has led to considerations around variability in skills both within and between individuals. Similarly, research theses published in New Zealand over the last decade identify a growing number considering within-individual skills differences as part of educational needs research.

Individuals with reading difficulties may be particularly prone to frustration stemming from their educational experiences. This is consistent with the findings for negative consequence of dyslexia on the individual's emotions, self-concept and self-regulation, which can impact negatively on well-being (see Everatt & Denston, 2020). Success in literacy development has been linked to success within the other learning areas contained within the national curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007). As such, difficulties with reading can affect any learning area where reading is crucial, leading to experiences of failure across a range of subjects. Such consequences may be more likely with age, and may lead to increasing negative feelings about education and disengagement from learning. Self-concept and disengagement may influence self-regulation, and poor self-regulation can increase negative behaviours that further interfere with learning. Such links suggest that improvements in achievement should be related to changes in self-concept, particularly if positive achievements were related to

the self and important to the individual in some way. Research by Denston (Denston, 2018; Denston et al., 2018) has been looking at ways to support literacy learning in children who have struggled with reading and writing, while at the same time increasing self-concept and self-efficacy, and reducing negative consequences. Interventions concentrated on developing strategies leading to success in word decoding/processing. However, there was also a focus on language processes that included the development of vocabulary and phonological and morphological awareness, as well as linking these concepts with corresponding orthographic features. The intervention focused on children who have experienced several years of difficulties with reading and writing (school years 4 and above), so a range of strategies were used to provide children with experiences of success. Chronological-age (rather than reading-age) texts were used in the work. These provided ways to support vocabulary development but also increased interest and motivation to read and gave the students the experience of overcoming a challenging task. Results from several ongoing studies have provided evidence for the positive impact of the intervention on literacy-related skills, including word reading and spelling and reading comprehension. There were also positive changes in measures of self-concept, self-efficacy, resilience and internalising (emotions) and externalising (behaviours) problems. Given the continued replication of such findings, intervention methods can be developed that overcome some of the negative consequences that have been associated with dyslexia.

Concluding Remarks

This short chapter aimed to summarise some major strides in work on dyslexia that have occurred in Aotearoa New Zealand over the last decade. This has included the continued development of perspectives on dyslexia and related special needs areas, within an ethos of inclusive practice. It has involved reaffirming and revising policy related to special needs, along with important revisions in teacher training aimed at providing new teachers with a background in supporting those with dyslexia, dyspraxia and ASD. There has also been a growth in research and tools/resources related to early literacy acquisition and dyslexia. Much of this work is still in its preliminary stages, so there will be an ongoing need to refine these developments and overcome challenges. Some of these will be specific to the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, as we have outlined above. However, these are exciting and promising times for those working within the field.

Notes

- 1 <http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/2539/114981/125051>
- 2 <https://www.dyslexiafoundation.org.nz>
- 3 See <https://www.inclusive.tki.org.nz>
- 4 <https://www.dyslexiaida.org/definition-of-dyslexia>
- 5 <https://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/System-of-support-incl.-PLD/Learner-initiated-supports/Reading-Recovery-and-Early-Literacy-Support>
- 6 See data at <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/reading-recovery>
- 7 <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/reading-recovery>
- 8 <https://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/System-of-support-incl.-PLD/Learner-initiated-supports/Reading-Recovery-and-Early-Literacy-Support>
- 9 See <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/System-of-support-incl.-PLD/Learner-initiated-supports/Resource-Teacher-Literacy-RTLit>
- 10 <https://conversation.education.govt.nz/conversations/learning-support-action-plan/learning-support-coordinators>

- 11 See <https://www.education.govt.nz/school/student-support/special-education/specialist-schools-for-students-with-high-needs/>
- 12 See <https://www.inclusive.tki.org.nz> & Ministry of Education 2020 guide 'About Dyslexia'.
- 13 <https://www.teachingcouncil.nz>
- 14 See https://teachingcouncil.nz/sites/default/files/Practica_Review_Full_Report.pdf
- 15 <https://www.nzcer.org.nz/>; and <https://assessment.tki.org.nz/>
- 16 <http://www.speld.org.nz/>
- 17 <https://www.ldanz.org.nz>
- 18 See <https://www.nzqa.govt.nz/providers-partners/assessment-and-moderation-of-standards/managing-national-assessment-in-schools/special-assessment-conditions>
- 19 <https://www.inclusive.tki.org.nz>
- 20 <https://www.canterbury.ac.nz/education-and-health/research/a-better-start-literacy-and-learning-theme>
- 21 See <https://www.abetterstart.nz/the-science/successful-learning>
- 22 <http://www.education.govt.nz/ministry-of-education/legislation/the-national-education-guidelines>
- 23 See examples in <https://gifted.tki.org.nz/define-and-identify/characteristics-of-the-gifted-and-talented>

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