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WRITING FOR THE ADULT NEW READER

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts
in Education at
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ABSTRACT

This investigation reports an inquiry into the needs within N.Z. literacy programmes for new teaching materials and describes the writing and testing of five stories developed to cater to these needs.

Two questionnaires were used to establish the requirements; one of which was sent to twenty-six individuals associated with literacy schemes as tutors, programme directors or educationists, while a second questionnaire was completed by sixty-eight adult students in three separate literacy programmes to ascertain their interest in reading leisure or functional materials.

There was found to be a need for N.Z. oriented leisure reading materials at the reading age 8 level prepared specifically for the adult new reader.

In view of this information, five stories were written with recognized readability factors and the characteristics of adult new readers as a prime consideration.

Five areas of relevance were established in light of current reading research.

These areas were as follows:

1. Setting objectives
2. Simplified and original writing
3. Words and word lists
4. Illustrations
5. Format

Nine adult new readers in Palmerston North were used as subjects for testing the materials as they were developed.

These same adult students and six standard two children, who had also read the materials, were asked a set of questions pertaining to each story. It was found that while the children could read orally more fluently, their comprehension of the stories was markedly inferior to that of the adult students.

The materials were further tested through the use of the Dale-Chall, Fry, Fog and Spache readability formulas

which resulted in scores of plus or minus one grade from the target 8 year reading level.

The stories were printed as four booklets and were sent, along with questionnaires, for independent testing to tutors and adult new readers in Napier, Auckland, and Christchurch.

A size 12 point type was found to be satisfactory while a smaller size 10 point type was unsatisfactory as it was judged to be too small for the adult students.

The five stories were rated by the fifty-five students who used the books in the final form as average, high average, and above average interest, with a particular appreciation for the humour, factual information, use of N.Z. spellings and the local origin of the stories.

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Palmerston North
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Illiteracy Problem:
Overseas and in New Zealand

Illiteracy problems in third world countries are well publicized, although the numbers and needs of adult illiterates in developed countries has received attention only in the past ten to twenty years (Ryan, 1977; Brown and Newman, 1970).

This thesis deals not directly with illiteracy itself, but with the preparation of reading material for adult literacy students in developed countries, particularly, New Zealand. Yet, in order to make this topic more relevant, an examination of the extent of the illiteracy problem and the steps that are being taken to meet the needs of adult students in developed countries is necessary.

Gathering accurate statistical information concerning the numbers of illiterates is difficult for want of a universal definition of literacy; each country's definition is a reflection both of its level of development and of its cultural expectations.

Literacy in third world countries suggests basic survival skills while in developed countries, literacy includes not only the ability to read and write, but the expectation that the individual will contribute towards his community (Harper, 1975).

The U.S.A. illiterate is defined as ... "Those who are unable to read and write a simple message either in English or any other language" (Ryan, 1977, p.4).

In New Zealand

Literacy refers to those competencies which any person brings to the tasks of understanding and using what he reads, and conveying what he means in writing, so that he can engage effectively in those activities which he is otherwise equipped to undertake. These competencies vary for any individual according to the task and to the context in which they are used. (Report of the Literacy Project Working Party, 1976, p.8)

In addition, classifications within the term 'literate' also require defining, e.g. illiterate, semi-literate, functional literate, survival literacy or exliterate. These terms usually relate to school grades or reading ages which in turn are based on chronological age and reading ability. For example, a nine year old child would have a reading age (R.A.) of nine if he is an 'average' reader. For adult new readers, i.e. adults in literacy programmes, reading ages are best reserved for programme planning guides and selecting or writing materials for specific reading levels (Longley, 1975). Nevertheless, adult literacy terms are defined in reading ages and grade levels.

In 1950, the British Department of Education suggested the illiterate had a reading age of less than seven years while the semi-literate's reading age was between seven and nine years (Harper, 1975).

The British definition of an illiterate remained the same in 1975, but the semi-literate was redefined as one who read between reading age seven and reading age thirteen (Longley, 1975).

The functionally literate is defined as having a reading age of thirteen years and as such, possesses only basic skills; lacking the sophisticated reading and writing abilities necessary to partake fully in his culture (Longley, 1975).

It is estimated that over 160,000 adults are illiterate in Britain while research suggests the number of semi-literates would surpass several million (Longley, 1975).

The U.S.A. functionally illiterate is defined as having five years or less of schooling (Ryan, 1977). The 1970 Census reported 1,443,000 Americans in this category with over twenty million Americans classified as semi-literate.

In monetary terms, functionally literate Americans earn \$4,000 average less per year than literate workers, and in 1970 the Bell Telephone System estimated they spent twenty-five million dollars on employee literacy education (Smith & Fay, 1973).

Australian figures indicate approximately 10-20% of their fifteen year old school-leavers have less than adequate reading skills (Hart & Richardson, 1973).

There are no officially recognized statistics concerning New Zealand's illiteracy problem (Harper, 1975). Nevertheless it has been suggested that approximately 10% of school-leavers fail to learn to read and write adequately (Brabyn, 1976b) and within the past year, a newspaper article entitled 'Read On ...There's 60,000 Who Cannot' outlined a new literacy programme in Wellington (Dominion, 1976). David James, director of the National Council for Adult Education, suggests that between 50,000-100,000 New Zealand adults may have reading ages at or below that of a nine and a half year old, based on estimates extrapolated from school P.A.T. scores (Dominion, 1977).

Information gathered from school-leaving records are less than accurate predictors of later adult standards since some students become motivated to improve their literacy skills of their own accord. But it is also known that literacy skills that are not initially well established tend to lapse without continued practice (Longley, 1975). Most semi-literate teen-agers become semi-literate or totally illiterate adults.

Catering for the Needs of Adult Illiterates:
Overseas and in New Zealand

How are the needs of these illiterates being met? In the U.S.A., the Laubach Literacy International Programme was founded in 1955. In addition to training tutors nationwide, materials are developed and published through the New Readers Press Publishers. Other large scale American programmes have included "The Right to Read" and "Operation Alphabet".

In 1975, the BBC Adult Literacy Project was launched and included radio and television programmes for training tutors and teaching adult students, tutor and tutor trainer information packs, student workbooks, tapes, etc. Additionally, the British National Institute of Adult Education publishes a literacy newsletter through the Adult Literacy Resource Agency (ALRA).

New Zealand has adult literacy programmes organized in approximately sixteen centres in the North and South Islands (Brabyn, 1977b). This estimate does not include services provided by the Psychological Service, reform institutions, private tutors, the Correspondence School, and many programmes offered at colleges and technical institutes. And, in August, 1976, the N.Z. Adult Reading Assistance Newsletter, ARAN, was first published (Brabyn, 1976a).

Pressures on the adult illiterate vary, depending upon his country of residence, whether he is a rural or urban dweller and the educational level of his family and friends (Ryan, 1977). Yet his chances of continuing to get by without literacy skills in an industrialized nation are diminishing.

Forty years ago in New Zealand one out of four jobs was filled by unskilled labour. Now, only one out of twenty jobs requires unskilled labour (Ryan, 1977). As populations increase and nations become more technologically advanced, the number of

jobs open to illiterate adults drops sharply; one result being a mushrooming of literacy schemes to meet increased demands for literacy skills.

In 1965, the state of Texas in America made plans to provide literacy classes for adults and the response was overwhelming. In every case, the final enrollment was two to three times what was expected. In Brownsville, Texas, 600 students were anticipated yet 1,600 enrolled for the classes. The scene was repeated in Houston, Texas, with the enrollment of 2,500 students though 100 students were expected (Cooper, 1967).

In spite of the initial enthusiasm and the adult student's recognized motivation, literacy classes in America face a staggering 54% dropout rate. The U.S. Department of Commerce attributes this to (1) the lack of professional tutors, (2) the lack of correspondence between tutoring and learners' needs, and (3) the lack of suitable adult learning material (Miccinati, 1977).

Though nationwide statistics are unavailable for New Zealand attrition rates, six literacy programmes reported their losses at 1-15% (National Council of Adult Education, 1976).

In New Zealand as elsewhere, tutors are usually volunteers and are professional or non-professional teachers. Training programmes last anywhere from eight to twenty hours (Brabyn, 1976b). Non-professional tutors plus the lack of correspondence between tutoring and learners' needs may be partially overcome in New Zealand by the large numbers of individual tutoring programmes as compared with American group classroom programmes (Bhola, 1977). However the lack of suitable adult learning material is a continuing problem both here and abroad. And hence, the basis of this thesis.

Materials for the Adult New Reader:
Overseas and in New Zealand

While speaking at the I.R.A. Conference in Palmerston North (1977), Dr. Harbans Bhola (1977) stated that there are no special materials developed and published for adult new readers nor for new literates in New Zealand. Dr. Bhola likened the situation to a ladder missing all rungs except the bottom and the fifteenth rung. Primary programmes are available where the basic alphabet and sight words are introduced, but even this material is pirated from childrens' reading programmes. Following this, materials in any large quantity are those for the adult general public, e.g. newspapers, magazines and books, many of which have a reading age difficulty level of 12-15+ (Brabyn, 1976a). At the same conference, Dr. John Ryan (1977) agreed with Dr. Bhola when he added that a bridge is needed between beginning material and that which is readily available for the literate.

At a conference held by the National Council of Adult Education (1976, Section 4, Item 12), it was stated that... "Information should be disseminated on suitable reading materials which are available for use by adults with reading difficulties, and New Zealand materials should be developed."

At a further conference in February (1977) concerning the supply of suitable reading materials it was stated that..."Selection of suitable material at an adult level of interest and at varied reading levels is a constant concern" (National Council of Adult Education, 1977, p.40).

New Zealand is not alone in a deficiency of materials for the adult new reader, as early studies in America also reported this need (Smith & Fay, 1973; Hall & Coley, 1975; Olsen, 1965). While the general lack of materials in America is now less apparent, there remains a gap in certain types of materials for specific levels of difficulty.

The need for materials at the reading age 8 level is apparent from a review of several American annotated bibliographies. This same review illustrates the lack of leisure reading materials, e.g. sports, romance, hobbies, as opposed to functional materials, e.g. childcare & tax forms. The New Readers Press Catalog (1977) had a total of ninety-three entries of which only sixteen were for reading ages 8 or less (Table I). Five of these selections were for leisure reading. The three books entitled 'Correlated Readers' had stories of approximately four pages in length. The two selections entitled 'Supplementary Reading' had eighty-one stories of less than two pages each, including illustrations. This raises the question as to whether or not these selections, because of their length, can be classified as stories.

An article entitled 'New Materials on the Market' (Stauffer, 1977) reviewed materials published for the first time since June 1, 1975. Of 146 items, thirteen were for adult interests. Four of which were for parents of children who were poor readers. The remaining nine series were evenly distributed between Primary (grade 1-4), Intermediate (grade 4-6) and Junior High (grade 7-9) difficulty levels.

Though poetry and fiction were not included in this review, much of the new fiction materials for 1975, 1976, would be reflected in the Free Library of Philadelphia Bibliographies (Forinash, 1974, 1975, 1976). This association compiles a Reader Development Bibliography for literacy tutors and this list was first published by the New Readers Press in 1974, with supplements for 1975 and 1976. The decrease in the amount of material reviewed for 1975-76 as seen in Table II reflects newly published material suitable for adult new readers. Of the total 431 items reviewed for the three year span, fifty-four were for reading age 8. While this appears to be a large number, it must be remembered that as the individual's reading

TABLE 1
 MATERIALS AVAILABLE THROUGH
 NEW READERS PRESS CATALOG (1977)

<u>Topic</u>	<u>Total Reading Age</u>		<u>Materials for</u>
	<u>Entries</u>	<u>& Level</u>	<u>Leisure Reading</u>
English reading and writing skills book (phonics)	5	3	0
Correlated readers	5	3	3
Supplementary readers	4	2	2
Reading Skills development	21 units	0	0
Personal business series	7	0	0
Re informed series	21	0	0
Career education	3	0	0
News For You (Weekly newspaper)	2	1	0
Social Studies	16	2	0
Family life and health	18	0	0
Drivers education	2	0	0
Sign Series	3	0	0
Religious heritage	5	5	0
Total	93	16	5

TABLE II

THE FREE LIBRARY OF PHILADELPHIA
 READER DEVELOPMENT BIBLIOGRAPHY (1974, 1975, 1976)

<u>Topic</u>	1974	Reading Age 8	1975	Reading Age 8	1976	Reading Age 8
Leisure reading*	70	5*	10	1*	2	0*
Community and family life	66	10	16	1	2	0
Jobs	33	0	8	0	0	0
Reading writing and arithmetic	42	8	6	2	15	4
Reading	55	19	5	2	9	1
Science	8	0	6	0	0	0
Social Studies	9	0	4	0	1	0
Famous people	6	0	0	0	0	0
Minority history	33	1	8	0	0	0
United States	10	0	8	0	0	0
Totals	332	43	70	6	29	5

skills improve, he can read not only his own reading age material but also all of that which is below his reading age. Thus, while the reader with a reading age of 11-12 years has 431 items from which to choose, the reading age 8 student has only fifty-four selections. Of these fifty-four items, only six were for leisure reading.

An Australian publication (Hart & Richardson, 1973) listed 142 series, four of which contained seventeen books for leisure reading at the reading age 8 level with a child and adult combined interest rating.

The BBC Adult Literacy Handbook (Longley, 1975) listed 167 reading series, thirty-four of which included materials at a reading age 8 level for leisure reading; the majority were childrens' or adolescents' interest levels.

Tutors' comments in the British ALRA newsletter point to the "acute shortage of structured reading material that caters for adult interest" (Devereux, 1976c, p.8) and continue by suggesting that there is plenty of functional materials provided by the two literacy newspapers, special sections in regular newspapers, and general printed matter, but what is lacking is good fictional materials for adults. (Devereux, 1977a, 1977b).

Factors Affecting Material Development and Availability: Overseas and In New Zealand

Why is there a lack of leisure materials particularly at the reading age 8 level for adult new readers? Economic factors are the main reasons. Adult literacy programmes are for a fragmented market and are not as profitable as are primary and secondary school programmes (Olsen, 1965). The managing director of a

large international educational book company in New Zealand sums up the situation ... "While there is a great need for this sort of material, sales are not known to be particularly high. However if we could get a spin-off of sales in secondary school as well it is possible that the market could be a reasonable one" (Heap, 1977). A second problem is that few trained writers are willing to write in this field (Ryan, 1977; Devereux, 1977b). Thirdly, for those who wish to write, there is little to guide them, as evidenced by a review of such materials. Two excellent publications, entitled Readability (Gilliland, John, 1972) and Printed Media and the Reader (Davies, 1973) are directed at writing and readability, but neither deal directly with writing material for the adult new reader. Literacy newsletters are also a source of guidelines, but these are generally found in the form of criticism or praise in book review columns. A British author, Lornie Leete-Hodge, was asked to rewrite a popular crime novel for the literacy market. The writer, never having worked with adult new readers, sought suggestions from literacy tutors, but her difficulties were only compounded with the diversity of advice she received (Brabyn, 1977b).

Most books dealing with the teaching of reading include a section on readability, but again, writers must read between the lines to apply the information to adult new readers. The Newhouse School of Communications, Syracuse University, U.S.A., offers a graduate programme in literacy journalism. Courses taught by Dr. R.S. Laubach (Laubach Literacy International) provide training in teaching methodology and preparation of adult-oriented materials at low reading ages. The extent to which the programme deals with writing for adult new readers is unknown.

There are two booklets published by the New Readers Press dealing with the preparation of materials for adults. The description of the first book, How to Take the Fog Out of Writing (Gunning, 1977) mentions nothing about adult new readers. The second publication, Using Readability (Laubach & Koschnick, 1977) is a guide for writing and evaluating materials for adult new readers and is based on the Gunning (1952) and Fry (1968) readability formulas. Yet writing to the requirements of a formula and not the needs of the adult new readers is not recommended as there are many intrapersonal variables which must be considered. A larger publication by Gunning (1952), The Technique of Clear Writing, is an excellent book for writers, but does not consider the adult new reader. One may read a number of Educational research journals and piece the information together, but for most aspiring writers this is a daunting experience.

Ideally, those who write for adult new readers should have --

1. experience with various methods of teaching reading;
2. awareness of readability research and factors affecting the difficulty of reading materials;
3. experience of working with, if not teaching reading to adult new readers;
4. writing experience;
5. an awareness of the extent and variety of needs within the literacy market.

It would be impractical to expect writers of adult materials to fulfill all of the proposed qualifications as materials will continue to be written and published as the literacy market expands. The quality of these materials will vary as it does now. Then again, writers may continue to ignore lower reading levels not only because of the restrictions of having to write within a limited vocabulary, but because of the misconception that writing at lower reading levels requires word repetition and that easy to read materials

are for the simple minded, e.g. too many series ... "equate limited reading ability with limited intelligence..." (Nolan, 1976, p.7). While it may be true that some illiterates are below average I.Q. (Palmer, 1967) this does not mean that they cannot learn to read or that material for them must be simple in both concepts and subject matter in addition to vocabulary. The main concern should be that while the materials are at a low reading level, they are also adult in concepts and format and of interest to the reader.

The Purpose of Literacy Programmes through the Interests
of the Adult New Reader:

Overseas and in New Zealand

It has been suggested that literacy schemes use materials of interest to the student to sustain motivation and reduce the attrition rate from literacy programmes (Bhola, 1977; Ryan, 1977; Miccinatti, 1977; Alesi, 1967; Brown, 1967). But what are the interests of adult new readers? The answers to this question are far from clear. While vast amounts of research exists concerning childrens' interests (e.g. A.S. Artley (1968) summarized seventeen studies alone), far less information is available concerning interests of the adult student. There may well be differences not only from one individual to another, but from one country to another. In several programmes for American inner-city illiterates, students have indicated a desire to learn to read for utilitarian and religious reasons and have suggested that reading the Bible and getting a better job are of high priority (Brown, 1967; Cooper, 1967). In the state of New York, U.S.A., 180 adult education students rated material in categories of interest from the most to the least interesting. 'People' and 'functions of the body' were rated highly, followed by 'animal life', 'history' and 'environment' (Fitzgerald, 1975). Other studies also have shown that adults are interested in the topic of personal health (Dale & Tyler, 1934).

While interesting, these limited studies do not illustrate adequately the primary goal of the American literacy programmes, which is to produce better citizens (Smith, 1967). The emphasis is on functional materials to meet the immediate needs of the student, but whether this emphasis actually coincides with the student's interests is largely unknown. The programme director's concept of 'immediate needs' may be altogether different from that of the student. The American Government considers educational materials to be a major weapon in the war on poverty.

"Without academic and job skills, the disadvantaged adult is doomed to poverty and social isolation"
(Olsen, 1965, p.276).

American journal articles listing materials to be used for teaching illiterates invariably include functional needs and interests such as child care, the military, car care, menus, consumer buying, health, family relationships, responsibility, community and world affairs, and suggest materials which integrate learning to read with general occupational learning (Alesi, 1967; Brown, 1967; Palmer, 1967; Smith, 1967; Holder, 1967; Luke, 1967; Jennings, 1967; Hall, 1975). The selections of available materials, as evidenced by the American annotated bibliographies, also reflected this functional goal.

To date, New Zealand does not have the large numbers of illiterates nor the levels of poverty as exist in the U.S.A. Thus one may question the necessity of using functional materials if they are not of high interest to the student.

While it has been suggested that there is a need for a greater exchange of information and materials between developed countries concerning the adult new reader (Ryan, 1977), it would also appear that cultural differences mitigate against the mutual use of interest research between countries (Gilliland, Jack, 1972).

Each country must be aware of specific needs and interests of its own students. The educational slogan -- 'fit the programme to the student, and not the student to the programme' is critically important.

Since in most New Zealand literacy programmes, individual tuition is encouraged (Bhola, 1977), the needs and interests of the New Zealand adult student can be more easily catered for.

Summary

It has been shown in the introduction that the increased numbers of illiterate and semi-literate adults in literacy schemes have resulted in a growing demand for teaching materials both in quantity and quality. The review indicated a special need for adult leisure materials particularly at the reading age 8 level. It was further suggested that writers need guidelines for the adult literacy market in order to encourage them to enter this field and produce quality materials at low reading ages. Such guidelines would also benefit the many volunteer tutors who will continue making their own materials for individual students.

Objectives

The objectives of this thesis were therefore twofold:

1. To ascertain the needs of students in New Zealand literacy programmes, and, by examining factors affecting readability and the adult new reader,
2. Develop a selection of materials in an attempt to cater to these needs.

These objectives would in turn generate guidelines for others writing for the adult literacy market.

Questions to be Answered Through Research

This project generated several questions, the answers to which would directly affect future production of materials for adult new readers.

These were:

1. To what extent and at what levels is there a need for materials developed specifically for adult literacy programmes in New Zealand?
2. Are New Zealand adult new readers more interested in reading functional materials or leisure materials?
3. Will the adult new reader's comprehension of more complex plots necessarily be hindered by his lower reading ability?
4. Do New Zealand adult new readers have a format preference?
5. Is it necessary for adult new readers to use a print size as large as that which is normally used in children's beginning books?
6. Is it possible to write interesting material for adult new readers on a topic that has been previously rated by them as uninteresting?

Questionnaires and Sample Groups

In order to answer these questions and to facilitate development of the materials, the following questionnaires and experimental groups were used:

1. A questionnaire was sent to 26 people associated with New Zealand literacy schemes to establish --