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**Word Level Literacy Skills of Adolescents
and their Teachers: An Exploratory Mixed Methods
Study**

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Abstract

Poor adolescent reading comprehension is a persistent problem which is difficult to solve because of its complexity. The contribution made by the word level skills of decoding and spelling to skilled reading has been under-researched in New Zealand. Relationships between word level abilities and reading comprehension were investigated in an exploratory study of 301 adolescents aged from 12 to 14 from six secondary schools in the lower North Island of New Zealand. Word level knowledge was assessed through pseudoword and real word spelling tasks whilst vocabulary knowledge was assessed using a standardised reading vocabulary assessment and a morphological awareness task. Results demonstrated that spelling was more difficult than reading comprehension, and that whilst most adolescents in the sample had a grasp of the alphabetic principle, many had weak knowledge of English orthography and morphology. Regression analysis showed that vocabulary knowledge made the greatest contribution to reading comprehension. The contribution of spelling, although quite small, was significant. This finding suggested that an intervention focused on developing orthographical and morphological knowledge might have a beneficial influence on reading comprehension abilities.

An intervention focused on developing orthographic and morphological awareness, delivered by classroom teachers, consisted of bi-weekly word study sessions over 21 weeks. The intervention aimed to improve spelling and decoding skills for weaker students and vocabulary knowledge and word consciousness for all students. Moreover, the intervention also aimed to increase teachers' word level literacy knowledge by exposing them to interactive word study activities intended to engage students' interest. Post intervention assessments results showed no intervention effects for standardised spelling, vocabulary or reading comprehension. However, gains were found in pseudoword spelling and morphology tasks. Qualitative evidence supported the role of the intervention in developing word consciousness for a number of participants. There was evidence from a word level

knowledge task that most intervention teachers improved their word level knowledge when compared with control teachers' results.

The study has added to the existing body of knowledge relating to adolescent literacy because of the dearth of research into New Zealand adolescents' decoding and spelling skills. Furthermore, the study has contributed to a better understanding of secondary teacher's knowledge of word level literacy skills.

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