

*Principal's Sabbatical Report 2015:*

**To THRASS or Not?**

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**Purpose:**

To research, critically examine and report on the use of the THRASS<sup>®</sup> *Teaching Handwriting, Reading and Spelling Skills* (Alan Davies & Denyse Ritchie) programme and its particular relevance to improved literacy learning outcomes in the Junior School. To review and reflect on the enablers and barriers of THRASS and its phonemic and graphemic approach in preference to other literacy teaching and learning approaches.

**Background:**

In July 2013 Massey University published a report “Why the New Zealand National Literacy Strategy Has Failed And What Can Be Done About IT – *Evidence from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2011 and Reading Recovery Monitoring Reports.*” James Chapman, one of the cohort who published the article, and his team presented their findings to a group of interested Horowhenua teachers and principals at Shannon School in 2014. I found their shared findings and discussion disturbing yet resonating with my own experience, understandings and concerns. For most of my teaching years I have questioned the viability and sustainable practice of the use of a constructivist whole language approach to literacy and to the Reading Recovery strategy in its present form. I believe most teachers, including myself, have probably used an ‘ad hoc’ approach when teaching literacy in order to provide students with some phonological ‘rules’ to base their reading and spelling learning on. Unfortunately my own experience with ‘language rules’ are that they actually cause confusion for children (and often myself). Over the years I have

used various spelling programmes only to be frustrated myself in understanding them – let alone children trying to make sense of the phonetic approach provided.

Shannon School is a decile one school with about 80% Maori students. We have a mixture of wealthy families with a relatively high proportion of disadvantaged families. We know that many of our children start school without being exposed to a wealth of language or vocabulary, having incorrect pronunciation of words and little exposure to examples of logical thinking with fewer questions or ideas expressed.

When I arrived at the school seven years ago teaching was very formal and reading in the Junior classes was entirely based on the First Chance programme. Unfortunately I was unable to find any evidence from teachers as to their pedagogy or understanding of the reading and writing process, nor was there any educational writing provided on the programme. At that stage I requested the Ministry of Education to remove us from First Chance and I introduced KMac that delivered a holistic approach within the ‘whole language’ approach that most teachers have been familiar with. The Senior classes took daily Reciprocal Reading which was researched as an effective strategy and so this has continued within a new context of providing more of a ‘student voice’ approach in a collaborative, Innovative Learning Environment space.

## **THRASS**

In 2014 we employed a teacher with recent experience teaching in Sydney Australia. She was experienced in using THRASS and had received extensive training as a facilitator. Educational readings around this approach to literacy positively resounded with me. Teachers in the Junior Area, in particular, also appeared to be positive about THRASS. At the start of the 2015 year four junior area teachers underwent THRASS training in Auckland with an Australian facilitator. They came back very enthusiastic about the programme.

In 2015 the Junior classes were opened up to form a collaborative teaching area. During the year the teachers have been coming to grips with the new open environment, putting MLE pedagogy into practice as well as using THRASS effectively with the students. The use of the THRASS App on iPads has increased

interactivity of junior students using THRASS to hear the sounds. At the end of the year we purchased the interactive floor word/sound map as well as other essential THRASS resources.

For 2016 we are replacing Reading Recovery with more extensive teaching of 'word attack' using the THRASS process within a whole THRASS language approach. The experience and data from using Reading Recovery has not benefitted many of our children with long lasting reading success and progress. Many students regressed in reading and many of our Reading Recovery recipients have been transient which has not always led to positive reading experiences or appropriate reading or language skills. We know from universal research (as cited in Vosniadou, 2001) that children learn best when interacting with each other, from teachers employing flexible and effective approaches and strategies and taking individual differences into consideration. Reading Recovery *per say* does not necessarily allow for this flexibility and I believe the programme and approach no longer fits well with the school's inclusive child-centred, individualised, collaborative, co-constructed learning environment.

### **What is THRASS?**

The THRASS program was developed in the mid-1980s by Alan Davies, a British educational psychologist, to use with adults with literacy difficulties. Denyse Ritchie, a writer, publisher and former teacher trainer from Western Australia, began working with Alan in 1995. Together they adapted the program for use with children, and is now used as a fundamental part of the curriculum or as a support program at both the primary and secondary levels.

(de Graff , 2001, p.98)

When Denyse Ritchie attended a conference in Birmingham England in 1996 she attended a session run by Alan Davies, who was then working at Manchester Metropolitan University. Denyse felt enlightened on viewing Alan's chart that set out all the English sounds. Denyse encouraged Alan to collaborate with her in adapting THRASS for children as well as adults and they devised an intervention pack for schools with all the artwork and design done by Denyse in Western Australia.

THRASS is presently being used throughout the world in schools in the United Kingdom, Australia, Europe, Malaysia, Middle East, South and Central America, Central Asia, the USA, South Africa and to a limited degree in New Zealand. Denyse Ritchie is presently successfully introducing THRASS to a number of indigenous aboriginal schools in the outback of Australia. Mead (2009) states “in South Africa the success of THRASS is such that the THRASS Accredited Certificate is already a compulsory module for Foundation Phase student teachers at both the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and the University of Pretoria, and other universities in Africa have also expressed interest in making it a compulsory module.”

The THRASS programme is not a resource to be used solely as a class spelling programme, phonetic or reading approach but is rather a pedagogical approach to the teaching and practice of the English language. The more the teacher becomes familiar with the materials the better they will be at supporting children in their understanding of the English language. It involves a multi-sensory approach to the teaching and learning of handwriting, reading, writing and spelling.

There are many resources that have been developed for THRASS including:

- Teacher manuals
- Audio raps and rhythms
- Copymaster handwriting sheets
- Charts and Floor Maps
- Computer programmes
- iPad App
- Jigsaws, cards etc
- Assessment and testing materials

### **Sabbatical**

My sabbatical took me to Perth Australia to meet with Denyse Ritchie. Denyse is a motivational speaker and seasoned trainer and is able to *sell her product* through her well rehearsed, researched and systematic approach. I met with Denyse, family members and workers in Perth where she has set up a company to make and distribute

the many and various THRASS products. I attended a seminar in Perth and teacher training session in Melbourne both run by Denyse. The attendees were highly motivated and enthusiastic with Denyse's presentation. Denyse arranged my attendance at several schools in Perth, Melbourne and Brisbane where THRASS is being used successfully.

I was *blown away* with the enthusiasm of usually young, vibrant Junior class teachers who were able to use the programme very effectively. I joined in with class sessions where young 5 and 6 year old children were able to 'sound out' the options for the spelling of complex words including my own Christian and Surname. This lesson was done with the large floor *picture* mat chart with the class sitting around the outside of the mat and interacting with the graphemes, pictures and phonemes. Although there were obvious differences in the abilities of the students and their knowledge of the English language they were all able to experience success and were enthusiastic and engaged in all the activities.

The lessons I attended varied from cross-grouping across several new entrant and junior classes to single cell teaching. Generally the teaching and learning was at desks with mostly formal class activities. The teachers I spoke to were very interested in my own school's learning in multi-leveled, innovative spaces. Generally the schools were interested in moving towards Modern Learning Environments and I saw evidence of some teacher-led learning walls. However I was unable to see THRASS working in the type of teaching and learning spaces being developed at Shannon school.

I attended several classes that were equivalent to our year 3 and 4 classes where they were using THRASS. None of these teachers were trained or had experience in using THRASS to the same level as the new entrant teachers. The teachers were still coming to grips with familiarisation of the programme themselves but were still enthusiastic in using it. However I didn't get the impression that there was a THRASS approach towards an inclusive language pedagogy but rather a series of practice sessions with the children. The problem appeared to be that although students were coming into the class with high levels of THRASS skills the teachers were unable to sustain a similar skill level themselves.

In discussion with school principals there was a consensus that the new entrant and beginning Junior teachers were trained, skilled and enthusiastic with the programme. They were able to anecdotally tell me that the language and reading levels of children had risen because of the programme. These principals also said that the sustainability of the programme throughout other classes in the school was an issue.

I spoke to several other Australian educators, teacher and principals, outside of these schools and questioned them about THRASS. Most were aware of THRASS but had the impression that the programme was expensive and required a lot of training. One principal had replaced THRASS with another phonics programme which was *easier* to administer. I got the impression that principals were perhaps not as *au fait* with the programme as teachers were, which is understandable when it was teachers only receiving the THRASS training.

## **Research**

The research by James Chapman and his Massey team, (Turner et al, 2013), (reiterating the work of Paris and Luo (2010) states that there needs to be “greater emphasis on the assessment and teaching of constrained skills (i.e., phonetical awareness, alphabetic coding skills, automaticity in word recognition) during the first year of formal schooling. Our national *whole language* approach to writing and reading is proving to work for only some of our children. In Australia and many other countries, based on extensive research, this type of approach is being replaced and mandated with some form of phonetics programme. With our present Reading Recovery programme research is very clear (Turner et al, 2013, p.32) that the programme only benefits some struggling readers and not those who need help the most. For these children, more intensive and systematic instruction in phonemic awareness and phonemically-based decoding skills is likely to be required.

Many of our students, including boys in particular and dyslexic students, get very confused with reading and spelling in particular. They are often taught rules but then they meet a whole raft of exceptions to the rule. They may be taught some type of

phonics only to again find that there are exceptions. It is no wonder teachers get exasperated and students get confused and disengaged.

“Many practicing teachers exhibit weaknesses in concepts pertaining to the structure and nature of English orthography” (Turner et al, 2013). One of our inherent issues in NZ education is that English speaking teachers are not really trained in orthography (the knowledge of the representation of the sounds of the ‘English’ language by written or printed symbols). Yet if teachers had this understanding they would be able to use this in all language-based teaching and learning programmes. THRASS does allow for this as it is not a programme as such but rather a methodology or philosophy of language use. It requires teachers to train, practice and use their knowledge as a pedagogical approach to teaching and learning.

In the appendix I have included the study and research outcomes for the use of THRASS in a number of reports. My own teachers, after a year of introducing THRASS, are seeing positive effects. As with the positive anecdotal principal comments from schools I visited using THRASS, these reports show data that proves the effectiveness of THRASS in various settings – primary, secondary, dyslexic students, English as a Second language, adults, groups of students with learning difficulties.

## **Conclusions**

My sabbatical gave me the opportunity of meeting with Denyse Ritchie who has been instrumental in devising THRASS and developing a wide range of resources for schools. It was interesting to see how Denyse has used her own language and design skills to develop all the resources herself and set up her own company using her own daughter and partner as key personnel. The opportunity of being part of two of Denyse’s presentations was inspiring, as were visits to schools in several Australian state schools.

This worthwhile learning opportunity gave me a thorough understanding of why there is a need for THRASS. In my research on phonetical approaches to learning I have not come across such a comprehensive programme, support system or methodology. I believe many of our students are failing in the whole language approach as it does

not provide them with the rigorous tools to enable them to establish the effective *rules about language* that many of our children need or are looking for.

THRASS requires a commitment from schools, teachers and teacher aides, with parent education, to be familiar with and learn how to use the materials. Teachers must practise the tools with their students and then use them in all teaching and learning opportunities. It requires intensive practice in the early years of a student's schooling followed by teachers who are able to utilise these tools with the students who are already familiar and au fait with this approach. It requires schools to make THRASS their pedagogical approach to all language – this is the commitment we are collaboratively taking onboard as a school.

The importance of strategies to assist the development of phonological awareness is well researched. THRASS does this explicitly while maintaining an emphasis on real writing and reading. It provides a set of resources that are therefore compatible with whole language and functional literacy approaches. The THRASS Chart acts as a motivational and confidence building tool kit that students may use, when needed, as a reference that re-inforces familiarity with grapho-phonemic units. Its use can be applied to any whole language or functional literacy tasks. The flexible, multi-sensory and interactive nature of THRASS resources and methodology caters well for the varying abilities and demands of differentiated learners.

The potential effectiveness of THRASS will depend upon how the resources are used. Teachers will need to determine the degree of explicit instruction according to the individual needs of students. Not all students will require the same amount or same methods of instruction. It is also important that phonics does not dominate instruction. The THRASS methodology should be carefully balanced with literature based, functional and whole language approaches.

### **Where to Next?**

In 2016 we are intending to have THRASS used throughout the school. We have a Junior (Years 1 to 4) and Senior (Years 5 to 8) learning hub with a Rumaki Hub (Years 1 to 7). We are looking at the possibility of some components being used in



the Preschool that sits within the school site. We are also looking at the possibility of THRASS being used in our te reo immersion Rumaki cross-aged class. I will also be exploring the use of THRASS with a deaf student. As we will not be using Reading Recovery we will need to see how THRASS can be used as an accelerant tool for some of our struggling readers and how it can successfully be incorporated in programmes for our special needs students. We see THRASS as a new strategy in providing our differentiated learners with a *tried and true* tool to accelerate student learning in all areas of language.

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## **Appendix: THRASS STUDIES AND REPORTS - SUMMARY**

**Johnson (1995)** 'The Handwriting, Reading and Spelling Sequence (THRASS). An Evaluation Of A Two Term Pilot Study'. This intervention has demonstrated that THRASS is an effective method of raising children's levels of achievement in reading throughout the Primary range. All the groups made gains that resulted the gap between reading age and chronological age being reduced.

**Lovegrove (1998)** 'Reading Acquisition Using Phonemic Strategies For Students Experiencing Difficulties With Learning'. Published in the 'Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities', Volume 3, Issue 2 June 1998, pages 31-37. Pre-and post-testing results from this case study report 'significant gains from THRASS when compared to a matched control over an 8-week intervention period'. Results indicated that the student on the phoneme-grapheme based program THRASS appeared to make more significant gains than her matched partner receiving Direct Instruction, even in the short time period of this study. The THRASS program was observed to increase accessibility to everyday reading material, provide an easy modeling tool for adult assistance in spelling and reading and provide a more consistent basis on which to make judgments or choices of graphemes-phonemes without having to learn a variety of rules or sayings.

**Matthews (1998)** 'Special Initiative To Enhance Literacy Skills In Bridgend'. This thirteen-week intervention study showed a Ratio Gain of 2.5 in Spelling for children in Year 3 and Ratio Gains in Reading Accuracy of 2.3 for Year 3s, 2.4 for Year 4s, 3.4 for Year 5s and 2.4 for Year 6. There were Ratio Gains in Reading Comprehension of 2.3 for Year 3s, 2.7 for Year 4s, 3.8 for Year 5s, 4.2 for Year 6s.

**Brooks (2002)** 'What Works For Children With Literacy Difficulties-The Effectiveness Of Intervention Schemes'. Published by the UK government, Department for Education & Skills in 'Research Report No RR380'. Note: The views expressed in this report are the author's and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education and Skills. This report compared 25 programs and the overall comment was that, 'THRASS was one of the more effective programs'. The report listed average ratio gains of 3.4 in Reading Accuracy and 3.8 for Comprehension in Years 5 students using THRASS. It also reported ratio gains of 2.4 for Reading Accuracy in years 3, 4 and 6 and average ratio gains of 4.2, 2.7 and 2.3 for Comprehension in the same year levels. References to THRASS appear on pages 48 and 123 of this report. Applications for reproduction should be made to Prof. Greg Brooks, School of Education, University of Sheffield, Education Building, 388 Glossop Road, Sheffield S10 2JA.

**DfES (2003)** (Department For Education & Skills), UK 2003. The Department for Education & Skills, 'National Literacy Strategy' guidance leaflet (NLS Ref 0201, May 2003), recommends THRASS because NLS research indicates that there is 'at least double the normal rate of progress' for many pupils.

**Boutilier and Norris (2003)** 'Using THRASS In Secondary Schools: Evidence For Highly Significant Improvements In literacy skills'. Concluded that 'THRASS resulted in significant improvements in the literacy skills of secondary pupils'. This study showed mean Ratio Gain scores for secondary school students (Year 8 and 9) for spelling and reading comprehension. Year 8 Spelling: 1.71, Year 9 Spelling: 1.93,

Combined Year 8 and 9 Reading Comprehension: 1.85, Combined Year 8 and 9 Reading Accuracy: 1.22. On average 40.5% of students achieved ratio gains of 2.0 or more for spelling. Interestingly, although reading skills were not the specific target of the intervention there were gains in both accuracy and comprehension, with 44% of students achieving Ratio Gains for reading accuracy of 2.0 or more and 32% achieving gains of 2.0 or more for reading comprehension.

**Edington And Shapwick School (2003)** Study conducted November 2002-May 2003. A Study Of Secondary Age Dyslexics. Ratio gains were between 4.0 and 6.0 for spelling when they received 10-30 minutes of THRASS training per day for 5 months. Using the Vernon Spelling Test, a group of Year 8 dyslexics made 30 months progress in spelling (Ratio Gain=6.0) in 5 months. A group of Year 7 dyslexics made 20 months progress in spelling (Ratio Gain=4.0) in 5 months. One pupil improved three-and-a-half-years in the five months.

**Greaves (2005)** 'THRASS Phonemic Teaching'. Data from two small-scale Australian studies showing the efficacy of the THRASS program on various aspects of reading and spelling are presented. Two regular primary school junior classes were compared over a 10-week period. One class had THRASS instruction. The other class was a control. The THRASS class showed significant improvement on pseudo-word reading, spelling, word identification and one aspect of phonological processing. A similar study design was conducted with secondary school remedial students in withdrawal classes with similar findings.

**Perri (2005)** 'The Effect Of The THRASS Program On Secondary School Students Literacy And Wellbeing'. Concluded that, 'As well as being significantly more effective in teaching literacy skills by ensuring students understand the fundamentals of reading acquisition, THRASS has shown to improve academic and general self-perceptions for students with learning difficulties'. 'There was a significant difference between the THRASS group and the comparison group in pseudoword decoding and single word reading immediately after the ten weeks intervention. 'Ratio Gain scores showed the THRASS group to be learning at 3 times the controls group's rate'. Furthermore when tested again five months after the intervention ceased (and many students no longer received any literacy assistance) a significant overall main effect was found for the THRASS intervention group. 'Ratio Gains also demonstrated significantly better improvement for the THRASS group over the comparison group on the three word level measures both at post test and five months later'.

**McLachlan (2005)** 'The effectiveness of the Teaching Handwriting, Reading And Spelling Skills (THRASS) Program As An Intervention For Literacy Problems In A Secondary Setting'. This ten-week intervention study was conducted in three schools with students experiencing literacy problems. The study concluded that, 'The THRASS group showed significantly greater improvement to a matched comparison group, in a literacy score consisting of the WIAT sub-tests of Pseudoword Decoding, Spelling, Word Reading and the Test of Reading Comprehension'. 'Ratio Gains generated strong evidence of the effectiveness of the THRASS program, with Ratio Gains of 3.0 compared to -0.47 with the comparison groups on the three measures of Pseudoword Decoding, Spelling and Word Reading'. 'This means that in the 10-week program, using these measures the THRASS group increased their reading and spelling ages by an average of 30 weeks, whereas the comparison group on average

actually decreased by 5 weeks'. 'The students not only benefited immediately after the program had ended, but maintained their gains for at least another four months'.

**Parry (2005)** 'Exploring The Effects Of The THRASS Program On Phonological Processing, Reading And Spelling Of Year 1 And 2 Students'. Concluded that 'Explicit phonics instruction, as implemented in the THRASS program, is a critical step leading to a balanced language reading program'. 'There was a significant difference in pseudoword reading age scores for the THRASS group compared to the non-THRASS group following the intervention'. 'The THRASS group increase in mean pseudoword reading age is 26 months, whereas the non-THRASS group increase is six months'. 'The interaction of time and the THRASS group and the significant effect of the THRASS group suggests pseudoword reading scores following the intervention have improved significantly more for the THRASS group'. Other measures included: 'The THRASS group increase in mean spelling age is seven months, whereas the non-THRASS group increase is two months'. 'The THRASS group increase in mean reading age is ten months, whereas the non-THRASS group increase is four months'.

**In 2005** two Queensland schools (populations of indigenous students who speak English as a second or third language), won Australian Literacy Awards. Official literacy data and testing from the Year 3 students, who had been doing THRASS for three years, showed that these children were at or above state benchmark. Principals of both schools have stated that the impact made by THRASS teaching strategies was clearly the main variable in securing these outstanding results. Both teachers and indigenous aides were trained in THRASS and were involved in the teaching process'.

**Burgess (2009)** 'To THRASS or not to THRASS'. This paper examined the suitability of THRASS for use in adult literacy programs. The paper concluded that, 'sufficient elements of good phonics instruction as described in the research review are evident in THRASS to merit its inclusion in adult literacy programmes. The importance of strategies to assist the development of phonological awareness is well noted. THRASS does this explicitly while maintaining an emphasis on real writing and reading. It provides a set of resources that are therefore compatible with whole language and functional literacy approaches. The THRASS Chart acts as a motivational and confidence building tool kit that adult students may use, when needed, as a reference that re- reinforces familiarity with grapho-phonemic units. Its use can be applied to any whole language or functional literacy task.

The flexible, multi-sensory and interactive nature of THRASS resources and methodology caters well for the varying abilities and demands of adult learners. Strategies such as word analysis by analogy and emphasis on independent and self-reflective learning are well suited to the learning styles of adult students'.

Please note that the above paper incorrectly identifies THRASS as a 'British scheme'. In fact the co-authors of THRASS are Denyse Ritchie from Perth, Western Australia and Alan Davies from Chester, England.

**Siik & Hawkins (2013)** 'THRASS PHONICS: A Case Study Of Thomas As An Emerging Reader In English'. Published in 'The English Teacher', Vol. XLII(1) April 2013. This study aims to evaluate the capacity of THRASS phonics, in teaching English literacy skills, to a Chinese Malaysian primary school student, in Kuching,

Sarawak. The authors selected case study as the theoretical framework to illustrate the impact that THRASS phonics had on both teacher and student during the study. The paper discusses the findings and

concludes with the implications for further phonics research in Malaysia. The study concludes that, 'THRASS phonics is a compelling instrument that can be used by Malaysian English teachers to ensure systematic and comprehensive phonemic and phonics instruction with students throughout Malaysia.'

**RELATED STUDIESTajuddin & Shah (2015) 'TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE OF PHONEMIC AWARENESS AND ITS INSTRUCTION IN ESL LEARNING – SUB-URBAN PRIMARY SCHOOL IN MALAYSIA .** Published in the International Journal of Technical Research and Applications, e-ISSN: 2320-8163, [www.ijtra.com](http://www.ijtra.com) Special Issue 22 (July, 2015), PP. 72-79 P74 of this study mentions the 2013 paper on THRASS by Siik & Hawkins.

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