

# **New Zealand Primary Principals Sabbatical Report**

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**Term 1, 2020**

## **Ko to ahurei o te tamaiti arahia of tatou mahi. Let the uniqueness of the child guide our work.**

**About Dyslexia**

**Ministry of Education (2020)**

### **Proposal:**

To develop a wider knowledge and understanding of programmes to ensure educational success and enhance life opportunities for all students, including success for Maori and non-Maori, and children who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

### **Background:**

For a number of years we have provided programmes and interventions across the school to assist our priority learners, specifically those achieving below the expectations as stated in the Ministry of Education's Literacy Learning Progressions. These learners were identified in our mid-year and end of year reports as at risk of not meeting expectations in the New Zealand Curriculum. We have a wealth of diagnostic data (reading conversations, running records, PAT, STAR, e-asTTle writing samples, essential word list spelling tests) that gave us information that confirmed what teachers knew. These children were not achieving at expected levels. We implement a range of interventions, however, year after year these children's progress tracked at small increments but not accelerated therefore, they remain below the New Zealand curriculum expectations.

Across a long period of time, we had participated in extensive professional development (LPDP, ALL, Literacy advisors, incidental professional development from providers such as Murray Gadd, Sheena Cameron, Gail Loane, Jeff Anderson). Additional support programmes, such as Reading Recovery, HPP, additional teacher aide time in classrooms, were used to try and accelerate the progress in literacy of these learners. Teacher Aide support was funded by the Board of Trustees in the hope that what was being done would make a difference to these learners across the school. Data was not supporting our actions therefore we had to do something differently, as we could no longer continue to watch these children progress through the years with lower achievement than what their potential was. In 2019 our student achievement target in the Charter was 'for every child to improve their spelling ability'. Although this target was achieved, teachers do not see the level of transfer from test lists of words mastered, into children's writing. This also reinforced the need to look at, and learn more about, the links between spelling, writing and reading.

At Riversdale we have a focus on teaching that is explicit, direct and intentional. But still there were gaps that were not being closed for our learners. Many of the children had

received a lengthy period of Reading Recovery instruction, with a majority completing the programme having achieved the expected levels. However, for some children their progress was not maintained in either reading or writing. We were questioning: what is it that we need to do? Are the provisions adequate, purposeful and making a difference? Are we getting a positive return for the Board funding of support programmes? Could a cohort of children who are so hard to make sustained shifts with, have a learning difference; be dyslexic or dyscalculic? At what age can we identify that children are struggling with literacy learning? And if so, we need to explore different interventions to ensure their success.

Although we had no knowledge at this time of specific tools for diagnosing those children who were dyslexic, teachers felt they had some indications. The children did not reach the 'After 6 months' indicators, they had difficulty learning and retaining sounds, letters and sight words. In writing their progress was slower, they had difficulty generating and recording ideas, and there were behaviours evident such as letter and word reversal. However, "it is not sufficient to suspect dyslexia merely on the basis of a child having a below-average reading age, because ... where dyslexia is concerned we are dealing with a *specific* difficulty." (Doyle, p49). Clearly, we needed to learn more about what dyslexia is, how to screen, and ways of supporting children with it.

The concept of "accelerated learning" is important given that an early gap between good and poor readers, typically persists or increases over time (Billard, 2010; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997) leading to inequities in educational, health and economic outcomes (Law, Rush, Schoon, & Parsons, 2009; Johnson, Beitchman, & Brownlie, 2010). For the children in Riversdale School to have enhanced outcomes we need to support them to have successful outcomes by the time they reach Year 8.

### **Purpose:**

"Reading scientists now know that children do not learn to read by memorising whole words of guessing words from pictures, context and/or first letters. Children who seem to be doing that are actually taking words apart and figuring out how the sounds and letters work, something many children can't do without explicit and direct instruction. Sounding out right through the words should simply not be reserved as a strategy of last resort, as Reading Recovery's Dame Marie Clay recommended". (Clarke, 2019).

The Ministry of Education's publication About Dyslexia (2020) states that "Dyslexia is a dynamic condition: people with dyslexia change as they grow and their needs change (p3). It is critical that difficulties learning to read are identified as early as possible and that intensive and well-targeted interventions are provided to students. Teachers must take action when difficulties with reading are identified rather than waiting for a formal diagnosis of dyslexia. (Hanks, 2011) (p6).

Being able to identify our students shortly after entry to school to know from the outset whether there were learning differences with acquisition of literacy was a key outcome from this sabbatical. If possible, locating suitable screening tools would give insights to our student's strengths and areas of difficulty.

Only recently has there been more wide acceptance of dyslexia being a learning difference for many children in schools, and that there are resources to support their learning. In a perfect world every child on entry to school would be assessed by a highly trained dyslexia

diagnostics professional. However, this is not the reality, and very few parents have access to trained professionals. Assessments may be prohibitive due to the cost, and the location of such professionals. Programmes to support children may also be too expensive for many parents to access.

I believe we can do better, and we will do better. We can no longer continue to do as we have always done and wonder why we get the same results as we always have. Nicholson and Dymock state that; Although the most common type of reading difficulty is poor decoding *and* poor language comprehension, we also know that up to 10 percent of the population are poor decoders with good language comprehension (i.e. dyslexic). p79.

For the rest of the 2020 school year, I wanted to upskill teachers to have a deeper and more complex knowledge of the teaching of phonological knowledge and alphabetic principle, and to be confident in adopting a model of explicit instruction to assist all learners (Tier 1 approach). Further to that they would then look at targeted learners (Tiers 2 and 3) to impact in a more focussed way, so these children would have more success with literacy. This would ensure our children with learning differences achieve educational success and have enhanced life opportunities.

### **Professional Activity and Findings:**

As dyslexia has been on my 'radar' for some time, I have been speaking with colleagues and looking for professional development opportunities that would develop my understanding, across 2019. I was delighted to be successful in my application for this sabbatical, and grateful that the Riversdale Board of Trustees supported my decision to take Term 1, 2020 as the study period.

#### **Feuerstein**

My initial focus was an investigation of the Feuerstein programme. I had several discussions with the Principal of Otatara School in Invercargill and read articles about its success in other schools in New Zealand. The opportunity to train in Feuerstein occurred in 2019, and a teacher's aide and I participated in this.

The Feuerstein program is based on the internationally renowned work of Professor Reuven Feuerstein, whose theories and applied systems have been implemented in a wide variety of settings, from clinical to classroom, and to business.

For students who struggle, they can lose confidence in their abilities and begin to dislike learning.

The Feuerstein programmes focus is on enhancing students' cognitive functions to help learners regain their confidence and generate new interest in the curriculum. These programmes assist learners to achieve their potential.

The programmes are used as tools to assist students in achieving their potential and have proven successful with people of all ages and abilities, including those with disabilities and learning difficulties. They have benefits for all students and have been successful with both learners experiencing learning difficulties, as well as with gifted students to improve decision making skills, planning, flexible thinking and more.

The program was designed to address all curriculum areas; its tasks do not require prior knowledge in any one content area.

The materials are organised into activities consisting of paper and pencil exercises, extensive discussion and supported learning aimed at developing specific thinking in areas such as analytic perception, orientation in space and time, systematic data gathering, hypothesising and classification.

It is an intensive program, with best results achieved when students are able to participate in two sessions per week over a 12 to 24-month period. Students learn to define problems, make connections, see relationships and become self-motivated. Consequently, they improve their thinking and work habits.

At the time of writing this section for the report (July 2020) we have had a small group of senior (Years 6, 7 and 8) students involved in the programme for almost a year. They will have completed all the booklets/tools by mid Term 3, 2020. Some data collected at this time does not show improvements to their learning behaviours within the classroom. Observations show that the children still are impulsive, and rarely bring the “Just a moment – let me think” mantra which underpins Feuerstein, to their work or behaviour. A student survey completed shows the following information:

<b>Student initials: Scale 1 least to 5 most.</b>	<b>Feuerstein has helped me ‘slow down’</b>	<b>Feuerstein has helped my learning.</b>	<b>Feuerstein has helped at home.</b>	<b>I have enjoyed... about Feuerstein.</b>	<b>I have not enjoyed ... about Feuerstein.</b>
DS (Yr 7 male, Maori)	Not really 1	Word finds 4	To do my washing 3	To find the differences 4	The dots are hard 1
LM (Yr 6 male, NZE)	A little bit with my work 3	Not too much 3	It hasn’t helped me much 1	I liked doing the dots 4	Getting stuck 2
JD (Yr 6 male, NZE)	In maths I stop and think 3	It helps me have straight lines 2	My room is always more organised 5	I enjoy the dots 4	I have loved Feuerstein 1
BG (Yr 7 female, NZE)	Had me slow down a lot. Gave me time in a test. It has made me think before I do some things. 3	No it has not 1	It has not helped at home 1	Nothing 1	No play time with friends or time to myself before school starts 1
JE (Yr 7 male, NZE)	I don’t feel like it has helped 2	I am not sure 3	Not really 2	Not a lot 2	It’s hard to think 4
LE (Yr 8 male, Maori)	It has made me slow down at my work 3	It has made my learning to concentrate more on work 3	Has helped me to think before doing something at home 4	I enjoyed the dots because I like to do dot to dot 4	We lose playtime and time to hang with friends And we only got 5 minutes for this 1

AN (Yr 8 female, Maori)	Not really 2	It hasn't helped me with my learning because it is overloading my brain instead of helping it 1	It has not 1	I have enjoyed the dots 2/3	It is too easy because my type of dyslexia is good at this and it is just overloading my brain. 1
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PAT Results	Maths		Reading Comp		Reading Vocab		STAR	
	T3 19	T1 20	T3 19	T1 20	T3 19	T1 20	T3 19	T1 20
DS (Yr 7 male)	3	3	3	2	2	abs	2	abs
LM (Yr 6 male)	4	2	5	6	5	abs	5	5
JD (Yr 6 male)	8	6	4	3	4	3	5	4
BG (Yr 7 female)	2	2	3	3	3	2	4	2
JE (Yr 7 male)	6	4	4	2	3	3	4	3
LE (Yr 8 male)	5	5	4	3	3	2	4	4
AN (Yr 8 female)	6	4	3	3	3	3	4	2

Discussion: some results could be due to holiday 'drop off'. Only one child has improved in one test over the period of two terms of Feuerstein instruction. Term 3 2020 results will also be compared. These are disappointing results. Impacting on them could be the fact that teachers have not reinforced the idea of taking time and processing logically before selecting the most appropriate answer.

The above voice and PAT results show little or no effect from Feuerstein intervention. The programme has been expertly delivered four days per week, across almost a year (at the time of writing). The children's voice matches that of the Progress and Achievement Tests. They do not generally see it as being helpful, and the PAT results show a decline in achievement. As a follow up I will be interested to speak to colleagues in other schools who trained at the time our staff did and see what results they have seen from the intervention.

### Better Start Literacy

*Every child should have the best possible start in life. To achieve this A Better Start researchers are creating the tools and methods to predict, prevent and intervene early so children have a healthy weight, are successful learners and teenagers can access the tools they need to look after their mental health.*

*A Better Start is the National Science Challenge working to help children, teenagers, their whanau and family achieve the best possible start in life. Our job is to find practical, evidence-based solutions that make a measurable difference for tamariki.*

*We can do that only when we work with communities, draw together indigenous and Western approaches to knowledge and bring the best researchers from different disciplines here and overseas to take a holistic approach rather than address health, wellbeing and learning issues in isolation.*

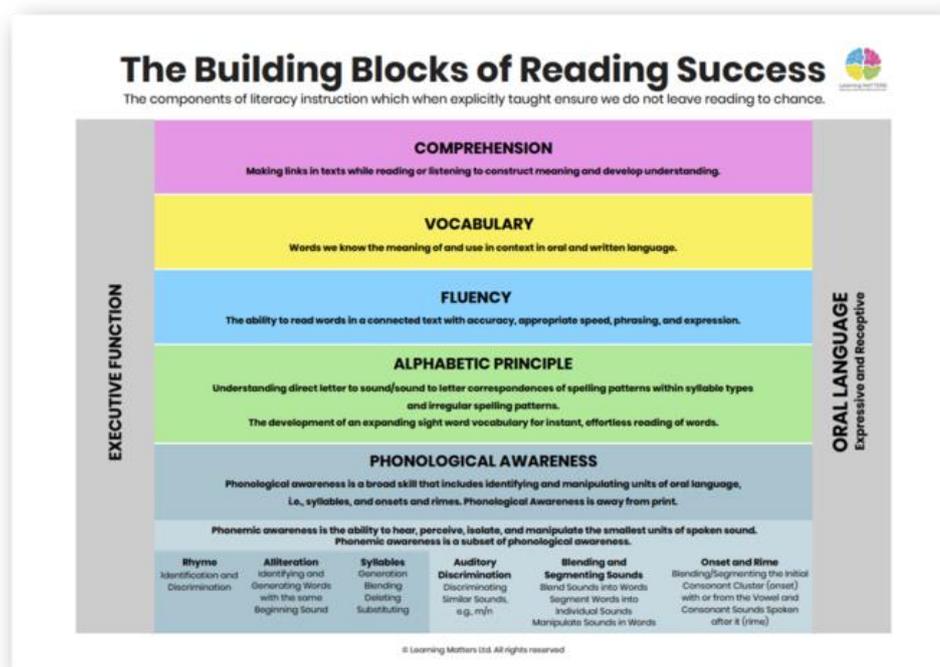
*A team of researchers at the University of Canterbury (UC) Child Well-being Research Institute|Te Kāhui Pā Harakeke in Christchurch, New Zealand, has developed the Better Start Literacy Approach, which is based on several years of research trials investigating the most efficient and effective methods to support children's early reading, writing and oral*

language success. *The Better Start Literacy Approach takes a strengths-based and inclusive perspective focusing on ensuring successful early literacy experiences for all children/tamariki. It is influenced by the work of Professor Angus Macfarlane (Professor of Māori Research at the University of Canterbury) and his colleagues, in understanding facilitators of success for young Māori learners. The approach includes ensuring positive engagement of whānau/family in their children’s literacy learning. The aim of the Better Start Literacy Approach is to advance more equitable educational outcomes for all our children and their whānau/family. (From [www.betterstartapproach.com/assessment-educators](http://www.betterstartapproach.com/assessment-educators)).*

After I was granted the sabbatical for 2020, I contacted Chris Cole, Learning Differences Advisor, Southland. Chris talked to be about the work of Professor Gail Gillon at the University of Canterbury and the Better Start Literacy programme. I emailed Gail and was delighted to be invited to join the initiation of a new cluster of schools into the programme and visit some schools who have the programme as established teacher practice. These visits learning occurred at the end of February, 2020.

I attended a teacher induction day for the Hornby Cluster of schools. I visited Yaldhurst School and St Anne’s School who both had been in the research in previous years. I also attended a parent/whanau meeting at St Bernadette’s School. This was to introduce the programme outline and answer any questions. It was my intention to return to Christchurch to visit the schools in the Hornby Cluster and see the implementation of the programme, however the Covid19 lockdown impacted on this.

This programme is making a significant difference to literacy acquisition for new entrant children. The research clearly shows this (and is available on-line if you google Better Start Literacy and look at the power point slides). The project is only being trialled in Canterbury and Auckland, and it is my hope that once the research period is completed, the Ministry of Education will ensure it is available to all schools in New Zealand.



This Learning Matters poster defines the essential elements for reading. At the foundation level is phonological awareness. The Better Start Literacy programme has a strong focus on phonological awareness as well as vocabulary acquisition using New Zealand picture books.

In terms of children with learning differences, this is a key factor in their literacy acquisition. Research (Kilpatrick 2019) indicates that dyslexics present with a phonological core deficit. The most common deficit areas are:

- Phonemic awareness
- Phonemic blending
- Rapid automatized naming
- Phonological working memory
- Letter-sound and sound-letter knowledge acquisition
- Nonsense word reading
- Developing an automatic sight word vocabulary

The Better Start Literacy programme focuses on a number of these deficit areas when children start their schooling, therefore supporting not only all children, but also those who may be somewhere on the learning differences spectrum.

Typically, learners with dyslexia have difficulty learning the code – specifically, decoding and spelling. In order to learn the code, students must develop:

- Phonological awareness
- An understanding of the alphabetic principle (About Dyslexia, p46)

Phonological awareness, and developing the alphabetic principle are core components of the Better Start Literacy programme. Alphabetic principle includes learning the names of the letters of the alphabet as well as understanding the following key concepts: we use letters to record sounds, there are different ways to write sounds and we can use more than one letter to write a sound.

Children who do not receive explicit teaching, or do not make these discoveries for themselves are unlikely to make the expected progress within the first year of schooling and beyond. Furthermore, teachers who have trained over the last period of years, are not being trained to focus on these areas once they are in the classroom, therefore generations of children have not had explicit instruction in phonological awareness. This could be reflected in NZ's continuing decline in PIRLS. The 'whole language' approach was not an effective teaching approach for many children. Current research indicates that phonological awareness is one of the biggest predictors of literacy success. Further to that, the teaching of alphabetic principle, otherwise known as phonics, is crucial in building reading fluency. (McNeill, 2019).

There are several screening tools that will indicate children have a learning difference:

- Lucid tools - consisting of CoPS (for ages 4-7) and LASS (ages 8-11 and 11-15), Ability, Exact, Recall, Rapid and LADSplus.
- Woodcock Johnston
- WISC (Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children)

These will give a formal diagnosis, and outline strategies for classroom teachers.

The Better Start Literacy programme has an online tool that is used to screen children's knowledge around phonological awareness and is critical for measuring the impact of the programme.

Conversation with Chris Cole has also highlighted that there are two questions to ask whanau if teachers suspect a learning difference:

1. Is there a family history of learning differences e.g. dyslexia?
2. Did the child have hearing difficulties prior to entry to school?

Focusing on Specific Learning Differences (SLD) at Riversdale School will enhance the outcomes for the children who attend across their eight years of primary education. Our future focus is to ensure that we maintain inclusive practices and pedagogies within the school setting. We need to involve whanau and the children in this journey. While we had previously been looking at interventions and noticing that a number of children were not making the expected progress over their years at school, we did not have enough knowledge about alternatives to better provide for them. Our work going forward will be to investigate learning differences further and enhance our pedagogical practices to be more inclusive of SLD children. It is exciting to imagine and implement programmes that give enhanced learning outcomes for these tamariki in our school.

### **Conclusion:**

As with all initiatives we are always checking their effectiveness regarding children's learning. In the review of both Feuerstein and Better Start Literacy, it may well be that one complements the other. Feuerstein is harder to measure in terms of impact, and it may be that we do not see this for some time. Better Start Literacy is designed to be clearly measurable as children are assessed on entry and at the end of ten weeks of the intervention.

The purpose of the sabbatical was to investigate programmes that would provide educational success for our groups of children who do not meet the expectations of the New Zealand Curriculum at specified year levels, and I feel I have achieved this. It has set me on a journey to cater for these children with more insight and understanding of their learning differences and strengths.

Early intervention is critical. We need to have diagnostic evidence and explicit structured programmes that will support all children's learning.

Our next steps are:

- Whanau engagement and information around learning differences.
- Implementation of Better Start Literacy (with permission) and tracking its effectiveness.
- A further review of Feuerstein after one year of the programme.
- Working alongside Learning Differences Facilitator Chris Cole for professional development about classroom adjustments to better cater for our dyslexic children.

### **Covid19 impact:**

Covid19 impacted significantly on my sabbatical. I have been able to investigate the Better Start Literacy programme. However, New Zealand was placed into Level 4 lockdown for the rest of the period of my sabbatical. This meant that I did not visit the schools I had intended to.

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Chris Cole. Learning Differences Southland. *Thank you for igniting my interest in learning differences and leading me onto the Better Start Literacy Programme.*

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