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THE ROLE OF
ITINERANT TEACHERS OF READING

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ABSTRACT

The position of Itinerant Teacher of Reading was established following a successful pilot scheme in 1974. The Department of Education indicated that the function of the itinerant teachers was to help alleviate the problem of children who experience severe difficulties in learning to read.

Departmental instructions to Education Boards were couched in general terms to allow the Boards some latitude in defining and establishing the role. This study researches the role of Itinerant Teachers of Reading.

The major objectives of the study were to describe the underlying purposes of the itinerant service and to clarify the role of Itinerant Teachers of Reading.

The literature discussing children at risk in reading reveals a similarity of opinions on the alleviation of the problem. New Zealand authorities on reading agree that there is a minority group of children who require intensive regular and individualised instruction to improve their reading ability. Also apparent is the tendency for the varied methods of instruction to be focussed closely upon text reading rather than isolated skills acquisition.

To ascertain the ways in which itinerant teachers were dealing with children at risk information was gathered via a questionnaire from all Itinerant Teachers of Reading in New Zealand. From their responses emerged three clearly discernible role patterns which ranged from an advisory type role to that of a travelling reading clinician. More detailed information was obtained by interviewing six of the fifteen itinerant teachers and observing four of the teachers at their work.

To gain a balanced viewpoint of the itinerant service a second questionnaire solicited opinions and data from a representative adviser and an inspector from each of the ten Education Boards. In general their opinions of the true function of itinerant teachers supported their Board's itinerant teacher(s). Some variation

between the methods of teaching advocated by this group and those used by the itinerant teachers was apparent.

An examination of Departmental documents followed by a lengthy correspondence with personnel involved in the pilot scheme produced a description of the initial purposes of the itinerant service. The first itinerant teachers were required to establish a pool of resource teachers in schools by training selected teachers in appropriate teaching skills.

Although the study is a descriptive one, the opinions expressed by the questionnaire respondents were discussed and presented as recommendations for possible future action. The recommendations encompassed the spheres of communications, service support, role clarification and standardisation, and accountability. The study concludes with a brief note on possible future evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

In 1974 a new position was established in the New Zealand primary and intermediate schools system. This was the position of Itinerant Teacher of Reading.

The objectives of this study were to:

- i) discover the true underlying purpose of the itinerant reading scheme,
- ii) clarify the role of Itinerant Teacher of Reading, and
- iii) establish a system of communications between Itinerant Teachers of Reading.

This thesis is a description of the ensuing research into the itinerant service.

The first chapter illuminates the problem of children who experience severe difficulties in learning to read. A brief description is given of the support services available to classroom teachers followed by a more detailed analysis of how the itinerant reading service was initiated and established.

An overview of some of the relevant New Zealand literature pertaining to instruction for children with reading difficulties is given in Chapter Two. Included here is a presentation of the methodology used in this study and its major objectives.

Because Departmental Circular 1976/76 was couched in general terms to allow district latitude in their role definitions, some role variations have evolved. Chapter Three describes three distinct patterns which have emerged and then briefly discusses advisers' and inspectors' opinions of how the itinerant reading role could be most effectively implemented.

There follow two chapters detailing questionnaire and interview responses including demographic information; an outline of the

variations in types of contact with associated personnel; methods and resources used by, and available to, itinerant reading teachers; and the opinions of advisers and inspectors on training, effectiveness, methods of teaching, resources, and functions of the itinerant teachers.

Chapter Six presents a discussion of possible alterations to the itinerant service to render it as effective as possible.

The concluding chapter of the thesis summarises the purposes of the study and the methodology used in the research. Finally some tentative recommendations for possible changes and improvements to the service are discussed.

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Rosalie Kay Phillips
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CHAPTER ONE : THE PROBLEM; SUPPORT SERVICES; BACKGROUND

The importance of the teaching and learning of reading has always been accepted in New Zealand education. Periodically, sections of the public criticise or question the effectiveness of our schools' teaching of this basic subject in the curriculum. This chapter cites some of the research evidence which indicates that standards in reading amongst New Zealand children are quite satisfactory, except, perhaps, amongst those pupils variously labelled 'failed readers', 'retarded readers' or backward readers' - those pupils who experience difficulty in learning to read. A summary of the traditional sources of guidance available to the classroom teacher in the teaching of pupils with learning difficulties in reading is given, and followed by a description of the beginnings of the itinerant reading service.

The ability to read is a fundamental skill necessary for life in our society. As well, reading has tremendous intrinsic worth to a large majority of people. Therefore reading has always been one of the basic subjects in the New Zealand school curriculum.

In spite of the importance attached to the teaching and learning of reading, not all pupils in our schools have successfully learned to read. As the level of literacy needed for survival in a complex society such as ours increases steadily, so too do public expectations of the achievements of the children passing through the education system.

Periodically, these expectations are voiced as criticisms of the standards¹ of literacy in our schools. Concerned citizens righteously call for a return to the 'basics' in schools. This in turn develops into a debate comparing competences in reading today and those in the past.

1. "Standards" as used in this paper refers to the loose general usage in reference to actual levels of performance as seen by lay people.

The Departmental review, Education Standards in State Schools in 1977 found that standards in reading are at least as good as they ever were, while Marie Clay, comparing her work with children with learning difficulties over the last thirty years states:

"and the percentage of children needing help may have been reduced." (Clay, 1979, 4)

Few definitive studies of comparative standards in reading have been undertaken in New Zealand. Warwick Elley in "Are Our Standards of Literacy Declining?" reviews the major relevant studies which present solid evidence for his conclusion that:

"New Zealand reading standards have improved since the 1940s" (Elley, 1976)

Similar evidence is summarised by Neil Reid (Set, No. 1, 1978) and by Marie Clay in opening the Tenth New Zealand Conference on Reading in 1979. Clay (1980, 9) listed six examples which belie public concern about standards in reading generally:

- "1. On the Otis Test of Mental Ability scores rose by one whole year of mental age at each age level between 1936 and 1968. By my reckoning that makes everyone above fifty less competent than they thought they were, relative to today's 20 year olds. As the Otis requires reading skill and correlates highly with reading tests this is indirect evidence that the skills underlying academic achievement have been improving.
2. Skoglund reported a comparison of test performance in 1959 with five earliest checks going back to 1927. He said:

Attainment, in comprehension was higher than ever before.
3. Compulsory military trainees 18 - 21 years showed attainment levels had risen between 1954 and 1964 (Hounsell).

4. In 1955 our children were about a year ahead of their Australian peers on ACER tests for reading comprehension and at much the same level in Word Knowledge. In 1968 the tests were re-administered, and overall standards were maintained. The top 80% were higher than at the earlier time.
5. In 1974 a check on the norms of the Progressive Achievement Tests showed that levels in reading comprehension may have been improving, but mean scores which included vocabulary, remained stable between 1968 - 1974.
6. Renwick (1977) reported that the percentage of pupils in each age group gaining University Entrance was doubled from 13% to 26% between 1951 and 1976."

However Clay sounded a note of caution:

"It is fair to conclude that we may not be doing enough to raise the reading levels of the slow progress children". (Clay, 1980, 14)

It has been estimated that approximately five percent of the school population fail to learn to read. A further ten percent have difficulty mastering reading (McIlroy, 1976). Therefore, in the vast majority of classrooms in our schools, there will be a number of children who require assistance beyond the normal reading programme in order to make progress.

Traditionally the classroom teacher has had access to various sources of help for the pupil with reading difficulties.

- i) At the school level teachers have been able to utilise the experience and knowledge of Senior Teachers. A major obstacle to such aid has been the inability within the system to release Senior Teachers to give classroom guidance.

- ii) Each Education Board has an Advisory Service which since the 1960s has included one or more Adviser on Reading. Until recently there were at least two Advisers on Reading in each Board but the 'sinking lid' policy has reduced this number.
- iii) During the last decade some Education Boards, for example Auckland and South Auckland, have conducted long-term (between one term and two years) in-service courses on reading. These have been a balance of theory and practice. Course members have been withdrawn from their schools to participate in a series of lectures and discussions followed by experimentation and practice in schools before returning to the training centre for evaluation and further instruction. Teachers receiving such training have tended to become Reading Resource teachers in their schools or, as in the Pakuranga-Howick area and Tokoroa, as seconded Itinerant Reading Resource teachers.
- iv) More recently, the Early Reading In-Service Course (ERIC) has been available to teachers on a national scale. In some areas, teachers are at present participating in E.R.I.C. for the first time, whilst teachers in other areas have had an opportunity to review or repeat the course. E.R.I.C. is an audio-tutorial type of course which presents reading as part of a balanced language programme. Through a series of slides and tapes the participants are guided through the many facets of an early reading programme. The course includes a unit on children who experience difficulties in learning to read.

Unfortunately no national discussion, review or evaluation of the effects of E.R.I.C. are as yet available.

- v) Following a research project in 1976-77 in Auckland and fields trials in five Auckland schools the following year,

Marie Clay initiated an in-service programme of reading recovery in forty-nine Auckland schools in 1979.

- vi) Reading Clinics were established in the 1940s. Myrtle Simpson and Ruth Trevor taught in Christchurch clinics at that time and during the 1950s clinics were established in Auckland, Wellington and Dunedin. The major purpose of clinics was to give individual tuition to pupils with severe reading disabilities. The pupils were (and are) selected from a wide contributing district and travelled once or several times weekly to the clinics for their lessons until the area reading clinic committee felt their progress was sufficient to warrant a discharge from the clinic roll.

- vii) During the decade between the early 1960s and the early 1970s the Education Department's policy changed to a concentration on the development of resources within schools. These included:
 - a) strengthening the staff of primary schools
 - b) increasing the supply of books in primary schools
 - c) increasing local in-service training courses for teachers; and
 - d) developing the Psychological Service

As well as these support services under the auspices of the Education Department and Education Boards, teachers may, upon their own initiative, enroll in Diploma in Teaching courses in reading with the New Zealand Correspondence School or in courses at any New Zealand University. All universities, except Auckland, offer at least one undergraduate reading paper at the 300 level and one at postgraduate level.

The Itinerant Service

In 1974 the Department of Education approved the appointment of two Itinerant Teachers of Reading¹ in Auckland and Christchurch.

1. Henceforth to be called I.T.Rs.

This approval was the outcome of consultations over a considerable period, involving the then Director of Primary Education, Mr J. Lee; District Senior Inspectors; reading clinic teachers; N.Z.E.I. Executive members; and the Officer for Special Education, Mr D. H. Ross. The special interest of Mr Lee in the concept of itinerant teaching of reading may well have been the initiative which led to the acceptance of the scheme.

A brief history of the establishment of the two pilot schemes indicates the prolonged nature of the consultations.

In 1966 the Henderson Head Teachers' Association (now the West Auckland Principals' Association) requested from the Auckland Education Board, assistance in the field of remedial reading for their area.

A local principal surveyed reading in 31 district schools in 1972 and submissions were made to the Department for the establishment of at least one Reading Clinic in the area. The Department, however recommended that a travelling Reading Clinician be appointed in September 1974 to work in the first instance in four West Auckland schools for one term.

This pilot scheme meant that the I.T.R. spent half a day every two days in each of the schools working with a teacher from that school. That teacher's sole responsibility was to work on a one-to-one basis with a few children requiring special assistance in reading. Selection criteria used were the same as then operating in Auckland Reading Clinics. In 1975, the scheme was extended to twelve schools which included the original four schools selected.

An evaluation of the Auckland pilot scheme was undertaken by Mr B. Williams, Inspector of Primary Schools, after the programme had been in operation for around two months. This involved detailing as a preamble a general description of the nature and organisation of the programme and the evaluation criteria for assessing its success.

Although not intended to provide exact scientific data but rather to indicate trends and attitudes, these criteria were:

- a) subjective reporting by the I.T.R. and others associated, of various types of behaviour which would indicate positive attitudinal shifts in children towards both instructional and recreational reading;

(The Auckland appointee continued to submit reports each term, including a retrospective one at the end of 1975).

- b) subjective reporting on behaviours indicated positive changes in children's personalities and social development;
- c) some objective indications of improvement both academic and/or attitudinal in other curriculum areas - particularly in the language area;
- d) changes in scores obtained on the Burt Reading Vocabulary test;
- e) changes in ability to handle fully graded prose material of increasing difficulty level;
- f) self-report to the inspectorate by the seconded teachers working with the I.T.R. about their attitudes towards this work, increased understanding of the reading process and influence on other teachers in their schools.

In Christchurch, as a result of a survey in local schools in 1974, the idea of an additional reading clinic teacher was first suggested to the Department of Education through the Inspector of Primary Schools in charge of reading. The teacher, it was proposed, would be itinerant.

During May 1974 it was suggested to the Department that an effort be made to base as much of the remedial work as possible in schools. An itinerant teacher would work with teachers engaged in remedial reading, to diagnose the needs and establish programmes for children with reading problems. Liaison was to be sustained with these teachers and further involvement was envisaged with teachers who were engaged in the long-term courses in Reading currently being innovated by Canterbury.

As the Department had been discussing just such a scheme it was decided to set up two pilot schemes, one in Canterbury and one in Auckland. The project was regarded as important in meeting the requests of various pressure groups, such as S.P.E.L.D., and for the Department to build up more adequate resources in the field. The operation was to be subject to continuous evaluation. The Director of Primary Education was to outline the purposes of the innovation and the procedures to be followed in its evaluation.

After the three months of the pilot scheme an evaluation of the appointee's work was made in December using criteria similar to those in Auckland. "Judged an outstanding success", it was recommended that this position be retained and other appointments of a similar nature be sought (Edmonds, 1980). It was recommended in this same report that the position be of a B2 status.

In both Auckland and Christchurch the aim was to build up a number of resource teachers within the schools to be able to help pupils with serious reading problems and by doing so to assist other teachers to develop similar skills. The itinerant teachers were to demonstrate and operate in a small selected group of schools.

A Department Circular (1976/76) was sent to each Education Board in 1976, outlining the functions, location, equipment and training of I.T.Rs (Ref Appendix I). The circular specified the functions of the I.T.R. thus:

"Each I.T.R. assists a group of schools selected by the district senior inspector. The itinerant teacher works with the class teachers (and the school's reading resource teacher, if appropriate) in providing a teaching programme for pupils who have serious difficulty in reading. The itinerant teacher will work personally with a child only until the class teacher can continue the programme, when the itinerant teacher will commence assisting another child in co-operation with the class teacher concerned".

(Department of Education, 1976/76)

It is interesting to compare this specification with the general aim of both pilot schemes which was to establish a core of resource teachers in schools.

Therefore, by 1978, each Education Board had an itinerant teacher of reading to supplement the existing sources of help available to teachers of children with reading learning difficulties. The original intention to establish a core of resource teachers was to be implemented by some Boards, whilst others met local needs in slightly different ways. This was in accord with the intentionally generalized Circular 1976/76.