

Pasifika Students in New Zealand Schools: Some Explanations for their Literacy Performance

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Lower literacy scores reflect an important issue in the education of minority students in many countries. This review of New Zealand literacy studies considers some possible explanations for the performance of Pasifika students in New Zealand schools. Brian Street writes that literacy is not a neutral technology that can be detached from specific social contexts (Street, 1984). His ideological and autonomous models of literacy may go some way to help us interpret and explain the performance of Pasifika students in our schools. Should the performance of these students be considered purely in terms of technical skill or should it also be looked at from the point of view of culture and ideology? Are we asking the right questions and asking in ways to discover what these students really know? While there may be no final answers to the problem, all possible remedies need to be explored.

Two key ideas about literacy learning and teaching emerge from the literature. The first idea is that of literacy as a set of skills that are culture-free and that can be taught and transferred to a new situation. These skills tend to be the reading and writing skills that belong to the school. This skills interpretation appears to be the commonly held “official” view of literacy and it marginalises the other types of literacy that may occur outside the formal school setting. Although literacy is generally described as both reading and writing, it appears that reading is given greater emphasis in the “official” view. This is also the case when teaching practices for literacy are criticised and debated in the popular media and in academic journals. The second idea about literacy is that it is embedded within social and cultural practices and is neither neutral nor value-free. These two paradigms of literacy will be explored in relation to Pasifika students in New Zealand and how their understandings about literacy are assessed.

Several studies indicate that in New Zealand many students from a Pasifika background are not achieving in literacy as well as their peers and we need to seek possible causes for this. This is of particular interest as Pacific peoples form a quickly growing proportion of New Zealand’s population (6.5 at the time of the 2001 census which was an increase from 5 percent in 1991.) It is a young population and there is a high density of these students in some schools. Eight percent of school students identify themselves as of a Pasifika background.

The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Reading Literacy Study (Wagemaker, 1993) indicated that there were some significant gaps in performance for those students whose home language was other than English. In New Zealand these were mainly children from a Pasifika background. The National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP) Reading and Speaking Assessment Results for the years 1996 and 2000 (Flockton & Crooks, 1997, 2001) showed lower scores in reading tasks for year 4 and year 8 students from a Pasifika background than for mainstream students. The Writing Assessment Results 2002 (Flockton & Crooks, 2003) show that Pasifika students at years 4 and 8 performed less well than other students on 25 percent of the tasks.

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (Ministry of Education, 2003b) indicates that the difference in reading scores between year 5 students speaking the language of the test at home and those who do not is relatively large in New Zealand. The results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2000) which examined the literacy skills of

15 year old students shows that students from a Pasifika background achieved lower scores than pakeha, Asian and Māori students on assessment tasks for retrieving information, interpreting texts, reflection and evaluation and on combined reading literacy (Sturrock & May, 2002). These results indicate a need to investigate ways to improve literacy learning for Pasifika students. Are there literacy skills that could be viewed as strengths that have not been measured by these studies?

Two Paradigms: Literacy as Social Practice and Literacy as Skills

A useful framework to explore the issue of literacy for Pasifika students is provided by Brian Street (1984, 1995) who describes what he terms as the autonomous and ideological models of literacy. Street's definition of literacy, like that of Graff (1987) and Scribner and Cole (1981) is also shaped by its sites and the uses to which literacy is put. He writes (Street, 1984; p.1) "I shall contend that what the particular practices and concepts of reading and writing are for a given society depends upon the context; that they are already embedded in an ideology and cannot be isolated or treated as 'neutral' or merely 'technical' ". Street argues strongly that literacy is not a neutral technology that can be detached from specific social contexts. He offers an example from his study of a commercial literacy that developed in the mountain villages of Iran in the 1970s. This developed from the culturally embedded social practices of reading and writing. The village entrepreneurs who bought and sold fruit succeeded because of their knowledge of literacy that was acquired in the traditional religious schools learning about the Koran.

Barton (1994) is also critical of this autonomous view that literacy can be reduced to sets of skills that can be broken apart into isolated components and then taught and tested. He offers a description that will seem familiar to the New Zealand reader; "One of the most powerful metaphors for literacy in public discussions of reading and writing is that of literacy as a set of skills. It underpins the way politicians and the media discuss literacy issues. Behind discussions and headlines on falling standards, the need to improve the teaching of reading and the 'problem' of adult literacy, there is often the metaphor of skills" (p.162).

Street prefers the ideological model which concentrates on the specific social practices of reading and writing. It stresses the significance of the socialisation process in construction of meaning, and is therefore concerned with the social institutions through which this takes place, not just the 'educational' ones. Street writes (1995) that literacy is so embedded within schooling that it is sometimes hard to recognise that for most of history and very much in contemporary society literacy practices have been embedded in other social institutions (p.107). This social view of literacy is supported by Barton (1994, p.210) who suggests that schools can take account of an ecological view of literacy and that school is seen as one context for learning amongst other contexts. Children learn about literacy informally in their everyday lives, both before they begin school and once they are attending school. "Children tend to feel excluded when their own literacy practices are not valued by the school. Schools should investigate which community practices should be legitimated by integrating them into the classrooms" (p.212).

Taught literacy is a key factor in who people identify with. What Street describes as the 'pedagogised' literacy becomes a concept around which ideas of social identity and even the collective identity of the nation can be defined. Street writes that if literacy acquisition is improved, issues of poverty and unemployment can be turned into questions about why individuals failed to learn literacy at school, diverting blame from institutions to individuals (p.125). Street asks which culture is to provide the model for literacy and which will be marginalised? He argues that research into literacy should not focus on the school in isolation but on the community's conceptualisation of literacy. Street believes that the autonomous model comes not so much from the school as from wider cultural and ideological influences. The community (including the nation itself) participates in the ideology of literacy teaching, though this is presented as being politically neutral and an educational matter. We need to consider this in the New Zealand context when seeking explanations for the underachievement of

students in our schools. Luke (1994) writes that literacy education concerns the distribution of knowledge and power in society. In whose interests is literacy constructed?

However, these two paradigms (autonomous and ideological) do not necessarily set up a dichotomy and Street (1995) suggests that all models of literacy can be understood within the ideological framework. He states that those who subscribe to the latter do not deny the importance of the technical aspects of reading and writing (decoding) but they believe that these are embedded within social practices. Luke describes literacy as not being a fixed static body of skills but as a “dynamic, evolving social and historical construction” (Luke, 1994, p. 2.) Literacy is about social practices that are used in family, the community, schools and workplaces. “My central claim is that the teaching of literacy requires social and cultural analyses of literacy in contemporary society and, crucially, of how it is part of the lived experience and futures of children and their communities”(p.4).

In what Street describes as an autonomous view of literacy, skills are seen as a neutral technology that can be detached from social contexts. However, there is a danger in separating understandings about literacy from social contexts as the researcher or teacher may misunderstand the responses that are given by the participants or students. (See for example Street, 1984 and Labov, 1973). Another problem is that this view of literacy as sets of skills may lead to a curriculum that is essentially test-driven.

Tests in the Autonomous Model

The disadvantages of this are described by Luke and van Kraayenoord (2003) who argue that the advent of national literacy benchmarks in Australia may subordinate the innovations and expertise in Australian literacy education to an approach that is test-driven and focuses on basic skills. They warn that the descriptive minima for the benchmarks in literacy could become the prescriptive maxima. According to Luke and van Kraayenoord, standardised testing reflects a behaviourist model of literacy, where reading and writing are “conceived of as discrete and transportable behaviours or skills that can be assessed in the contexts of pencil and paper stimulus/response tasks” (page 5).

Further criticism of testing comes from Au and Raphael (2000) who describe the tests used in the United States as reflecting Street’s (1995) autonomous model of literacy. This model assumes that literacy is a collection of skills that can be measured by standardised tests and that the results accurately reflect students’ cognitive skills in reading and writing. The Ministry of Education documents relating to literacy and the assessments of students in New Zealand schools described above seem to take this point of view. However, Au and Raphael caution that the literacy measured by these tests is but one among several literacies that the students are learning, and that these students often appear highly literate when literacies other than those of the school are considered. They suggest that Street’s ideas have important implications for researchers and educators in literacy education of students of diverse backgrounds. We must consider this in the New Zealand context when we are looking in dismay at the so-called “long tail” of underachievement in literacy scores.

Students of diverse background form a large proportion of the school population in the United States. In the 1990s 35 percent of students in grades 1-12 were from minority groups. (Au & Raphael, 2000, p.175) Au and Raphael report that schools have not been successful in bringing these students to the same literacy levels as mainstream students. Those who support the autonomous model argue that teaching specific and basic skills will reduce the achievement gap for minority students. Proponents of the ideological model warn that standardised tests measure one form of literacy and do not indicate students’ true literacy levels. A dilemma seems to exist for teachers. Is it possible that an autonomous model is appropriate to help address the underachievement of these students?

Brian Street’s two models offer us a framework to interpret the results of literacy studies in New Zealand, particularly in relation to Pasifika students, and also to consider the alternate views on literacy teaching that have been debated in New Zealand over the past decade or so. In New Zealand,

as elsewhere in the world there has been debate over the most appropriate way to teach reading and at the core of this is the issue of skills. It is interesting to note that there is not the same interest in the methods used for teaching writing, which it could be argued, is equally complex.

The “Official” View of Literacy

What then is the “official” view of literacy in the compulsory education sector in New Zealand? The New Zealand Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education 1993) strongly emphasises the need to prepare young people for a workforce that is highly skilled and adaptable. Peters (1994) considers that the framework represented the National government’s attempt to modify the education system to meet economic needs. He writes that reducing knowledge to skills which are quantifiable conveys a “bias towards a vocational education” (p. 262). The framework reflects “a curriculum of enterprise and competition”. Further criticism of the curriculum is made by Carpenter (2001) under the telling chapter title *Curriculum and the (Re)production of education*. Here, Carpenter claims that since the early 1900s the school content for New Zealand students has never been so structured, prescribed and monitored [Carpenter, 2001 p. 109] Carpenter states (p. 118) that when the Framework was first published in 1993 it seemed to be liberal and permissive. Since then the curriculum statements and support material have been published and the structures for teachers have become more prescribed and the autonomy of the teacher more restricted.

The Report of the Literacy Taskforce (Ministry of Education, 1999a) has resulted in new resources to enable teachers to interpret the English curriculum. These include exemplars for writing, oral and visual language, the indicators of progress in *Effective Literacy Practice* (Ministry of Education, 2003a) as well as teacher support materials for the Ready to Read series and the School Journals. The Literacy Experts Group (Ministry of Education, 1999b) advised that there should not be a recommendation to set minimal competency levels, reflecting the concern expressed by Luke and van Kraayenoord, (2003).

The Ministry of Education’s drive to improve learning for Pasifika students includes the initiative to strengthen education in Mangere and Otara (SEMO) and there have been significant developments in this area. *Picking up the pace* (Phillips, McNaughton & MacDonald, 2001) is the final report to the Ministry of Education on the professional development associated with the Early Childhood Primary Links via Literacy Project (ECPL) and describes the research into effective ways of supporting literacy development for children in communities served by decile 1 schools in Otara and Mangere, where up to 90 percent are children from a Māori or Pasifika background. The writers state that these children, when compared with national patterns, have low achievement in conventional school literacy on entry to school and this disparity in reading and writing continues through schooling (p. 7).

Phillips et al (2001) investigated whether through professional development for these teachers an increased number of children in decile 1 schools could achieve at levels expected for their age at entry to school and at age six. An increased number of children achieved in the expected average range for their age at 6 years. Key ideas that developed from this study are the significance of teacher expectations, the need for deliberate teaching, and the development of professional learning communities. While in some respects it seems that the approach is basically autonomous, (focusing on teaching the skills to get children up to their peers’ level) at the same time the authors stress the need to understand the cultural background of the children. They do make links to the children’s literacy backgrounds outside the school.

Skills and Levels

Timperley, Phillips and Wiseman, (2003) describe how the researchers compared children’s scores to national average scores. The writers state that there are no national levels as such but they used benchmarks of average 6 year old reading at levels 9-14 (Reading Recovery levels) or blue to orange on the Ready to Read colour wheel. Timperley et al acknowledge that the achievement measures may

not reflect important learning and that assessing children through standardised tests may belittle the deeper learning that is not indicated by the tests. A similar view is stated by Phillips et al (2001). They write that there are differences in achievement on entry to school between Māori and Pasifika children and other children. However, they point out the limitations of these descriptions of gaps, because this may hide important aspects of literacy development achievement for these children from minority groups. While it is true that some of what the children learn about literacy can be measured by the indicators of school, these children may have engaged in literacy and language activities that are different from mainstream children. This means that their knowledge may not be well represented in tests of conventional literacy practice especially when they begin school.

Diversity and the Mismatch

McNaughton (1995) acknowledges that children from all cultural and socio-economic backgrounds develop expertise in literacy practice prior to school. He notes however, that many children attending decile 1 schools may have had limited experiences in the social practices and the types of reading and writing that curriculum statements mandate in schools.

Phillips et al (2001) explain that literacy is more than a process of decoding and comprehending. They state that it “must be situated in the social, physical, and socio-cultural world of participants within community-wide social practices” (p.85). They write that while the examination of the parts (words, morphemes, letters, sounds) is necessary, this examination of the parts must relate them to their context. The implications of this for effective practice are that teachers need to select tasks that involve children's current understanding of the world. Alton-Lee, (2003) reminds us that by 2040, which is within the working life of teachers who are currently being trained, it is expected that the majority of children in New Zealand primary schools will be Māori and Pasifika. Alton-Lee writes that external benchmarks, and effective diagnostic and formative assessment play a key but not sufficient role in supporting high achievement for diverse learners.

Effective links need to be created between school cultural contexts and other cultural contexts. Alton-Lee writes that over the past two decades there has been an increasing realisation of the significance of the cultural dimensions of classroom practice and the match or mismatch between the social class and ethnic cultural capital of the students home and the school. (see Heath, 1983; Jones, 1991). Alton-Lee describes a study of writing process (O'Rourke & Philips, 1989, in Alton-Lee, 2003. p.34.) where the pedagogies tended to favour a mainstream cultural voice and the authors identify practices that were reported by teachers as being particularly effective for Māori and Pasifika students. These included using ethnically diverse role models, scaffolding of oral expression more directly into written, facilitating peer support (teina/tuakana or tuakana/teina), and giving prestige to the oral as well as written ‘publishing’ of work.

A new literacy handbook for primary teachers *Effective Literacy Practice in years 1 to 4* (Ministry of Education, 2003a) has been developed as a result of the Literacy Taskforce recommendations. The content is appropriate for teachers of students from year 5 to 8 as well and we must assume that the title is a political choice to meet the requirement of the Literacy Taskforce. This handbook draws heavily on recent literacy research in New Zealand and overseas (including Phillips et al, 2001) and needs to be commented on here. Through the handbook is a strong message that being literate is much more than being able to use the technical skills of reading and writing. The theory and guidelines for teachers contained within *Effective Literacy Practice* seem to fit more with Street's ideological model of literacy than the autonomous. The significance in literacy learning of the link to students' culture and background is emphasised. “Every learner views literacy tasks through a cultural ‘lens’ because most of the prior knowledge, experiences, and values that a learner brings to literacy activities arise from their cultural background. Culturally based values and knowledge affect each learner's engagement and interest in the learning activity. Ensuring cultural engagement is particularly important in classrooms where the students come from diverse backgrounds, especially where their cultural backgrounds differ from the teacher's.” (Ministry of Education, 2003a. p.23).

The text challenges teachers to move away from associating difference with deficit. It reports that studies revealed that teachers often underestimated how much students knew and the rate at which they could progress, and assumed that their parents lacked commitment and did not have the interest or ability to contribute to their child's education. (p.154) The handbook states that some literacy practices are required and valued outside the school and some are common to many settings both in and out of the school (p19). These ideas of teachers giving recognition and value to students' uses and understandings of literacy outside the school are mentioned briefly and may not be understood by teachers.

Effective Literacy Practice does have a strong emphasis on assessment and skills. It clearly outlines sets of skills to be acquired after one year and four years of instruction, and standardised assessment procedures that teachers may use to assess their students in literacy and it suggests the levels where these may be used. (For example, School Entry Assessment, running records, The Observation Survey, Assessment Resource Banks, and Progressive Achievement Tests.) A section of the book that is likely to be of great interest to teachers is the section titled *Patterns of progress* (pp.70-74) where there are detailed indicators of what children may be expected to know and be able to do after one year of literacy instruction and after four years. In the past there has been some debate amongst teachers over expected reading levels for children at particular ages. The previous handbooks for teachers, *Reading in junior classes* (Ministry of Education, 1995) and *The learner as a reader* (Ministry of Education, 1996) do not specify reading levels for children of a particular age. The handbook does not indicate a "writing age" for children at the end of year 1 or year 4. While this approach could hardly be termed an "autonomous" view of literacy, it is giving more specific indications of skills for each level than have been given previously to primary teachers.

These lists of reading and writing skills for children at the end of year one and year four were recommended by the Literacy Taskforce (Ministry of Education, 1999a) and I see a potential difficulty in them. The premise of the handbook is that *all* children including those from diverse backgrounds will be able to achieve to these expectations. However, the book is based on research where a selected group of teachers were provided with a significant amount of in-service training which is not available to other teachers who are expected to be able to achieve the same results. The reality for the vast majority of classroom teachers is that the new handbook will arrive in their school, and they may be able to attend one day of in-service on it, after which they will be expected to implement its policies and therefore improve their literacy teaching.

This is an excellent new resource which could lead to significant improvements in literacy teaching in New Zealand primary schools, but I believe that if it is to be successful then the Ministry of Education needs to invest in ongoing in-depth in-service for teachers. There is a possibility that without reading the research that underpins the handbook, some teachers may misunderstand aspects of the text, particularly as they relate to students from diverse backgrounds. The concept of challenging your expectations about students from a background other than your own may be less straightforward than it seems. Teachers may eagerly focus on the indicators for progress and teach to these (from an autonomous perspective) without giving sufficient consideration to all the dimensions of effective practice as they are described in the handbook. If there is not adequate in-service it is possible that there could be a repetition of the sort of misunderstanding that occurred in primary schools in the 1980s and 1990s over writing. New Zealand teachers embraced the ideas of Donald Graves on "process writing" but to a certain extent they misinterpreted Graves' philosophy. Students were encouraged to write freely but were not producing good quality writing or gaining greater skills in writing across the curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1992, pp. 8-9). It seemed that many teachers heard only part of the message and were reluctant to intervene so students lacked understandings of genre structures, spelling and grammar.

It seems that the authors of the writings that have arisen out of SEMO have produced statements that link to Street's ideological model of literacy but it is not really clear how teachers are to achieve this. This is an area that requires further investigation. The new literacy handbook *Effective Literacy*

Practice provides guidelines for primary teachers but it is just part of the story. There seems to be a genuine attempt to consider the relevance of children's cultural backgrounds but there is also a heavy emphasis on the transmission of skills. How can teachers best implement this? The ideas need to be implemented thoroughly rather than just be talked about. We need the details.

When we consider the way literacy is assessed in New Zealand, some questions need to be asked about this in relation to Pasifika children's learning. Are we doing Pasifika children justice? Are they really underperforming or is it perhaps that some of the assessment measures are wrong? Is it possible that the curriculum has a restricted view of literacy? If we followed Street's ideological model we would be looking at Pasifika ideas of literacy and using those as strengths in school programmes where possible.

It seems worthwhile to explore theories and definitions of literacy that are more encompassing than an "official" school view of literacy, and which include home and community literacies that would enable teachers to use the strengths that Pasifika children may have in these.

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