

# REPORT SUMMARY

## THE NEW ZEALAND INITIATIVE

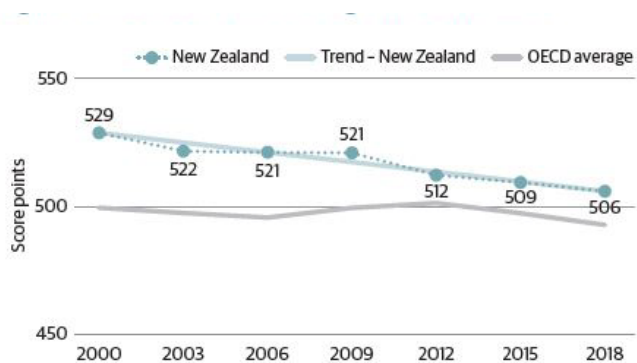
# Reading with the light switched on

Steen Videbeck

New Zealand was world leading in literacy. However, over the past 50 years, our performance has fallen substantially.

International assessments of New Zealand's reading performance paint a worrisome picture. PISA scores (for 15-year-olds) and PIRLS (for 9-year-olds) both have fallen, and our substantial underachievement has persisted.

Figure 1: New Zealand's Pisa Reading Score (2000 - 2018)



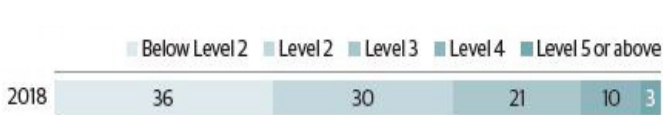
Source: OECD "Programme for International Student assessment (PISA) Results from PISA 2018: Country Note: New Zealand," (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019) 2.

Māori and Pasifika students are particularly underserved. PISA 2018 showed 30% of Māori 15-year-olds are in the bottom category for reading. For Pasifika, it was 36%. These numbers represent an education system that is failing large numbers of students.

Figure 4: Māori students achieved at all Pisa proficiency levels from poor performers to top performers - Reading (2000 - 2018)



Figure 5: Pacific students achieved at all Pisa proficiency levels from poor performers to top performers - Reading (2000 - 2018)



Behind the statistics, our failure has a human face. Kids who label themselves as being 'dumb' because they are struggling to learn to read. Kids who withdraw from learning. The data shows the lost potential of students. But it is also indicative of the lost potential of teachers. The way most New Zealand schools teach reading is not aligned with the science of how children learn to read.

### The literacy revolution

Despite the challenges, there are reasons to be optimistic. A revolution in the way literacy is taught in New Zealand schools is underway.

Throughout the country, teachers and concerned parents have questioned the poor literacy rates among their children.

Their questioning of the status quo has led them to an evidence-based approach called Structured Literacy.

### Central Normal School

Since implementing Structured Literacy three years ago, Central Normal School has seen a significant improvement in the results among both Māori and non-Māori students. The acceleration of Māori learners means that Māori and Pakeha students are now achieving at the same level. The school is encouraging other schools to pursue Structured Literacy.

These community-led efforts, with the help of leading academics, have started to affect change at a national level. The Minister of Education, Hon Chris Hipkins, has signalled a 'literacy reset'.

The 'literacy reset' is starting to take shape. The Ministry of Education is producing new Structured Literacy aligned books and has committed to Professional Development for existing Year 1 and New Entrant teachers on how to use them. Changes to Reading Recovery have also been announced.

But education is littered with big promises and disappointing results. Will this be a shallow or deep reset?

A deep reset needs to prioritise increasing teacher knowledge of both language and evidence-based practice – allowing teachers to become experts in teaching reading.

So, how do policymakers help switch on the light for all teachers?

First, the Ministry of Education needs to send strong signals that explicitly endorse Structured Literacy.

Second, Ministry of Education policies shouldn't pick winners by funding only one Professional Development provider, one source of resources or one intervention programme. This will hamper quality and innovation. Instead, schools should be allowed to choose the professional development that best suits their individual needs.

Third, Initial Teacher Education needs to be improved. When the author of the report first entered a classroom as a recently qualified teacher, he did so with little knowledge of the science of reading. Structured literacy should be

taught as an important component of teacher education so that new teachers are familiar with evidence-based literacy instruction before entering the classroom. To help encourage this ITEs should be more transparent about what they teach.

We hope this report will increase public awareness of the scale of New Zealand's literacy problem.

### Summary of Recommendations

1. The New Zealand Curriculum should explicitly endorse Structured Literacy.
2. Increase transparency of the content of ITE literacy courses.
3. Give newly trained teachers the option to sit a reading instruction exam that is aligned to the Science of Reading.
4. ITE literacy coursework and practica should be aligned to the Science of Reading.
5. Update the Effective Literacy Practice series and Literacy Learning Progression Framework to focus on Structured Literacy and the Science of Reading.
6. Funding should be made available for schools who want to purchase alternative decodables. Schools should also be able to use an alternative Scope and Sequence.
7. The Ministry should allow more choice for funded Professional Development for Structured Literacy and extend funded Professional Development to all Year 1-8 teachers.
8. Schools that choose not to use Reading Recovery and Early Literacy Support should be eligible for funding to implement an alternative Structured Literacy aligned intervention.
9. Schools should display detailed information about their literacy programme on their website.
10. Standardised screening assessments should be used to determine the subset deficits that underlie a child's reading difficulties.

Read more at [www.nzinitiative.org.nz/SwitchedOn](http://www.nzinitiative.org.nz/SwitchedOn)

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Steen Videbeck** is a Research Fellow specialising in education. Before joining the New Zealand Initiative, he taught at an International Baccalaureate school in Denmark. Previously, he was a Senior Advisor to the Parliamentary Undersecretary (Education). He holds a Master of Science in applied economics from Cornell University, a Master of Arts (with Distinction) in economics from Victoria University of Wellington, and a Graduate Diploma in Teaching (Primary).