Schools' Provision for Students at Risk of Not Achieving: Evaluation of an Education Review Office Evaluation Report

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ABSTRACT

A recent report published by the Education Review Office (2008) found that most primary schools were able to adequately identify their students who were at risk of not achieving (in literacy). The basis for their findings was that most schools had apparently indicated that they had used the current assessment tools for identification purposes. However, a second finding noted in the report was that most schools were less able to show that they effectively used the data to inform their teaching practices. The concern expressed in this paper is that the evaluation report is merely confirmation that, in general, ERO appears to be satisfied with the appropriateness of the current literacy assessment tools as being suitable for identifying all students who were at risk of not achieving. Given the vast research literature implicating poor and/or inefficient phonological processing skills as being the causal link to most early literacy-related underachievement, it is suggested in this paper that the ERO report could have noted the absence of such assessment tools, and therefore any subsequent teaching interventions that addressed these issues.

INTRODUCTION

International literacy surveys (that have included New Zealand performances) have been conducted since 1970 and the performance gap between the top and bottom readers in New Zealand has continued to widen (see Greaney, 2004; Prochnow (2004); Tunmer & Chapman, 2004; Tunmer, Chapman & Prochnow, 2003; Tunmer, Prochnow, Greaney & Chapman, 2007). These results suggest that there seems to be a continuing problem involving our inability to address the specific learning needs of this particular group of students. In particular, there are problems with the identification (i.e., assessments), programme interventions (i.e., teaching) and how progress from such interventions is monitored and reported.

This paper will discuss the main findings of a recent Education Review Office (ERO) report (ERO, 2008) that investigated the extent to which schools were able to cater for students who were at risk of not achieving. However, the paper will also critically analyse the ERO findings in terms of their likely impact on future classroom practice with regards to closing the literacy achievement gap particularly for Maori and Pasifika students.

SOLUTIONS FOR REDUCING THE LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Tunmer, Chapman and Prochnow (2003) outline two commonly espoused strategies that many New Zealand educators and the Ministry of Education perceive as solutions to reducing the literacy gap. These include continuing to do more of the same in terms of how reading is taught, and accommodating cultural differences within the classroom programmes, particularly for Maori and Pasifika students. Advocates who support doing more of the same (e.g., Elley, 2004; Ministry of Education, 1999, 2003; Smith & Elley, 1997) are also opposed to making substantial changes to current literacy teaching practices as they maintain that nothing is wrong with the current system. The recent Ministry-supported Literacy Professional Development programmes and the nationally funded Reading Recovery programme are two examples of this strategy. With regard to Reading Recovery, some researchers maintain that this programme represents a continuation of teaching strategies that are common within the regular classroom environment from which the student has already failed. Tunmer et al. (2003) argue, for example, that:

> Given that Reading Recovery is essentially a more intensive version of what occurs in regular New Zealand classrooms, it would not seem to be an ineffective strategy to place children who are failing to learn to read into a remedial reading programme that uses the same methods that most likely contributed to their failure in the first place.   (p.124)

Accommodating cultural differences has also been proposed as a strategy for reducing the literacy achievement gap especially for Maori students (McNaughton, 1995). This strategy is based on the assumption that literacy problems can be reduced if teaching practices allow children from minority cultures to engage in literacy activities that closely resembles home practices. Tunmer et al. (2003) suggest that there are three problems with accepting the 'culturally responsive instruction' theory. First they argue that cultural/ethnic differences are often confounded with socio-economic variables. Because many Maori students come from low socio-economic backgrounds, it is difficult to determine the relative contributions that cultural/ethnic and socio-economic variables make to reading achievement. The second concern about accepting the cultural accommodation theory to address literacy underachievement is that while cultural accommodation may show gains in students' level of participation and/or school satisfaction, Tunmer et al. maintain that there is little or no evidence that such instruction positively influences reading achievement. Finally, Tunmer and colleagues argue that:

> The problem of how to reduce the gap in early literacy achievement may have less to do with modifying classroom instruction to match home literacy practices and more to do with addressing the specific needs of children struggling to learn to read in an alphabetic orthography regardless of the cultural group or social class to which they belong.   (p.126)

In other words, learning to read the English alphabetic script presents the same problems to all students irrespective of their language and/or cultural backgrounds.

It seems clear that, based on the recent international literacy surveys, the continued adherence to doing more of the same and to accommodating cultural differences have had little effect on reducing the literacy achievement gap in New Zealand. In fact, the opposite has occurred as is evidenced by the international literacy surveys.

It is suggested that in order to address the specific needs of struggling readers a change to the ways in which we assess and teach literacy is required. However, before any solutions to these issues can be presented it is useful to discuss the current school practices for addressing the learning needs of the underachieving students. This includes a discussion about how children who are at risk of failing are identified in the classroom and the level at which effective teaching programmes are delivered and monitored. A recent Education Review Office Report (2008) *Schools' Provision for Students at Risk of Not Achieving* investigated these issues. Some of the findings from this report will be discussed. However, it will also be contended in this paper that, if we are serious about closing the literacy achievement gap in New Zealand, that the findings from the ERO report merely confirm the need for a re-evaluation of the way students who are at risk of not achieving in literacy are assessed, taught and monitored. In the next section, the ERO report will be briefly discussed followed by a critical analysis of some of the key issues arising from the report.

THE 2008 EDUCATION REVIEW OFFICE REPORT

While there is no specific mention of *literacy* under-achievement in the title of this 2008 ERO report, the report focuses *predominantly* on the catering for students who are at risk of not achieving in literacy (mainly reading) in primary schools. The main purpose of the report was to investigate the extent to which (125 primary and 30 secondary) schools identified students who were at risk of not achieving, how well these schools had developed appropriate programmes and how effectively they had monitored their students' progress and reported this information back to parents, Boards of Trustees and others.

Any evaluation report that focuses on why New Zealand has a very large and continuing literacy achievement gap between the top and bottom readers (and what can be done about it) is important in order that effective solutions are found to this problem. The large government financial commitments to the National Literacy Strategy over recent years to address this issue (e.g., the Literacy Leadership programme, the Reading and Writing Professional Development programme, Reading Recovery, the three Effective Literacy Practices texts: *Effective Literacy Practices in Years 1-4; Effective Literacy Practices in Years 5-8: Effective Literacy Practices in Years 9-13*) makes this report even more relevant.

Background information from the ERO 2008 report
This ERO report follows three earlier ERO reports (1995, 1997, 2005) that also addressed issues of student underachievement. Brief mention is also made in this 2008 report about the poor performances of Maori and Pacific students in

the recent 2005/06 PIRLS survey of literacy progress (PIRLS, 2005). ERO (2008) noted, for example, that:

> The evidence suggests that Maori and Pacific students are disproportionately represented in the lowest achieving group. The 2006/06 PIRLS results showed that the range between the highest and lowest achieving students was greater for Maori than for Pakeha/European, Asian or Pacific. The mean scores for Maori and Pacific students were significantly lower than the international mean with less than half scoring above this mean. (p.5)

It is clear from this statement that the evaluation report was intended to have a specific focus on literacy underachievement and particularly for Maori and Pacific students. The report also addressed the issues of identification of students at risk of not achieving and the extent to which interventions are effectively developed and the progress monitored and reported. While the report investigated the assessment and teaching practices in both primary and secondary schools, the current paper will focus only on the primary school findings related specifically to literacy learning.

Identification of students at risk of not achieving

> Reliable and valid assessment processes are critical in identifying at-risk students and diagnosing their special learning needs to provide appropriate support for their learning.
>
> Education Review Office (2008, p.7)

ERO was interested to find out how well schools had identified their students who were at risk of not achieving. With regards to the identification of students at risk a key finding in the report noted that 'The majority of the schools could adequately identify students at risk of not achieving, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy' (p.1). In fact, ERO noted that three quarters of the schools surveyed were able to identify their students who were at risk of not achieving. The students who were deemed most at risk in the schools had been identified as those who were performing below expectations in relation to their chronological age. In some schools the 'trigger point' for being 'at risk' (in reading) was reported as being 6 months or more below their chronological age.
The report noted, for example, that:

> Good practice that helped identify students who were at risk of not achieving or who were underachieving included the use of diagnostic and standardised assessment tools, particularly in literacy, to determine the specific gaps in students' learning. (p.8)

These literacy assessment tools included: the Diagnostic Observation Survey, asTTle, STAR, PAT and Running Records. These tools were therefore considered by ERO to be effective for identifying students at risk. It appears that, in general, ERO was satisfied with the level at which schools were able to collect student achievement data. However, concern was raised about how schools

used the data to inform teaching practice. The report notes, for example, that while schools 'were generally more able at gathering and collating students achievement information … [they were less able at] interpreting the results and determining which intervention would benefit individual students' (p.22).

ERO also investigated the types of instructional programmes that were deemed to be effective and the levels at which schools monitored and reported student progress.

Specific initiatives to support students at risk

While the ERO evaluation noted that most schools were able to effectively *identify* the students who were at risk of not achieving in literacy, 'there was a much wider variation in the quality and effectiveness of how schools addressed the specific needs of students, and monitored, reviewed and reported on the progress and impact of their provision' (p.1).

The report suggests that the most effective programmes for at-risk students were those that involved in-class approaches rather than programmes that required the students to leave the classroom (p.9). Other 'effective' programmes included 'perceptual motor programmes' (p.9), Rainbow Reading (p.9), literacy support teachers, teachers' aides, RT:Lits, RTLBs and GSE (p.10). The report also included a brief discussion about Reading Recovery so it is assumed that ERO views this programme as reflecting or representing 'effective' practice for assisting students at risk. It was also reported that one third of schools used parent/community volunteers to assist with teaching students at risk.

A particular focus of the report involved Maori students' underachievement. The report noted that 'in the best instances ERO found that schools tailored their approaches to ensure the cultural needs of Maori learners were addressed' (p.14). Furthermore, the report concludes 'where teaching is inclusive and reflects the students' life, knowledge, relationships and experience, students are more likely to engage with learning' (p.14). This 'cultural accommodation' approach was further emphasised in the recommendations where the report notes that schools should 'ensure that programmes for Maori and Pacific students include culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy' (p.28).

DISCUSSION

Any evaluation report that focuses on the identification of students at risk of not achieving in literacy is particularly relevant given the Ministry of Education's ongoing literacy professional development strategies and the status of New Zealand's persistent literacy achievement gap. It makes sense to evaluate the effectiveness of the identification processes because if early identification processes are not being used then it would not be expected that effective interventions would occur. Thus, a focus on prevention is more effective than a focus on a cure.

Identification processes currently used in schools

New Zealand teachers have access to more published procedures for the assessment of achievement in reading than in any other curriculum areas or strands evaluated in this report.

Education Review Office (1999, p.17)

The ERO (2008) report noted that teachers were generally able to adequately identify their students at risk of not achieving. The report however was not specific about the types of assessments that were deemed to be effective, although some tests were briefly mentioned (e.g., STAR, PAT, AsTTle). One reason why the evaluation reported positively on the level of identification may have been because of the large number of reading assessment tools available to teachers. Currently there are at least twelve different literacy-related assessment tools available to primary teachers and several of these tools have been in existence for decades. However, there are two issues of concern that arise from these assessment tools. While most of them have relevance for identifying particular areas of need, none of the current literacy assessments commonly used in most schools assesses phonological awareness, and there are no phonological-based assessment tools that are commonly used at the new entrant/year one level. Indeed the ERO (2008) report did not mention the presence of any phonological-based assessments or interventions at all. Given the large amount of international research evidence implicating poor phonological processing abilities (including poor phonological awareness) as being the main cause of low reading achievement, it is a concern that this issue does not appear to be adequately addressed in the schools, and furthermore, this was not an issue addressed by the ERO report findings.

Quality of the programmes
ERO evaluated the quality of the programmes that were used in schools to address the learning needs of students at risk of not achieving. ERO's main criterion for 'effectiveness' appears to be based on the location of the programme (e.g., in the class versus outside the classroom). ERO (2008) noted, for example, that 'the most successful initiatives involved inclusive approaches, most often undertaken in the classroom, alongside the peer group' (p.9). While this is a useful suggestion it is interesting to note that ERO positively views the Reading Recovery programme which is an outside the classroom (i.e., pull-out) programme. Other resources that received positive comments in the report included the use of outside agents such as Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour, Special Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs) and teachers' aides. While it is common for schools to use these external agents as a way of dealing with the students at risk of not achieving, it would be expected that those students with literacy-related learning needs would be better catered for by their class teachers. However, this is really only possible if the regular class teachers are given the appropriate professional development.

The ERO report correctly acknowledged the role of the teacher when discussing the importance of addressing the learning needs of all the students in the class. The report noted, for example, that 'the prime responsibility for improved learning remains with the classroom teachers and their ability to adapt teaching to the full range of students' learning needs' (p.19). However, it could be argued that the extensive use of external agents to deal with the specific (literacy) learning needs of students at risk of not achieving could allow for teachers to abdicate responsibility for this particular group of students. Perhaps this point could have been made in the report.

CONCLUSIONS

In this evaluation report, ERO correctly identified the need for schools to more effectively monitor, evaluate and report on the effectiveness of the programmes that are funded in their schools. The report noted, for example, that few schools were able to produce evidence for the effectiveness of their interventions. However, in order to accomplish this task teachers need access to better and more focused literacy assessment tools than those that are currently used. None of the literacy assessments noted in the ERO report (e.g., Diagnostic Observation Survey, asTTle, STAR, PAT and Running Records) assess the critical phonological-based skills that are shown to be causally related to poor reading progress.

Another issue with most of these assessments is that they are not valid measures for diagnosing causal reading problems *during the first 12 months of instruction*. Given the extent of the international research evidence that demonstrates how early negative Matthew effects begin to appear as a result of poor reading progress (and the wait-to-fail approach that defines the reading level deficit model), it is surprising that the ERO evaluation did not acknowledge this issue. In support of this claim it is interesting to note that while ERO reported on the apparent success of the Ministry-funded national Literacy Professional Development programme, this particular professional development does not address literacy teaching in the *first* year of school. Its focus is more concerned with literacy issues from year 3 and above, thus supporting the wait-to-fail model.

In relation to Maori underachievement the report noted a concern that approximately 27 percent of Maori boys and 26 percent of Maori girls had received Reading Recovery in 2006. While the report noted that it was important for schools to understand why Maori students are at risk of not achieving (p.14), it is suggested that ERO appears to view Reading Recovery as an effective programme for addressing the literacy needs of this particular group of students. Although a recent evaluation of Reading Recovery (McDowall, Boyd, Hodgen & van Vliet, 2005) claimed that the programme was successful for Maori students, a critique of this evaluation (and many of the claims made relating to Maori achievement) suggests that this programme does not address this particular group's needs (Chapman, Greaney & Tunmer, 2007).

In conclusion, it appears that many of the main findings in the ERO report regarding the assessment and teaching of students at risk of not achieving *in literacy* merely add support to the current status quo procedures of 'doing more of the same' in the classroom. In support of this claim are the many statements that are reported as examples of effective assessment and teaching practice. These include an acceptance of both current literacy assessment tools and programmes, particularly for the first two years of school instruction. Perhaps a more realistic outcome from the report might have included a critique of some of the current literacy practices and an acceptance or acknowledgement of the international research literature related to assessments and intervention practices for students at risk. This is not an unreasonable claim given that the Chief Education Review Officer, Graham Stoop (2008) claims that the Education Review Office is 'an independent government department and [that] the overall view we get from reviewing schools every day allows us to comment critically on current education policy' (p.12).

While the report correctly noted that there were several commendable practices used to address the needs of students who were at risk of not achieving (in literacy), it is, however, suggested that the current status quo situation involving assessment and teaching practices, is likely to remain. Given New Zealand's continuing achievement gap in literacy (as evidenced in the international literacy surveys), this ERO report is unlikely to have much positive impact on this issue. The report seems to have ignored the national and international research evidence that implicates poor phonological processing abilities (including phonological awareness) as being the main cause of most reading difficulties.   Nowhere in the ERO report was mention made of the apparent lack of phonological-based assessments or teaching practices.

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