



# Now I don't know my ABC

The perilous state of literacy in Aotearoa New Zealand

BY NINA HOOD & TAYLOR HUGHSON



the  
education  
hub

## About The Education Hub

The Education Hub is a not-for-profit with a mission to bridge the gap between research and practice in education in order to improve opportunities and outcomes for young people in New Zealand. Our work involves empowering educators as leaders of change in schools and ECE centres by ensuring they have easy access to the right information, in the right form, at the right time, and have the capacity and support to utilise it to improve practice.

## About the authors

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## Executive summary

A 2020 UNICEF report found that only 64.6% of Aotearoa New Zealand fifteen-year-olds have basic proficiency in reading and maths<sup>1</sup>. Turning that around, a staggering 35.4% - over a third of fifteen-year-olds – struggle to read and write. Given the critical (and growing) importance of literacy, not only for education and employment but also for broader life outcomes, this statistic is deeply worrying. That something must be done to address the distressingly low literacy rates in Aotearoa New Zealand is clear. This report draws on the best available evidence to understand more fully exactly where Aotearoa New Zealand is and how we got here, in order to inform ongoing discussions on how we address the literacy crisis in this country. As such, it is hoped that it can be a call to action as well as potentially feeding into the work the government currently has underway to address literacy achievement in Aotearoa New Zealand's education system

### Where are we at?

- The overarching picture of Aotearoa New Zealand's literacy achievement is concerning; however, limitations in available data make it challenging to offer a comprehensive picture of literacy achievement.
- The performance of both primary and secondary school students has been declining in most reliable measures of reading achievement, especially since 2009. In recent years, not only has Aotearoa New Zealand's reading achievement declined faster than in comparable countries, but the proportion of students achieving at the highest levels in reading has also decreased.
- The few reliable studies of writing achievement indicate that large numbers of Aotearoa New Zealand children have significant issues with writing, and that these issues are getting worse over time.
- Persistently large gaps remain between students from different socio-economic backgrounds, and these gaps continue to be higher than in comparable countries.
- There remain persistently large gaps between the literacy levels of different ethnic groups, with Pākehā and Asian students consistently achieving, on average, higher reading and writing scores than Māori and Pasifika students.
- There continue to be large gender gaps in literacy, with girls achieving, on average, higher reading and writing scores than boys.

<sup>1</sup> UNICEF. (2020). *Worlds of Influence: Understanding What Shapes Child Well-being in Rich Countries*. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org.nz/stories/new-report-card-shows-that-new-zealand-is-failing-its-children>



### How did we get here?

It is challenging to unravel exactly why Aotearoa New Zealand's literacy levels are as low as they are. There are undoubtedly multiple, inter-connected contributing factors. However, there is too little large-scale or reliable research into literacy in Aotearoa New Zealand to draw any definitive conclusions, and what research is available does not allow clear causal links to be drawn. However, combining international research together with local studies does enable the identification of possible, and in many cases even probable, contributing factors:

- For the past 20 years, Aotearoa New Zealand has lacked a national literacy strategy meaning there is no clear, coordinated plan for how all parts of the education system need to work together to improve literacy achievement.
- The nature of the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) and NCEA has led to differences in the breadth and depth of knowledge students acquire, as well as opportunities for students to engage with complex texts and to develop critical literacy skills.
- Effective pedagogy, supported by high-quality assessment, is not present in all early childhood education centres, schools, or classrooms.
- High quality, systematic support, including effective literacy interventions at every level of schooling, are not available to all students who need it.
- Māori-medium education lacks a range of contextually appropriate literacy supports, including adequate funding, resourcing, assessment tools or professional development opportunities.
- Systemic racism and discrimination within the schooling system continues to significantly impact some students' ability to succeed
- High levels of absenteeism and transience, particularly among certain groups of students, is limiting the amount of [literacy] instruction some students receive.
- There are significant disparities in the home literacy environments of children
- The number of young people reading for enjoyment and the amount of time young people spend reading is decreasing.
- Increased use of digital devices is potentially impacting literacy; however, the data on this are complex and suggest that, in education, how and by whom devices are used is as important as how often devices are used.

### Where to next?

To have the greatest chance of changing the tide and improving the currently declining literacy levels in Aotearoa New Zealand, any response should be carefully planned, multifaceted, and coordinated across national-level, school-level, and societal-level contexts and actors. Such a response should include:

- Developing a national, coordinated strategy to drive improvement and reform efforts, including a separate strategy for Māori medium education
- Ensuring all children receive the best literacy start through both family and community as well as early childhood education interventions
- Providing guidance on effective pedagogy across all levels of schooling, which is based on the best available evidence
- Including high quality assessment (both formal and informal) as part of any pedagogical reform
- Ensuring a broad, diverse, and knowledge-rich curriculum is present in all schools
- Accompanying changes to the curriculum with changes to NCEA, which ensure all students receive rich opportunities to learn
- Establishing a sophisticated, fit-for-purpose, targeted national response to intervention approach that works across all year levels and in all schools
- Ensuring teachers hold the necessary knowledge and know-how to provide high quality literacy instruction and rich opportunities to learn for all students by reforming current initial teacher education and professional learning and development
- Developing a robust strategy to support students to read widely for pleasure
- Underpinning such a national reform initiative must be a research and evaluation programme to facilitate improved understanding of the factors influencing literacy achievement, to assess the impact of new initiatives, and to support ongoing improvement efforts.

Addressing the literacy crisis in Aotearoa New Zealand will require reform at all levels. It is not a quick fix. It is something that requires a dedicated, connected response and a true commitment and desire to make a change. While there are few significant studies exploring system-wide literacy improvement efforts, literacy has one of the more robust and extensive research bases of all areas of education. This, coupled with what is known about the components that comprise effective education reform and school improvement efforts, means that improving the literacy achievement of Aotearoa New Zealand's young people should be possible. Indeed, the failure to do so can rightly be called a national crisis.

<sup>1</sup> Note that of the eight-week period, two weeks were the end of term 1 holidays, and most schools partially reopened for a small number of children when the country moved to Level 3 on April 27<sup>th</sup>.

## The impetus for this report

### Recollections of a Resource Teacher of Literacy (RTLit), Christchurch 2021

There was a boy at one of my schools who I took on when he was halfway through Year 6 [aged 10 or 11], and at this point he couldn't read or write at all. In fact, when I first assessed him, he said to me "this is really embarrassing, but I don't even know the alphabet". So, we started right from scratch. It took a while for him to understand the relationship between sounds and letters and his phonemic awareness developed very slowly; he did have speech difficulties as well. Once he got it, he did speed up in his reading acquisition. We got to the point where he could read cvc [consonant, vowel, consonant e.g. cat] words. Then I didn't see him for a while because of the lockdowns. [After the lockdowns] I reassessed him. After the assessment I asked him if he'd like to read me anything and he went away and got a book, and he was able to read to me the fiction story he selected very well. He then said "I want to read more" and he read a non-fiction story to me. He then asked if he could have more books. And that was just such a delightful change for me from a child who had behavioural difficulties and couldn't read or write at all and was now asking for books and reading for pleasure.

It would be easy to dismiss the story above as a one off. That a child could enter Year 6 following five years of schooling and not know the alphabet seems unfathomable. Unfortunately, available data suggest that poor literacy levels are in fact a widespread issue. Kick-starting this whole project to better understand literacy in Aotearoa New Zealand was the statistic, published in a UNICEF report from 2020, that only 64.6% of Aotearoa New Zealand fifteen-year-olds have basic proficiency in reading and maths<sup>2</sup>. Turning that around, a staggering 35.4% - over a third of fifteen-year-olds - struggle to read and write. Given the critical (and growing) importance of literacy, not only for education and employment but also for broader life outcomes, this statistic is deeply worrying.

Research has demonstrated a significant relationship between literacy and the ability to reason efficiently and critically, particularly in the context of solving novel problems. More literate individuals also enjoy better health and wellbeing, and live longer. Even when controlling for other potential factors such as age, gender, socio-economic status, and ethnicity, lower literacy has been consistently associated with outcomes as diverse as lower incomes, more hospitalisations, lower vaccine uptake, lower participation in screening programmes

(such as those for certain forms of cancer) and increased recourse to emergency care, as well as being a predictor of criminal activity<sup>3</sup>.

That something must be done to address the distressingly low literacy rates in Aotearoa New Zealand is clear. Literacy, and more particularly, how to teach reading, writing, and oral language in schools, remains a contested area in educational research, policy, and practice. This report draws on the best available evidence to understand more fully exactly where Aotearoa New Zealand is and how we got here, in order to inform ongoing discussions on how we address the literacy crisis in this country. As such, it is hoped that it can be a call to action as well as potentially feeding into the work the government currently has underway to address literacy achievement in Aotearoa New Zealand's education system.

This report is composed in such a way as to make it accessible to as broad an audience as possible. For those wanting to dig a bit deeper and to more fully understand the research and data that inform the ideas raised here, a more detailed discussion of the evidence is presented in a companion report, *What's happening with literacy in Aotearoa New Zealand? Building a comprehensive national picture*.

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF. (2020). *Worlds of Influence: Understanding What Shapes Child Well-being in Rich Countries*. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/nz/stories/new-report-card-shows-that-new-zealand-is-failing-its-children>

<sup>3</sup> Text adapted from Hughson, T. (2021). *Literacy: Why it matters*. The Education Hub. <https://theeducationhub.org.nz/literacy-why-it-matters/>

**PART**  
**1**

**Where are we?**

The overarching picture of Aotearoa New Zealand's literacy achievement is concerning; however, limitations in available data make it challenging to offer a comprehensive picture of literacy achievement.

The most reliable insights into literacy achievement in Aotearoa New Zealand (and those that form the basis of this report) come from three sources: (1) the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which is three-yearly international study conducted by the OECD into fifteen-year old's ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges; (2) the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), a five-yearly international study monitoring trends in the reading achievement of ten-year olds; and (3) the National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement (NMSSA), which monitors student achievement across the New Zealand Curriculum, including in reading and writing, at Years 4 and 8 in English-medium state and state-integrated schools. While these provide a useful picture of literacy achievement over time in Aotearoa New Zealand, there remain significant gaps in our understanding. For example, Aotearoa New Zealand lacks rigorous nation-wide data sets in a number of key areas, particularly for students before Year 4 of school, as well as for other specific areas of literacy including writing, oracy, early literacy, and secondary school literacy.

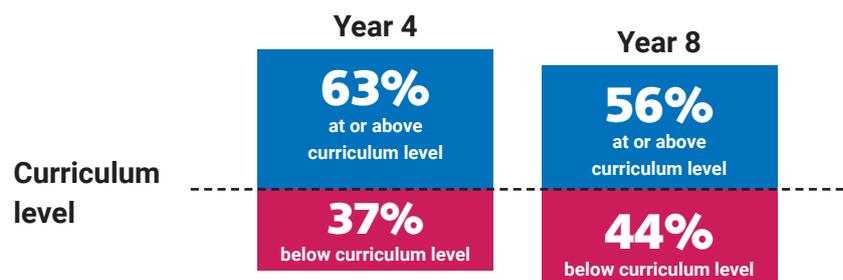
While the data may be patchy, common themes emerge from the three studies, providing insight into literacy achievement in Aotearoa New Zealand over the past two decades.

The performance of both primary and secondary school students has been declining in most reliable measures of reading achievement, especially since 2009. In recent years, not only has Aotearoa New Zealand's reading achievement declined faster than in comparable countries, but the proportion of students achieving at the highest levels in reading has also decreased.

The NMSSA from 2019 (the most recent year of data collection for reading and writing) found that only 63% of Year 4 students and 56% of Year 8 students are 'at or above' the expected level of reading proficiency [Chart 1].<sup>4</sup>



**Chart 1: NMSSA Reading Proficiency of Year 4 and Year 8 students 2019**



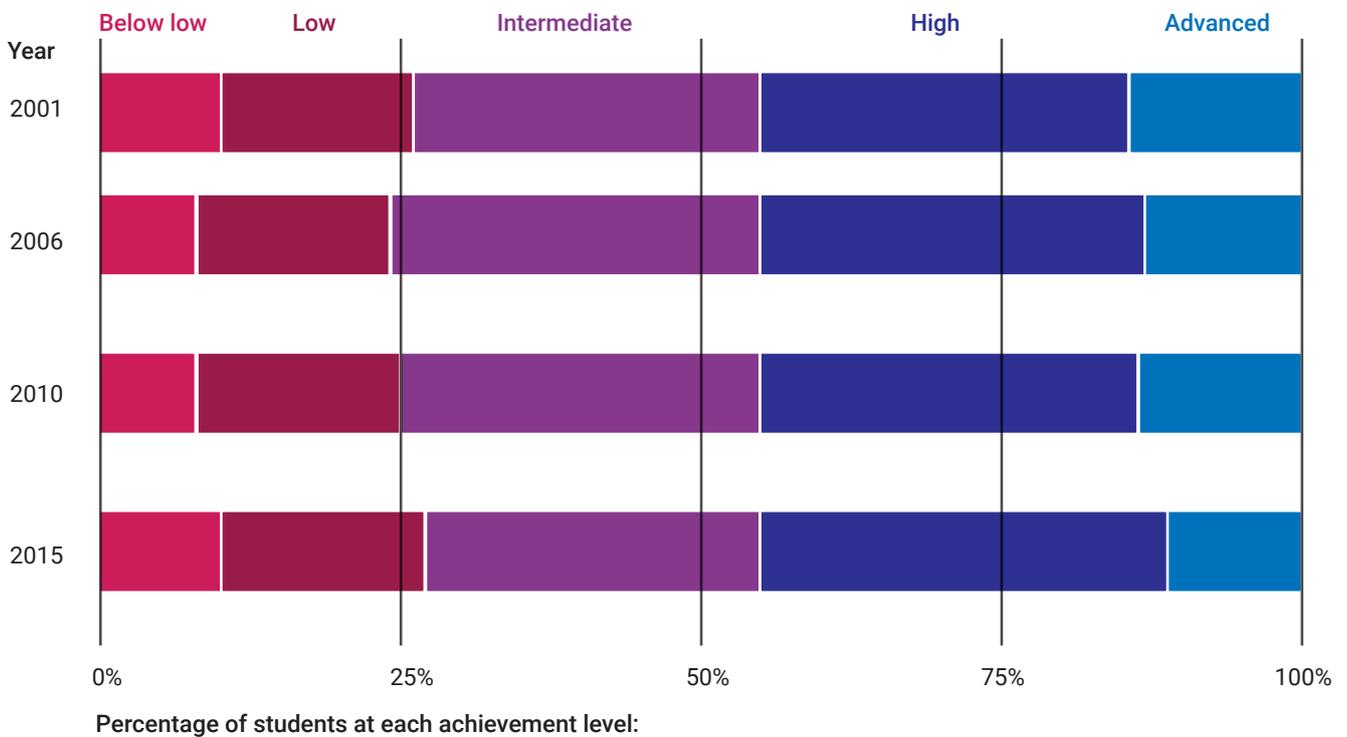
<sup>4</sup> Educational Assessment Research Unit & New Zealand Council for Educational Research. (2020). *National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement: English 2019 Key Findings*. Ministry of Education. <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/nmssa/english/nmssa-2019-english-key-findings>. In this report references for major datasets such as this will be provided just once, rather than every time these datasets are mentioned in the body of the report.

NMSSA findings broadly align with the most recent round of the PIRLS assessment, conducted in 2016, which found that 10% of 10-year-olds did not meet the low benchmark (a statistically significant drop from 2011) and a further 17% did not meet the intermediate benchmark, meaning that their ability to make inferences from simple texts was at nascent stages<sup>5</sup>. Taken together, these data suggest that 27% of 10-year-olds are achieving at substantially below the level expected for their age. Furthermore, the proportion of children reaching the high and advanced benchmarks dropped significantly in 2016 to 41% and 11% respectively [Chart 2].

**10%**  
of 10-year-olds did not meet the low benchmark in the PIRLS 2016 assessment



**Chart 2: Reading achievement profile of Aotearoa New Zealand 10 year olds PIRLS 2001-2015**

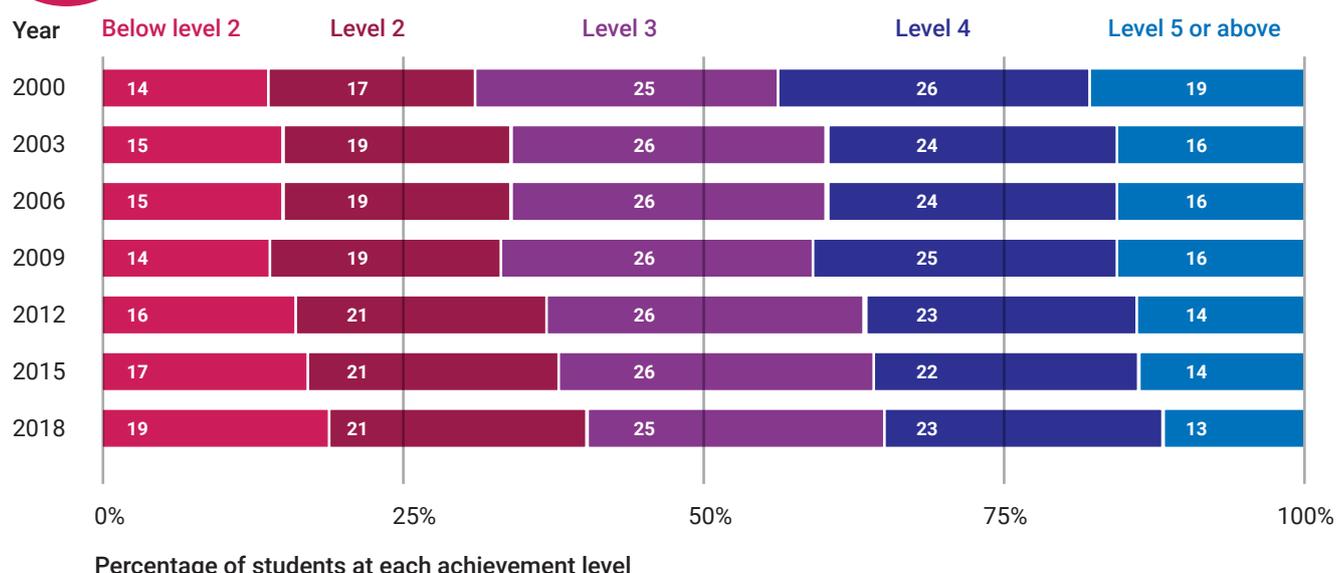


<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Education. (2017). *PIRLS 2016: New Zealand's Achievement*. Ministry of Education. <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/2539/pirls-201516/pirls-201516>

The most recent round of PISA testing (2018) found that the proportion of students with significant literacy issues in Aotearoa New Zealand (meaning they did not meet the reading baseline) has grown from 14% in 2000 to 19% by 2018. Simultaneously, the proportion of advanced readers (categorised in PISA as 'Level 5 literacy' and above) has declined from 19% in 2000 to 13% in 2018 [Chart 3].



**Chart 3: Reading achievement profile of Aotearoa New Zealand 15 year olds PISA 2000-2018**



While reporting isolated cross-country comparisons is not particularly useful, understanding how Aotearoa New Zealand's performance has changed over time - both relative to itself and other like countries - can help to provide a richer understanding of literacy achievement. Aotearoa New Zealand's mean reading score in PIRLS 2016 of 523 not only represents a statistically significant drop from the 2011 mean of 531 but also puts it 24th out of the 26 OECD nations who participated in PIRLS 2016, with only France & Chile scoring lower. Furthermore, Aotearoa New Zealand's performance declined the most out of the 11 English speaking nations who participated in PIRLS in both 2011 and 2016, at a time when many nations, including Australia, England, and Ireland were recording substantial gains in their students' reading ability. In 2016, Aotearoa New Zealand ranked 8/11 among these countries, placing it below Singapore, Australia, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Canada, the USA, and England, and above Malta, Trinidad & Tobago, and South Africa. Aotearoa New Zealand also had the second-widest distribution of scores among this group of countries.

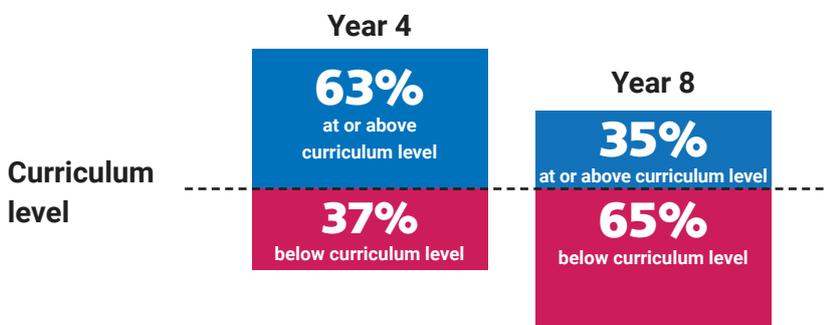
Analysis of PISA data paints a similar picture. Since 2000, the average reading score of Aotearoa New Zealand students has declined significantly, by 23 points, from 529 in 2000 to 506 in 2018, with the most marked drop between 2009 and 2012. This 23-point decline is much more pronounced than the seven-point decline in the OECD average over the same time period.

The few reliable studies of writing achievement indicate that large numbers of Aotearoa New Zealand children have significant issues with writing, and that these issues are getting worse over time.

The number of students at or above the expected level of writing as outlined by the NMSSA in Year 4 is 63%, dropping to only 35% of students by Year 8 [Graph 4]. The NMSSA also shows a (statistically significant) decline of 2 scale points in writing achievement for Year 4 students between 2012 and 2019, which represents about a third of a year's progress, a substantial amount when students have attended school for fewer than 4 years. This drop includes larger declines in Year 4 writing for some sub-population groups: boys (3 scale points), Pākehā (4 scale points) and high decile students (4 scale points).<sup>7</sup>



Chart 4: NMSSA Writing Proficiency of Year 4 and Year 8 students 2019



Persistently large gaps remain between students from different socio-economic backgrounds, and these gaps continue to be higher than in comparable countries.

The NMSSA data determined, on average, an 8-scale point gap in student achievement in Year 4 writing between high and low decile schools, which equates to nearly one year's difference in progress. This grows to a 12-scale point gap (nearly 1.5 years of progress) in average achievement in writing by Year 8. Even greater differences were found in reading with a 17-scale point gap between average achievement in high and low decile schools in Year 4 and a 16-scale point gap in Year 8, equating to a nearly two-year gap between student achievement in high and low decile schools.

These findings are consistent with data from PIRLS 2016, which identified a gap of 67 points between students categorised as being in 'more affluent' schools (who scored an average of 551 points) and 'less affluent' schools (who scored an average of 484 points), compared to an average gap internationally of 43 points. While the gap between these groups of students did narrow between 2011 and 2016, this is due to the small but statistically significant decrease of 9 points in the mean score of more affluent students.

Similar findings are present in the 2018 PISA data, which found socio-economically advantaged students outperformed disadvantaged students in



The NMSSA data determined, on average, an 8-scale point gap in student achievement in Year 4 writing between high and low decile schools, which equates to nearly one year's difference in progress

<sup>7</sup> In the NMSSA writing assessment, 7 scale points is equivalent to one year's progress. For the NMSSA reading assessment, 9 scale points is equal to one year's progress. It is important to keep this difference in mind when reading the following sections.

reading by 96 score points in Aotearoa New Zealand compared to 88 points on average across OECD countries. While this gap has been narrowing over time, it is only because the reading achievement of socio-economically advantaged students has been declining at a faster rate than that of disadvantaged students (21 points compared with 13 points since 2009).

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**In Year 4, ākonga Māori score 5 scale points lower in writing and 9 scale points lower in reading compared to non-Māori students.**

**There remain persistently large gaps between the literacy levels of different ethnic groups, with Pākehā and Asian students consistently achieving, on average, higher reading and writing scores than Māori and Pasifika students.**

The NMSSA data show that in Year 4, ākonga Māori score 5 scale points lower in writing and 9 scale points lower in reading compared to non-Māori students, the equivalent of approximately three quarters of a year and one year of learning respectively. By Year 8, this gap extends to 10 scale points in both writing and reading, which is equivalent to over one year's progress. While there is no statistically significant difference in writing scores between Year 4 Pasifika and non-Pasifika students, by Year 8 Pasifika students score on average 3 scale points lower than non-Pasifika students, or approximately one-third of a year behind. In reading, Pasifika students on average scored 12 scale points lower than non-Pasifika at Y4 and 13 scale points lower at Y8, equivalent to nearly one and a half years of learning.

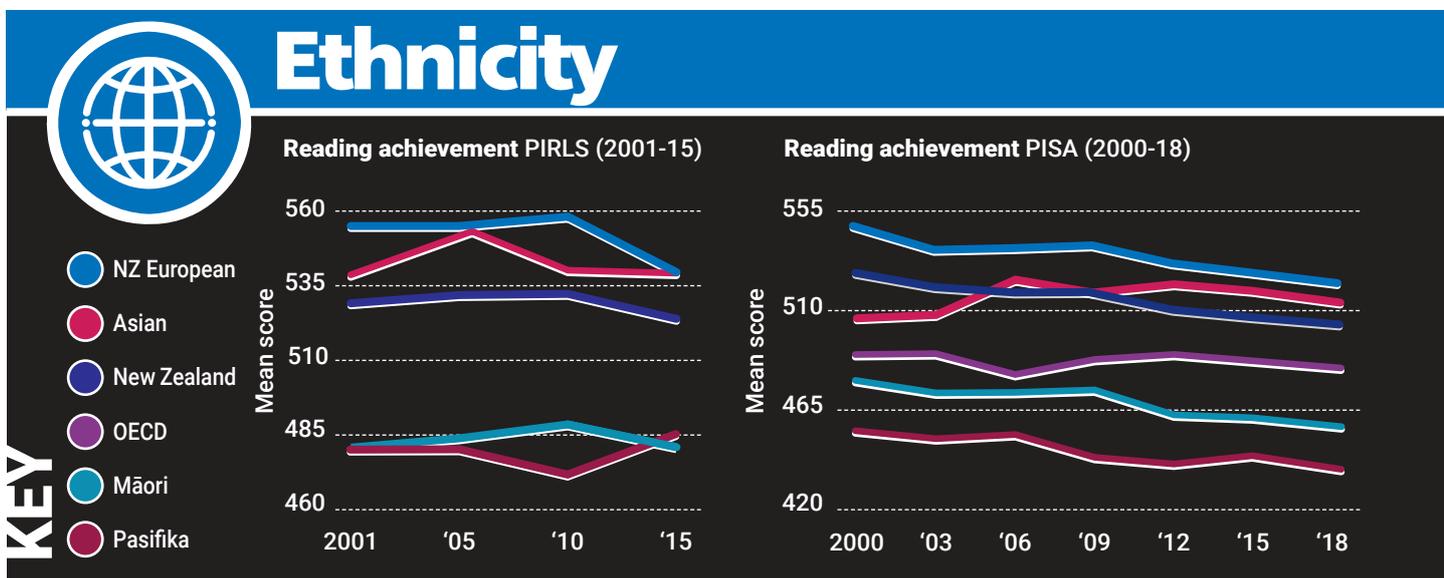
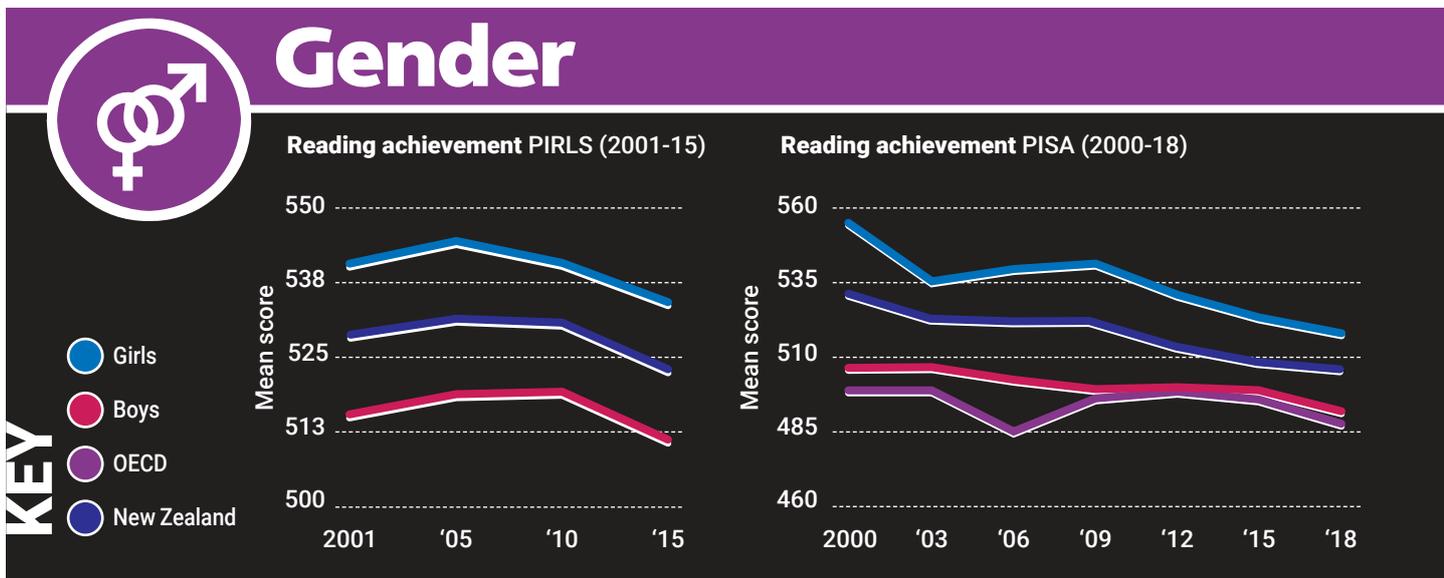
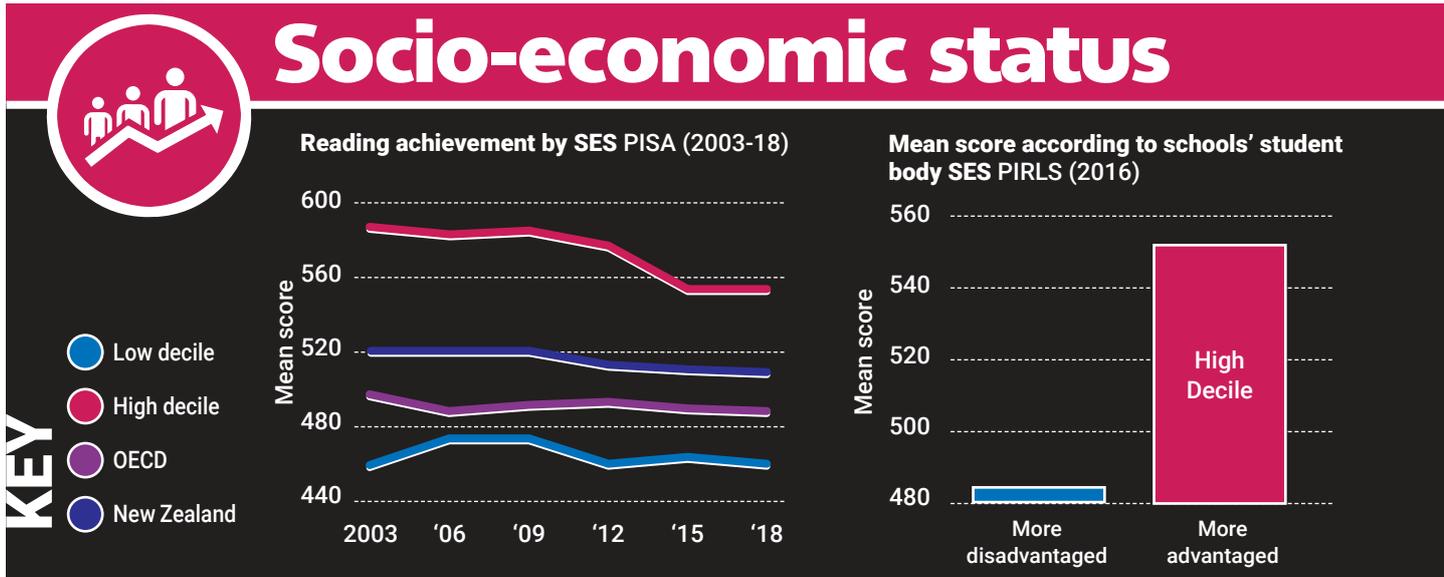




The PIRLS 2016 and PISA 2018 data similarly highlight the significant ethnic gaps in literacy achievement in Aotearoa New Zealand. In PIRLS, at age 10, Pākehā students received an average score of 545 points, compared to an average score of 479 for ākonga Māori and 485 for Pasifika students. PISA data show that compared to the Aotearoa New Zealand average reading score of 506 points, the average score was significantly lower both for ākonga Māori at 463 and Pasifika students at 442, compared to an average score of 524 for Pākehā students and 517 for Asian students. Furthermore, since 2000, statistically significant declines have been identified for ākonga Māori as well as Pasifika and Pākehā students.

**There remain persistently large gender gaps in literacy, with girls achieving, on average, higher reading and writing scores than boys.**

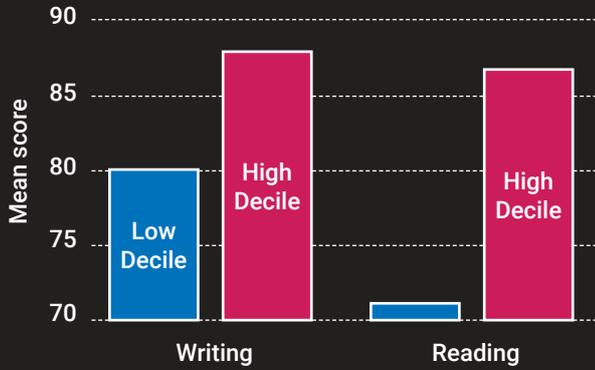
The NMSSA data show that in writing, girls on average outperformed Year 4 boys by 11 scale points in Year 4 and 12 scale points in Year 8, the equivalent of over one year's learning. Similarly in reading, girls on average outperformed boys by 7 scale points in Year 4 and 5 scale points in year eight, equivalent to over half a year of progress. In PIRLS 2016 there was a 21-point gap between girls' and boys' reading achievement, the 12th largest gender gap out of the 50 countries who participated. Similarly in PISA 2018, the mean reading performance score for girls (520 points) was significantly higher than that of boys (491). While this gap has been narrowing since 2009, this is only because girls' reading achievement has been declining at a faster rate than boys.



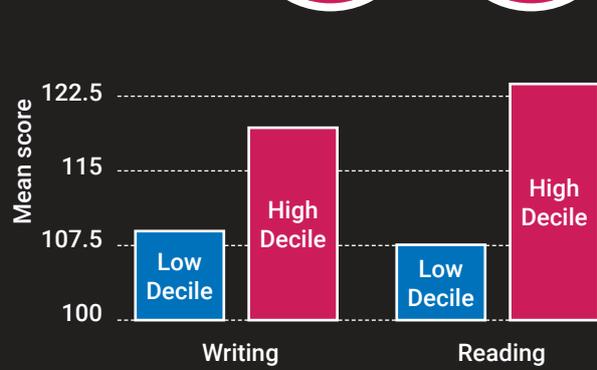
### Reading and writing achievement NMSSA (2019)



#### Year 4



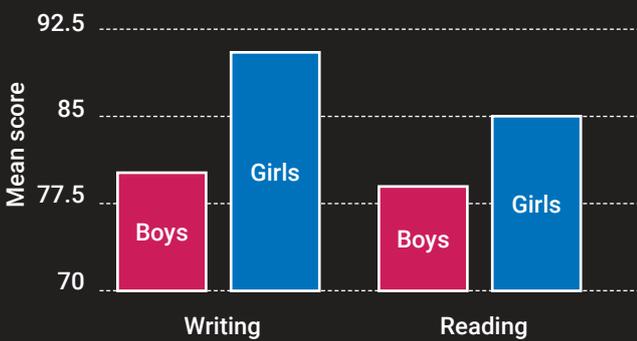
#### Year 8



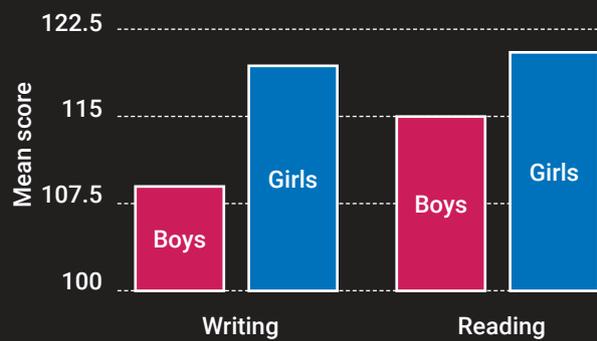
### Reading and writing achievement NMSSA (2019)



#### Year 4



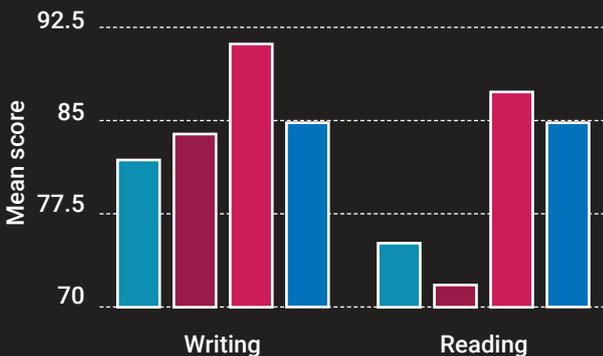
#### Year 8



### Reading and writing achievement NMSSA (2019)



#### Year 4



#### Year 8



# PART 2 How did we get here?

It is challenging to unravel exactly why Aotearoa New Zealand's literacy levels are as low as they are. There are undoubtedly multiple, inter-connected contributing factors. However, there is too little large-scale or reliable research into literacy in Aotearoa New Zealand to draw any definitive conclusions, and what research is available does not allow clear causal links to be drawn. However, combining international research together with local studies does enable the identification of possible, and in many cases even probable, contributing factors. This section will discuss these potential factors, with a specific focus on those factors internal to the education system. While broader societal factors, not least socio-economic inequality, are central to explaining varying levels of academic achievement, this report is just focused on what we can do within the education system to improve outcomes for all. A more detailed examination of the research base drawn on, alongside some consideration of the impact of broader societal factors, is available in our companion report.

**For the past 20 years, Aotearoa New Zealand has lacked a national literacy strategy.**

The government does not currently have a clear, coordinated plan for how all parts of the education system need to work together to improve literacy achievement (although it is in the process of developing one). This has resulted in evolving evidence on effective literacy practice not being disseminated or implemented across the system, and funding and other forms of literacy support including resources and interventions not being systematically allocated to the parts of the system (such as particular schools or students) that need them most. What is more, until 2021 there was not a professional learning and development programme designed to upskill teachers in effective literacy teaching strategies (although note that the currently running professional learning and development programme addresses only certain aspects of literacy instruction in the first years of primary school). While studies of nation-wide literacy efforts are limited, the available research does suggest that having a clear plan and developing specific and targeted system-wide initiatives to help make that plan a reality are crucial to improving literacy outcomes.<sup>8</sup>

**The nature of the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) and NCEA has led to differences in the breadth and depth of knowledge students acquire, as well as opportunities for students to engage with complex texts and to develop critical literacy skills.**

Knowledge is critical for reading (and writing). The ability to comprehend a text (provided one can decode words) is directly connected to whether individuals have the relevant vocabulary and background knowledge to make sense of what they are reading.<sup>9</sup> As all new information is interpreted in relation to what we already know, people with a larger mental lexicon and more extensive knowledge base not only more easily comprehend a wider range of texts but also are able to undertake more sophisticated analysis of those texts. The importance of existing knowledge to reading achievement was recently shown

<sup>8</sup> Campbell, C., Fullan, M., & Glaze, A. (2006). Unlocking potential for learning. *Effective district-wide strategies to raise student achievement in literacy and numeracy*. Ontario Ministry of Education; Gallagher, M. J., Malloy, J., & Ryerson, R. (2016). Achieving excellence: Bringing effective literacy pedagogy to scale in Ontario's publicly-funded education system. *Journal of educational change*, 17(4), 477-504; Levin, B. (2010). The challenge of large-scale literacy improvement. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 21(4), 359-376; Stannard, J., & Huxford, L. (2007). *The literacy game: The story of the National Literacy Strategy*. Routledge.

<sup>9</sup> Hoover, W., & Tunmer, W. (2020). *The Cognitive Foundations of Reading and Its Acquisition*. Springer; Jeon, E. H., & Yamashita, J. (2014). L2 reading comprehension and its correlates: A meta-analysis. *Language learning*, 64(1), 160-212.; Nagy, W., & Townsend, D. (2012). Words as tools: Learning academic vocabulary as language acquisition. *Reading research quarterly*, 47(1), 91-108; Perfetti, C. A., & Adlof, S. M. (2012). *Reading comprehension: A conceptual framework from word meaning to text meaning*. In J. Sabatini & E. Albro (Eds.), *Assessing reading in the 21st century: Aligning and applying advances in the reading and measurement sciences* (pp.3-21). Rowman & Littlefield.



in an Australian randomised control trial study which examined the impact of providing children with culturally and contextually relevant texts and questions. The study found that making content culturally relevant to regional and Aboriginal students could close the Indigenous reading gap by 50 per cent and reduce the urban-rural gap by a third.<sup>10</sup>

Reading and writing achievement, particularly as students advance through school, relies not only on the instruction and learning that occurs during dedicated literacy or English lessons but is supported and built across all curriculum areas.<sup>11</sup> However, the largely content-free nature of the New Zealand Curriculum means that the knowledge to which students are exposed across all areas of the Curriculum, and at all years of schooling, varies considerably. While we lack large-scale studies in Aotearoa New Zealand exploring the content that students engage with during their schooling, there are small-scale studies, focused on individual subjects and a limited number of teachers and classrooms, which have found evidence of some students experiencing a narrow curriculum at school.<sup>12</sup>

There exists further evidence – again from a limited number of small-scale studies – that the length and complexity of texts students encounter at school varies considerably.<sup>13</sup> Low-level texts and limited opportunities to develop the critical literacy skills that are increasingly important for engaging with the vast amounts of information (and misinformation) to which we currently have access are hampering students' ongoing achievement. Several of these studies have specifically posited that the nature of NCEA has also contributed to these limited opportunities for students.

<sup>10</sup> Dobrescu, I., Holden, R., Motta, A., Piccoli, A., Roberts, P. & Walker, S. (2021). *Cultural Context in Standardised Tests*. Working Paper. University of New South Wales Economics of Education Knowledge Hub. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/606d0efce3d8ab58471157c4/t/61b5cbd9f3c0e91347c7c5db/1639304168125/Dubbo+December+2021.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Lesaux, N. K., Kieffer, M. J., Kelley, J. G., & Harris, J. R. (2014). Effects of academic vocabulary instruction for linguistically diverse adolescents: Evidence from a randomized field trial. *American Educational Research Journal*, 51(6), 1159-1194; Nagy, W., & Townsend, D. (2012). Words as tools: Learning academic vocabulary as language acquisition. *Reading research quarterly*, 47(1), 91-108

<sup>12</sup> Ormond, B. (2011). Transformative shifts in art history teaching: The impact of standards-based assessment. *The Curriculum Journal*, 22(4), 567-590; Ormond, B. (2018). The impact of standards-based assessment on knowledge for history education in New Zealand. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice* 26(2), 143-165; Wood, B. E., & Sheehan, M. (2021). Transformative disciplinary learning in history and social studies: Lessons from a high autonomy curriculum in New Zealand. *The Curriculum Journal*, 32(3), 495-509; see also references for the below footnote.

<sup>13</sup> Hughson, T. A. (2021). Learnification and the outcomes-focused curriculum: The case of secondary school English in Aotearoa New Zealand. *The Curriculum Journal* 32(4), 652-66; Wilson, A., Madjar, I., & McNaughton, S. (2016). Opportunity to learn about disciplinary literacy in senior secondary English classrooms in New Zealand. *The Curriculum Journal*, 27(2), 204-228; Wilson, A., & Jesson, R. (2018). A case study of literacy teaching in six middle-and high-school science classes in New Zealand. In K. Tang & K. Danielsson (Eds.), *Global developments in literacy research for science education* (pp. 133-147). Springer; Wilson, A., McNaughton, S., & Zhu, T. (2017). Subject area literacy instruction in low SES secondary schools in New Zealand. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 40(1), 72-85.

### Effective pedagogy, supported by high-quality assessment, is not present in all early childhood education centres, schools, or classrooms.

While limited, there is evidence from Aotearoa New Zealand to suggest that adequate knowledge of effective literacy instruction is not held by all teachers,<sup>14</sup> and that, even where it is, this is not always being transferred into teaching practice.<sup>15</sup> The research suggests that gaps in teacher knowledge exist across the early childhood, primary, and secondary sectors and relate to reading and writing instruction as well as oracy (oral language), which increasingly is viewed as a critical component of early literacy development.

The continued disagreement among both researchers and teachers about what constitutes effective literacy instruction, particularly in early childhood education and the first years of school, undoubtedly influences the variable knowledge and implementation of core literacy practices. This is compounded by the absence of reliable systems for disseminating information about advancements in knowledge and effective practice to teachers or for supporting teachers to transfer this information into their teaching practice.<sup>16</sup> However, Aotearoa New Zealand lacks large-scale studies exploring the nature of teaching practice occurring across schools, making it challenging to construct a detailed understanding of the pedagogical practices occurring in Aotearoa New Zealand classrooms. Furthermore, available data suggest that the preparation teachers receive during their initial teacher education (ITE) is not universally equipping them with the knowledge and expertise required to implement effective literacy instruction.<sup>17</sup> A particular risk has also been identified of Māori-medium ITE sometimes struggling to adequately support kaiako Māori to develop sufficient te reo Māori competency prior to entering Māori-medium environments.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the quality of literacy resources and professional learning and development available to teachers remains variable.

There also is research indicating limitations in both the assessments available to teachers to monitor student progress as well as teachers' and schools' abilities to utilise assessment information to support students and improve practice.<sup>19</sup> Assessment forms an important aspect of effective pedagogy, enabling teachers to understand the progress of each individual student, including specific aspects of literacy they might be struggling with, as well as understanding which teaching approaches, and interventions, have been more or less successful.

<sup>14</sup> Arrow, A. W., Braid, C., & Chapman, J. W. (2019). Explicit linguistic knowledge is necessary, but not sufficient, for the provision of explicit early literacy instruction. *Annals of dyslexia*, 69(1), 99-113; Chapman, J. W., Greaney, K. T., Arrow, A. W., & Tunmer, W. E. (2018). Teachers' use of phonics, knowledge of language constructs, and preferred word identification prompts in relation to beginning readers. *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*, 23(1), 87-104; Carroll J., Gillon, G. & McNeill, B. (2012). Explicit Phonological Knowledge of Educational Professionals. *Asia Pacific Journal of Speech, Language and Hearing*, 15(4), 231-244.

<sup>15</sup> Arrow, Braid & Chapman (2019)

<sup>16</sup> Hood, N. (2017). *From Tinkering to Intelligent Action*. The Education Hub. <https://theeducationhub.org.nz/white-paper-from-tinkering-to-intelligent-action/>

<sup>17</sup> Carroll, Gillon & McNeill (2012); Washburn, E. K., Binks-Cantrell, E. S., Joshi, R. M., Martin-Chang, S., & Arrow, A. (2016). Preservice teacher knowledge of basic language constructs in Canada, England, New Zealand, and the USA. *Annals of dyslexia*, 66(1), 7-26; Wilson, L., McNeill, B., & Gillon, G. T. (2015). The knowledge and perceptions of prospective teachers and speech language therapists in collaborative language and literacy instruction. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 31(3), 347-362.

<sup>18</sup> Hōhepa, M., Hāwera, N., Tamatea, K., & Heaton, S. (2014). *Te puni rumaki: Strengthening the preparation, capability and retention of Māori medium teacher trainees* (Final Report). Ministry of Education; Skerrett, M. (2011). *Whakamanahia te reo Māori: He torohanga rangahau – A review of literature on the instructional and contextual factors likely to influence te reo Māori proficiency of graduates from Māori medium ITE programmes*. New Zealand Teachers Council.

<sup>19</sup> Cameron, T.A., Carroll, J.L.D., Taumoepeau, M., & Schaughency, E. (2019). How Do New Zealand Teachers Assess Children's Oral Language and Literacy Skills at School Entry? *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies* 54, 69–97; Parr, J. M., & Timperley, H. (2008). Teachers, schools and using evidence: Considerations of preparedness. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 15(1), 57-71.

**High quality, systematic support, including effective literacy interventions at every level of schooling, are not available to all students who need it.**

Aotearoa New Zealand lacks a clear Response to Intervention (RTI) system for literacy needs. Typically, RTI systems operate in three tiers: Tier 1 involves well-designed, research-informed in-class learning; Tier 2 involves specific, targeted interventions to bring students back up to acceptable literacy levels; and Tier 3 involves intensive interventions for the small group of students who do not respond to Tier 2 interventions. Some schools do offer a tiered approach to literacy interventions, but there is no national infrastructure to ensure that all schools are able to do this, and in many cases, schools feel they do not have the staffing or the expertise to operate any form of tiered interventions to a high degree of effectiveness.<sup>20</sup>

A parliamentary select committee report found that students with specific learning needs, including literacy-specific needs, are not well served by the education system.<sup>21</sup> The report revealed that it was difficult to get children's needs diagnosed, that support for students with identified needs was typically poorly funded or non-existent, that many schools were not supported to use effective practices, and that transitions between schools were often difficult. Teacher submissions as part of a select committee review stated that initial teacher education did not adequately prepare them to support students with additional learning needs, including those students with literacy-specific issues like dyslexia.<sup>22</sup>

**Māori-medium education lacks a range of contextually appropriate literacy supports**

Research into literacy provision within the Māori-medium sector is generally small-scale, and much of the available work is now quite dated, which is an issue in itself. However, there are consistent issues regarding a lack of funding and resourcing around literacy in Māori-medium education, a lack of specifically-tailored assessment tools and teaching resources, and limited appropriate professional development.<sup>23</sup> Additional concerns have been raised around the transition Māori-medium students often end up making into mainstream schools, and the lack of support for these students and their unique literacy needs as they move from primarily working in one language to working in another in their new mainstream environments.<sup>24</sup> Some research has also highlighted concerns of kaiako who feel unsure of how to balance the acquisition of literacy in te reo Māori and in te reo Pāhehē within kura kaupapa.<sup>25</sup>



**Teacher submissions as part of a select committee review stated that initial teacher education did not adequately prepare them to support students with additional learning needs**

<sup>20</sup> Select Committee on Science and Education. (2016). Inquiry into the identification and support for students with the significant challenges of dyslexia, dyspraxia, and autism spectrum disorders in primary and secondary schools. New Zealand Parliament. [https://www.parliament.nz/resource/en-NZ/51DBSCH\\_SCR71769\\_1/](https://www.parliament.nz/resource/en-NZ/51DBSCH_SCR71769_1/)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> ERO. (2000). *Literacy Education in Kura Kaupapa Māori*. Education Review Office; Hill, R. K. (2010). *What is the role of English transition in Māori-medium education?* Unpublished doctoral thesis. University of Waikato; May, S., & Hill, R. (2005). Maori-medium education: Current issues and challenges. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 8(5): 377–403; May, S., Hill, R., & Tiakiwai, S. (2004). Bilingual education in Aotearoa/New Zealand. *Key findings from bilingual immersion education: Indicators of good practices*. Ministry of Education.

<sup>24</sup> Hill, R. (2016) *Transitioning from Māori-Medium to English: Pursuing Biliteracy*. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 51, 33–52; Weir, H. (2012). *Transitioning from Māori-medium to English medium education: The experiences and perspectives of three students*. University of Sydney Papers in TESOL, 7, 51-85.

<sup>25</sup> Berryman, M. & Gwyn, T. (2003). *Transition from Māori to English: A Community Approach*. NZCER Press; Hill, R. (2011). Rethinking English in Māori-medium education. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 14(6), 719-732. Such research does not suggest that English should be prioritised over te reo Māori, but just reports concerns from those operating within the Māori-medium sector about how to achieve a balance between the two languages so that students are prepared to use both with confidence.

### Systemic racism and discrimination within the schooling system continues to significantly impact some students' ability to succeed

Māori and Pasifika students continue to be subjected to systemic racism within the schooling system in ways that negatively impact their ability to succeed. Prominent and well-documented themes in the literature include teachers consistently having lower expectations for Māori and Pasifika students (even when controlling for other factors like socio-economic status and prior attainment) and providing them with more limited opportunities to learn, and teachers and schools not valuing non-Pākehā worldviews.<sup>26</sup> There is further evidence of bias when comparing students' achievement on standardised tests and teachers' overall judgements of achievement in National Standards, a bias particularly evident for Māori and Pasifika students, and boys in writing.<sup>27</sup> These specific issues are exacerbated by broader structural issues in the education system, such as the teaching workforce continuing to be predominantly Pākehā while the student body is increasingly diverse.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Turner, H., Rubie-Davies, C. M., & Webber, M. (2015). Teacher expectations, ethnicity and the achievement gap. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 50(1), 55-69; Bishop, R., & Berryman, M. (2006). *Culture speaks: Cultural relationships and classroom learning*. Huia Publishers

<sup>27</sup> Meissel, K., Meyer, F., Yao, E. S., & Rubie-Davies, C. M. (2017). Subjectivity of teacher judgments: Exploring student characteristics that influence teacher judgments of student ability. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 65, 48–60.

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/teacher-numbers>

<sup>29</sup> Brunt, A. (2021). *Philanthropic Community: The education data story*. Unpublished Ministry of Education presentation, New Zealand.

<sup>30</sup> Gottfried, M. A. (2010). Evaluating the relationship between student attendance and achievement in urban elementary and middle schools: An instrumental variables approach. *American Educational Research Journal*, 47(2), 434-465; Gottfried, M. A. (2014). Chronic absenteeism and its effects on students' academic and socioemotional outcomes. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, 19(2), 53-75.

<sup>31</sup> Mol, S., Bus, A., de Jong, M. & Smeets, D. (2008). Added value of dialogic parent-child book readings: A metaanalysis. *Early Education and Development*, 1(1), 7-26; Niklas, F. & Schneider, W. (2015). With a little help: Improving Kindergarten children's vocabulary by enhancing the home literacy environment. *Reading and Writing*, 28(4), 491-508.

<sup>32</sup> Hemmereichs, K., Agirdag, O., & Kavadias, D. (2017). The relationship between parental literacy involvement, socio-economic status and reading literacy. *Educational Review*, 69(1), 85-101; Kloosterman, R., Notten, N., Tolsma, J., & Kraaykamp, G. (2011). The effects of parental reading socialization and early school involvement on children's academic performance: A panel study of primary school pupils in the Netherlands. *European Sociological Review*, 27(3), 291-306.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas, Meissel, & McNaughton (2019)

### High levels of absenteeism and transience, particularly among certain groups of students, is limiting the amount of [literacy] instruction some students receive.

Aotearoa New Zealand has significant and ongoing issues with school attendance nation-wide. For instance, in 2019, only approximately 57% of students were classified as 'regular' attendees, meaning they attended school more than 90% of the time (a threshold which means they could still miss a day of school every two weeks).<sup>29</sup> In the same year, Māori students were regular attendees only approximately 47% of the time, while Pasifika students attended regularly only approximately 50% of the time. We currently lack robust local evidence tying attendance to academic achievement/literacy attainment, and of course, attendance is affected by a range of other factors, not least socio-economic ones. However, international evidence suggests that attendance rates do strongly correlate with student achievement, even after controlling for other factors.<sup>30</sup>

### There are significant disparities in the home literacy environments of children.

International evidence strongly suggests that a child's home literacy environment, including factors such as the number of books in a child's home and whether their parents engage in literacy-based activities with them, correlate strongly with children's literacy levels.<sup>31</sup> The home literacy environment is especially important in the early years, before children start formal schooling.<sup>32</sup>

Aotearoa New Zealand data, while limited, suggest that there are significant disparities in the home literacy environments of young children. The Growing Up in New Zealand (GUiNZ) study indicates that while 85% of mothers read books, sing songs or play music with their child several times a week or more, there are significant ethnic and socio-economic disparities in children's experiences.<sup>33</sup> For instance, mothers of New Zealand European children were almost four times as likely to read books to their child once or several times a

day (72%) as mothers of Asian, Māori or Pasifika Island children, while mothers whose children faced the greatest levels of socioeconomic deprivation were less likely to read to their child once or several times a day, compared with mothers whose children faced the least socioeconomic deprivation.<sup>34</sup> There are many complex factors that lie behind these statistics, including parental working hours and lack of access to culturally-relevant reading materials.<sup>35</sup> However, as discussed in the final section below, unless we are able to provide more support to all parents to provide a rich literacy home environment for their children, this will continue to be a significant factor in later literacy disparities.

### The number of young people reading for enjoyment and the amount of time young people spend reading is decreasing.

Both the NMSSA and PIRLS have established clear correlations between reading for pleasure and literacy outcomes, with NMSSA focused on how regularly students read, and PIRLS on how much students indicated they enjoyed reading.<sup>36</sup> In addition, the most recent PISA data found the number of students agreeing with the statement 'I only read if I have to' rose from 38% to 52% between 2009 and 2018, while students agreeing that 'for me, reading is a waste of time' rose from 18% to 28% over the same period. At the same time, the number of hours children reported spending reading dropped significantly, with 43% of children saying they never read for enjoyment in 2018, up from 30% of children who said the same in 2000. Students who indicated they read less and students who indicated they enjoyed reading less gained significantly lower scores in PISA, even when accounting for both gender and socio-economic factors.<sup>37</sup>

### Increased use of digital devices is potentially impacting literacy; however, the data on this are complex and suggest that, in education, how and by whom devices are used is as important as how often devices are used.

The only large-scale data on device use and literacy in Aotearoa New Zealand comes from PISA. They suggest that, even when controlling for socio-economic status and gender, Aotearoa New Zealand students do best in the PISA reading assessment when they use devices in their English classes for 60 minutes or more each week.<sup>38</sup> However, this finding contrasts with the broader international picture, which shows that in most countries it is students who never use devices in English classrooms (or classrooms where they study their national language) who have the best literacy outcomes.<sup>39</sup> Device use by students alone in English class, as opposed to by teachers alone, or by teachers and students working together, is also associated with much lower literacy outcomes in Aotearoa New Zealand.<sup>40</sup> Finally, reading books digitally as opposed to on paper is also associated with poorer literacy outcomes in Aotearoa New Zealand, a finding that is consistent with the international literature.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. NZDep refers to the NZ Deprivation Index, with 10 indicating the greatest degree of socio-economic deprivation, and 1 indicating the least.

<sup>35</sup> Glynn, T., Berryman, M., & Glynn, V. (2000, July 11-14). *Reading and Writing Gains for Maori Students in Mainstream Schools: Effective Partnerships in the Rotorua Home and School Literacy Project*. Paper presented at the International Reading Association World Congress on Reading, Auckland, New Zealand; Hall, N., Hornby, G., & Macfarlane, S. (2015). Enabling school engagement for Māori families in New Zealand. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 24(10), 3038-3046 – although note these studies are focused on school experience rather than experiences prior to school.

<sup>36</sup> Educational Assessment Research Unit & New Zealand Council for Educational Research (2020); Ministry of Education (2017)

<sup>37</sup> Medina & McGregor (2019).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Bryant, J., Child, F., Dorn, E., & Hall, S. (2020). *New global data reveal education technology's impact on learning*. McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/new-global-data-reveal-education-technologys-impact-on-learning>

<sup>40</sup> Sutcliffe, R. (2021). *PISA 2018: Digital devices and student outcomes in New Zealand schools*. Ministry of Education. [https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/208799/PISA18-Digital-devices-and-student-outcomes-in-New-Zealand-schools-web-accessible.pdf](https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/208799/PISA18-Digital-devices-and-student-outcomes-in-New-Zealand-schools-web-accessible.pdf)

<sup>41</sup> For Aotearoa New Zealand see Medina & McGregor (2019); for overseas evidence see: Delgado, P., Vargas, C., Ackerman, R., & Salmerón, L. (2018). Don't throw away your printed books: A meta-analysis on the effects of reading media on reading comprehension. *Educational Research Review*, 25, 23-38; Furenes, M. I., Kucirkova, N., & Bus, A. G. (2021). A Comparison of Children's Reading on Paper Versus Screen: A Meta-Analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 91(4), 483-517.

## PART 3 Where to next?

The data summarised above clearly signal that low and declining literacy levels among Aotearoa New Zealand's young people must be addressed. To have the greatest chance of changing the tide, any response should be carefully planned, multifaceted, and coordinated across national-level, school-level, and societal-level contexts and actors. The following section provides an overview of key evidence-informed steps that must be taken to kick-start a literacy transformation in Aotearoa New Zealand. For a more detailed outline of these steps, including more comprehensive links to the evidence that underpins them, please turn to our companion report titled *What's happening with literacy in Aotearoa New Zealand? Building a comprehensive national picture*.

Ensuring children receive the best literacy start is essential. Those who develop stronger early literacy skills are more motivated and tend to read and write more. This supports them to engage with new and more information, and the greater reading and writing mileage further strengthens their abilities in these areas. Furthermore, early literacy success is connected to continued motivation and engagement at school, the ability to engage with learning across the curriculum, and a reduction in behavioural issues.<sup>42</sup>

How can this best literacy start be achieved? It is first important to acknowledge that literacy begins before children start school. Such a statement does not advocate the transfer of school-level learning into early childhood, but rather recognises the role that both whānau and early childhood educators play in supporting literacy development. It is **important that children have a rich variety of early literacy experiences**: opportunities to dance and sing, to talk with adults and peers, to listen to stories and tell stories to others, to be engaged with print symbols and mathematical symbols in a range of forms, and to use a range of media for writing, drawing and creating their own artefacts. Culturally-specific ways of developing early literacy skills need to be recognised as part of this process.<sup>43</sup> Children need access to resources and opportunities in their early years that support the development of early literacy skills, and they also require thoughtful and intentional mediation of literacy opportunities at each phase of development. **Intentionally scaffolding children's developing understandings of literacy in a way that is meaningful and enjoyable for children**, with a heavy focus on play and playful learning, is essential.<sup>44</sup>

In early primary, it is essential that children learn to decode text through explicit, systematic phonics instruction whilst also building up their vocabulary, mental lexicon, and conceptual knowledge through engagement in rich language. This is facilitated by adults reading and discussing rich texts with them, classroom discussions, and engagement in knowledge building across the curriculum.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Bangert-Drowns, R. L., Hurley, M. M., & Wilkinson, B. (2004). The effects of school-based writing-to-learn interventions on academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(1), 29-58; Graham, S., Kiuahara, S. A., & MacKay, M. (2020). The effects of writing on learning in science, social studies, and mathematics: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 90(2), 179-226; Lee, C. D., & Spratley, A. (2010). *Reading in the disciplines: The challenges of adolescent literacy*. Final report from Carnegie Corporation of New York's Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy. Carnegie Corporation of New York.

<sup>43</sup> Neha, T., Reese, E., Schaughency, E., & Taumoepeau, M. (2020). The role of whānau (New Zealand Māori families) for Māori children's early learning. *Developmental Psychology*, 56(8), 1518.

<sup>44</sup> This paragraph adapted from McLachlan, C., (2021). *Fostering early literacy in ECE settings: principles, practices, and progression*. The Education Hub. <https://theeducationhub.org.nz/fostering-early-literacy-in-ece-settings-principles-practices-and-progression/>

<sup>45</sup> Wyse, D., & Bradbury, A. (2022). Reading wars or reading reconciliation? A critical examination of robust research evidence, curriculum policy and teachers' practices for teaching phonics and reading. *Review of Education*, 10(1), Advance online publication.

Literacy improvement efforts cannot stop once children have mastered the basics. Schools must also support the development of critical literacy, disciplinary literacy, literacy for knowledge acquisition, and literacy for the effective communication of ideas and information. It is this range of literacy abilities that will enable students to connect with different subject areas and different topics for a range of purposes. Not only do students need to be able to engage with complex texts and abstract concepts and ideas, with today's complex digital media environments, they also require skills in navigation, comprehension, analysis and evaluation across multiple sources.<sup>46</sup> Crucially, all of this needs to be done in culturally responsive and sustaining ways, which make use of culturally-relevant learning contexts and pedagogical approaches.<sup>47</sup>

**Developing a national, coordinated strategy to drive improvement and reform efforts** will be essential (we note that such an initiative currently is underway, although it is too early to assess its merits).<sup>48</sup> **A separate strategy should also be created for Māori medium education.** But a strategy alone will not be enough. It is essential that the implementation of such a strategy is carefully planned and executed, ensuring that adequate resourcing and support are sustained over time, and that the initiatives are evaluated and iteratively improved. Any such effort will require multiple actors working both individually and in unison. It will not be a quick process. Any such effort must be underpinned not only by the best available evidence on literacy development and instruction but also by evidence on effective education reform and school improvement initiatives.

**Providing guidance on effective pedagogy across all levels of schooling** must form part of any literacy reform efforts.<sup>49</sup> These must draw on the best available evidence of effective literacy instruction. While establishing the pedagogical principles associated with effective literacy instruction will be critical, it also is important to equip teachers with knowledge of what these principles look like when applied in practice<sup>50</sup> and how to implement them.<sup>51</sup> This second point is more complex than it initially sounds. When reading the research on literacy instruction, it is readily apparent that, while instructional principles are readily available, there is remarkably little detail regarding the particulars of what these actually look in the classroom beyond what is specified in named programmes or interventions. Similarly, teacher know-how generally develops over a period time and with the support of an instructional coach or mentor who can model effective practice and support teachers as they iteratively refine their craft.<sup>52</sup>



**Developing a national, coordinated strategy to drive improvement and reform efforts will be essential**

<sup>46</sup> Adapted from Hitchcock, D. (2021). *Literacy across the curriculum at secondary school*. The Education Hub. <https://theeducationhub.org.nz/literacy-across-the-curriculum-at-secondary-school/>; see also Education Endowment Foundation. (2021). *Improving Literacy in Secondary Schools: Guidance Report*. Education Endowment Foundation.

<sup>47</sup> Bishop, R., O'Sullivan, D., & Berryman, M. (2010). *Scaling up education reform: Addressing the politics of disparity*. NZCER Press; Bishop, R., Berryman, M., Cavanagh, T., & Teddy, L. (2009). Te kotahitanga: Addressing educational disparities facing Māori students in New Zealand. *Teaching and teacher education*, 25(5), 734-742.

<sup>48</sup> Campbell, Fullan & Glaze (2006); Gallagher, Malloy & Ryerson (2016); Levin (2010)

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> As part of its Bright Spots programme, The Education Hub has been working with schools across New Zealand to capture using video together with written commentary the different practices and components that go into effective literacy programmes.

<sup>51</sup> Arrow, Braid & Chapman (2019).

<sup>52</sup> Kraft, M. A., Blazar, D., & Hogan, D. (2018). The effect of teacher coaching on instruction and achievement: A meta-analysis of the causal evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 88(4), 547-588.



<sup>53</sup> Cameron et al. (2019); McLachlan, C., & Arrow, A. (2011). Literacy in the early years in New Zealand: Policies, politics and pressing reasons for change. *Literacy*, 45(3), 126-133; Schluter, P. J., Audas, R., Kokaua, J., McNeill, B., Taylor, B., Milne, B., & Gillon, G. (2020). The efficacy of preschool developmental indicators as a screen for early primary school-based literacy interventions. *Child development*, 91(1), 59-76.

<sup>54</sup> Kerr, B. G., & Averill, R. M. (2021). Contextualising assessment within Aotearoa New Zealand: drawing from mātauranga Māori. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 17(2) 236–245.

<sup>55</sup> On the importance of insuring students acquire a broad base of knowledge in order to become highly literate, see again Hoover & Tunmer, W. (2020); Jeon & Yamashita (2014); Nagy & Townsend (2012).

<sup>56</sup> Kanu, Y. (2007). Increasing school success among Aboriginal students: Culturally responsive curriculum or macrostructural variables affecting schooling? *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education*, 1(1), 21-41; Macfarlane, A., Glynn, T., Cavanagh, T., & Bateman, S. (2007). Creating culturally-safe schools for Māori students. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 36(1), 65-76.

<sup>57</sup> As discussed above, see again Hughson (2021); Ormond (2018); Wilson, Madjar & McNaughton (2016)

<sup>58</sup> Catts, H. W., Nielsen, D. C., Bridges, M. S., Liu, Y. S., & Bontempo, D. E. (2015). Early identification of reading disabilities within an RTI framework. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 48(3), 281-297; Denton, C. A. (2012). Response to intervention for reading difficulties in the primary grades: Some answers and lingering questions. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 45(3), 232-243. There is still more work that needs to be done to identify the effectiveness of RTI programmes working as a whole, but the evidence is clear that all the components of an RTI approach – including identifying student need and them meeting this with a targeted intervention – are central to improving students' literacy if they are struggling.

<sup>59</sup> Darling-Hammond, L., Hyster, M. & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective Teacher Professional Development*. Learning Policy Institute. Timperley, H., Wilson, A., Barrar, H. & Fung, I. (2007). *Teacher Professional Learning and Development: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration* (BES). Ministry of Education, New Zealand.

**Assessment must form part of any pedagogical reform** to ensure that teachers and schools have a clear understanding of the achievement and progress of each student, as well as to support teachers and schools to evaluate the success of different initiatives and practices. For example, establishing a quality, easy-to-use school-entry assessment is an important part of enabling teachers to develop effective instructional approaches to enable all their students to gain the knowledge and skills they need to succeed.<sup>53</sup> Again, it is essential that all assessments used are well-attuned to the cultural needs and specificities of students and their communities.<sup>54</sup>

**Ensuring a broad, diverse, and knowledge-rich curriculum is present in all schools** is essential (and it is possible that the curriculum 'refresh' initiative currently underway may achieve this).<sup>55</sup> This should not discount the socio-cultural knowledge that all children bring to education (indeed, the research is clear that children need to see themselves reflected in the curriculum).<sup>56</sup> Rather, it recognises that part of the purpose of schooling is to provide children with access to knowledge, both know-what and know-how/skills, beyond that to which they otherwise would have access. Such a curriculum must be enacted in the classroom through pedagogy and resources that provide children with rich opportunities to learn. This requires high quality curriculum resources as well as support for teachers in understanding the different ways to offer these rich learning opportunities. Changes to the curriculum must be accompanied by **changes to NCEA** to ensure it is no longer the case that credits can be gained more easily by offering students narrow curricular experiences and overly-simplistic texts to read and engage with.<sup>57</sup> Instead, NCEA needs to work in concert with the curriculum to ensure it is in the interest of schools to offer students broad, diverse, and challenging learning experiences.

Improved curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment should lower the number of students requiring literacy interventions, but it will not eliminate it. Therefore, **establishing a sophisticated, fit-for-purpose, targeted national response to intervention approach that works across all year levels** and in all schools is



essential.<sup>58</sup> Such an approach must be adequately resourced, including having people with the specialised knowledge and expertise required to provide different levels of support. Furthermore, the interventions on offer should be tailored to the specific needs of individual students and supported by robust evidence of efficacy.

Alongside system-level supports and resources, **ensuring teachers hold the necessary knowledge and know-how to provide high quality literacy instruction and rich opportunities to learn for all students will require changes to current initial teacher education and professional learning and development.** Evidence on high quality teacher learning suggests that to be effective, learning should be sustained over time, be based in the context of practice, and include elements of instructional coaching.<sup>59</sup> There is further evidence that someone holding – either formally or informally – the position of literacy leader in a school, and who has the knowledge and expertise to support the development of other teachers, will likely lead to greater success.<sup>60</sup>

Outside the immediate world of the classroom, it is crucial that we **develop a robust strategy to support students to read widely for pleasure.** Research is clear that even when controlling for other factors, reading for pleasure is strongly correlated with better reading comprehension, in large part because reading for pleasure allows students to gain access to a broad array of vocabulary and other knowledge.<sup>61</sup> Given that PISA data has revealed dramatic declines in students' reading for pleasure over the past decade, a plan to reverse this is urgently required.

Underpinning such a national reform initiative must be **a research and evaluation programme to facilitate improved understanding of the factors influencing literacy achievement, to assess the impact of new initiatives, and to support ongoing improvement efforts.** The need for this is clearly evidenced by this report, which has been hindered by the limitations in the current evidence based on literacy, particularly in the Aotearoa New Zealand context.

<sup>60</sup> May, S. (2007). Sustaining Effective Literacy Practices Over Time in Secondary Schools: School Organisational and Change Issues. *Language and Education*, 21, (5), 387-405.

<sup>61</sup> Clark, C., and Rumbold, K. (2006). Reading for Pleasure: A research overview. *The National Literacy Trust*; Sullivan, M. & Brown, A. (2013). *Social inequalities in cognitive scores at age 16: The role of reading.* Institute of Education, University of London.

## Conclusion

It is apparent that children are experiencing widely different opportunities to learn. These differences start at birth, impacted by disparities in home literacy environments. They continue in early childhood education where differing levels of teacher knowledge, and different pedagogical practices and teaching philosophies influence both the opportunities and support children receive to develop age-appropriate early literacy skills. Such differences in pedagogical practices and knowledge continue at primary school, influencing the opportunities students receive to develop the foundational literacy skills that will set them up for ongoing literacy and broader educational success. The opportunities to learn that some students, particularly Māori and Pasifika, receive continue to be negatively impacted by low teacher expectations. These in turn negatively influence the nature, breadth, and level of challenge present in the curriculum, the pedagogical approaches employed, and the level of support that they receive. For some students, opportunities to learn can also be enabled or constrained by the types, availability, and implementation of interventions. The variance in opportunities to learn continue as children proceed through school. The opportunity to engage in rich and challenging texts, the opportunity to read and write across the curriculum, and the opportunity to develop the critical literacy skills all vary between schools, and at times within the same school.

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**These discrepancies in opportunities to learn represent a systemic failure. They cannot and should not be apportioned to any one group, organisation, or policy.**

These discrepancies in opportunities to learn represent a systemic failure. They cannot and should not be apportioned to any one group, organisation, or policy. Addressing the literacy crisis in Aotearoa New Zealand will require reform at all levels. It is not a quick fix. It is something that requires a dedicated, connected response and a true commitment and desire to make a change. While there are few significant studies exploring system-wide literacy improvement efforts, literacy has one of the more robust and extensive research bases of all areas of education. This, coupled with what is known about the components that comprise effective education reform and school improvement efforts, means that improving the literacy achievement of Aotearoa New Zealand's young people should be possible. Indeed, the failure to do so can rightly be called a national crisis.





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