

2022 Storylines Betty Gilderdale Award lecture

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IN PRAISE OF STORYLINES – AND READING FOR PLEASURE

Tēna koutou katoa

Tēna koutou, tēna koutou, tēna koutou

Tēna koutou e whanau,

Ngā mihi mahana.

Thank you for being here and giving up your Sunday afternoon. I feel very privileged to be awarded Storylines Betty Gilderdale Award which acknowledges the enormous contribution to children’s literature made by our much-loved and peerless Betty Gilderdale. Betty is one of the most internationally renowned New Zealand authors of books for children. There must be hundreds of thousands of children throughout the world would know exactly what you mean by ‘The Little Yellow Digger’. Betty was also a guiding light for children’s literature in New Zealand both as an inspiration to countless teachers at North Shore Teachers’ Collage, and many others including me, and probably the first New Zealand scholar in the field of children’s literature.

As much as I am honoured and delighted to be receiving this special award, it seems very strange that, instead of helping to decide who was going to get the award for many years, and have the pleasure of phoning the astounded and disbelieving recipient of the award on the other end of the phone line, today I am the recipient, and our wonderful Storylines Trust Chair, Christine Young, the bearer of the astonishing news.

I had already nominated a most deserving author who gives outstanding service to children’s literature. When I asked one of my colleagues why this person had not been selected, the response was “they will have another chance next year”. Perhaps the selection committee thought Libby might not be around this time next year, so we had better give it to her now!

Nonetheless, I thank you, my dear and highly respected colleagues, for giving me this honour. I would like to acknowledge the previous holders of the awards, some of whom are here today, and whose Storylines Betty Gilderdale lectures, I recall, as being interesting and inspiring.

Over the past 30 years Storylines has become an important part of my life, not because I am an author but for me as a teacher, teacher educator, researcher and academic.

I am convinced that if we want a well-educated nation, we must encourage young people to love reading. To be effective, we must produce not just young people who can read, but who want to read and engage with texts whole-heartedly and critically.

I will argue later that I believe that reading for pleasure is a core aspect of an effective literacy education programme. Sadly, in today's classroom's literacy programmes, learning to read for pleasure is not always a component, and consequently organisations such as Storylines, Books in Homes, Read NZ and librarians have an important role to play.

But first I want to share with you how I became involved in Storylines, what it means to me and what, for me have been highlights, and Storylines' achievements over these past 30 years.

At secondary school, unlike my classmate Tessa [Duder], I wasn't an English scholar – I was into maths, chemistry, and physics; I was going to be a scientist – maybe a geologist; my first career was as a medical technologist.

Certainly, I enjoyed reading as a young girl and, like many of my age, was obsessed by the Famous Five, Twins at St Claires and of course Swallows and Amazons. Reading to me was an escape to a world of fun, adventure, and excitement. Apparently very early in my life, according to my family, I always had my head in a book. I think it was an escape especially when, as a very young child at boarding school in England for a year and half, I was often lonely (but that's another story).

It wasn't until much later I realised why I loved stories, and why books could be such a powerful source of language – new words and new worlds – and were a way to help understand yourself and others. I came across Rudine Sims Bishop's wonderful statement that ***"Books are windows into the realities of others, not just imaginary worlds, and books can be mirrors that reflect the lives of readers and that readers can walk into a story and become part of the world created by the author"***.

The trajectory of my life changed in the early 1970s. My nephew Richard, aged two, the same age as our youngest son Hamish, was diagnosed as profoundly deaf. Richard and Hamish spent a lot of time together as my brother had died suddenly, and I and my sister-in-law and our children spent a lot of time together especially the school holidays. Richard and Hamish developed their own richly communicative language.

I became fascinated with the communication between these two little boys as they went through that rapid period of language development developing their own sign language. Even today as 50-year-olds, to the observer, they appear to have their own special language to communicate. In the early 1970s there was no official New Zealand Sign Language, although deaf adults had their own sign language communication – signing was prohibited in the School for Deaf; despite having no or little phonological input children were expected to communicate through residual hearing amplified by clumsy, rather primitive, hearing aids and lip reading. However clandestine groups met to learn and practise sign language using an Australian system of Signed English – and we joined these.

After some time, I decided that once Hamish started school I would train as a teacher with the intention of becoming a teacher of the deaf. During my shortened teacher education

course, Noeline Alcorn, like Tom Fitzgibbon at North Shore Teachers College, was not only a source of information about good books but also awakened in me an awareness of the pivotal role stories and poems can play in children's early learning to read and write, as well as in their later lives. Noeline also introduced me to the Children's Literature Association and, as an eager parent and budding teacher, I discovered the wealth of books for children.

However, after two years as a primary teacher and completing a Master's degree in education with a literacy focus, I was offered a position at university as junior lecturer to complete a doctorate. I had realised that, at this stage of my life, being a teacher of the deaf was not practical for a mother with small children: the School for Deaf was 'out west' in Auckland and we lived 'out east'. Doing a doctorate was an opportunity for me to bring my interests in literacy education and deafness together.

My doctorate explored the process of learning to read for children who were deaf. With no, or minimal, phonological input how do they unlock the meaning of printed words and the magic and wonder of stories? Do they, like hearing children, draw they on their knowledge of vocabulary and language structures?

By now, the early 1980s, Signed English had been introduced to the School for Deaf and the literacy programme followed the balanced literacy programmes used in all schools.

Early in my research I had to give a paper at a conference in Baltimore and had the opportunity to visit Gallaudet University, established in the 1850s as University for Deaf and Hearing-Impaired students. Here I watched a shared reading lesson and the follow-up discussion with the teacher and profoundly deaf students. Sign Language and other visual information such word and letter shapes built on their vocabulary and knowledge of language structures gained through many experiences of signed story telling. I also sat in on some signed reading of picture books on videos which had text subtitles. Visual storytelling expanded their vocabulary and familiarity with the structures of English with subtitles providing graphic representation of the words and concepts they saw being signed.

At this time, in the early '80s, the early days of sign language, many children in the School for Deaf were assessed to have low reading scores. Deaf children at that stage had been shown to struggle with reading – it was assumed because of their inability to hear the sounds. One profoundly deaf girl (aged 12), however, whose parents had signed with her from birth and had read to her consistently using sign language, read at well above the level considered appropriate for hearing children. A previous study in Canada had shown that children who were profoundly deaf, but using sign language, could achieve nearly as well as hearing children. This pointed the way to the research I wanted to do

So, a very brief summary of my doctorate is that rich experiences of language through communication and storytelling and opportunities for reading can ensure all deaf children can become engaged readers – that phonological information, a vital source of information for hearing readers, is not essential if there are other sources of information, but that exposure to meaningful texts is.



It was during this time that my personal love of reading and reading to my own children, and an understanding of the power of reading to children, became more crystallised. This coincided with the great boom in New Zealand children's literature... the era of Margaret Mahy, Tessa Duder, Joy Cowley, Gaelyn Gordon David Hill and many others, and as well, a plethora of books emerged relevant to young people in New Zealand. The Children's Literature Association was now part of my life.

In 1991, when I was working for the Hearing Association and National Foundation for the Deaf, I had just stepped down from being President of the New Zealand Literacy Association and our children had 'grown up', Tessa coerced me into working with a group of people to set up a New Zealand national body to advocate for children's literature and to complement and liaise with the Children's Literature Associations around New Zealand.

This established the New Zealand Children's Book Foundation with Tom Fitzgibbon as its first chair. The NZCBF (which became the Children's Literature Association of New Zealand (CLFNZ) and then Storylines) established the first of the awards that today are the Storylines Awards: the Storylines Margaret Mahy Medal and the new writers' awards, the Storylines Joy Cowley and Storylines Tom Fitzgibbon awards – others emerged later.

My early years in Storylines paralleled my entry into teacher education at the Auckland College of Education with fabulous colleagues. Literacy education at that time, referred to as 'a balanced approach', had a strong emphasis on literature. Learning to read meant learning to use the tools of language to make sense of print in reading and a way of conveying meaning in print in writing; it requires not only skills but practice; and practice requires quality literature relevant to readers' lives.

Time on task, that is, exposure to meaningful print, was critical with approaches such as language experience, shared and guided reading and writing important aspects for beginning teachers to understand – phonics, or graph-phonics as they should be referred to, were incorporated into these approaches. Reading to, reading with, and reading by children was a key principle.

Every lecturer was expected to start every class by reading to the students as a model of what was expected of them when they were teaching in schools. If any of you happened to have been students at ACE [Auckland College of Education] during that time, I am sure you will recall the sound of Wayne Mills' booming expressive voice resounding through the corridors. Wayne was an inspiration to us all.

In those early years of the '90s teacher education time devoted to the teaching of oral language, reading and writing was about three times greater than it has been in the past ten years. With the amalgamation with universities, the course time was decreased and class sizes increased – although there were also many benefits for teacher education.

At the same time as this being a golden era of New Zealand children's literature, in academia the 'Phonics Wars', as it was described in the media, was in full swing. Research from Massey University set out to undermine the influence of Professor Dame Marie Clay's



work. They argued that reading should focus primarily on systematic phonics and decoding and not meaning. A *Metro* article and a Sunday TV programme got into the controversy – both of which I was uncomfortably involved in. When I queried the Sunday TV interviewer prior to recording an interview whether this was to be an unbiased programme, she replied, “Oh no, I intend this to be very controversial”. I certainly don’t remember this experience with much pleasure! To some extent this was resolved, by the then Minister of Education convening a literacy experts group representing academic teacher educators from opposing sides in the so-called Phonic Wars, and a Literacy Task Force comprising principals, classroom teachers, literacy advisors, Ministry of Education people and Learning Media to try to resolve the issue. As a result, terms such as phonological and phonemic awareness and graphophonics started to be used to describe letter-sound relationships in the reading and writing process. Unfortunately, this resulted in some schools treating systematic phonics as an additional topic rather than as a tool to elicit meaning from the text. Extra class time devoted to this ‘subject’ had the effect of extra pressure on teaching time. Reading to the class was often the casualty.

By now I was fully involved in Storylines, part of the Management Committee working alongside many wonderful enthusiastic volunteers. Storylines’ only contract position was a very part time Festival or Family Day manager. It depended, and still does, on a strong volunteer workforce.

And so, in this next section I want to tell you about some of the personal highlights of my time with Storylines and what I consider are some of Storylines’ outstanding achievements of since its inception in 2000.

I have to start with the **Storylines Festival** or **Family Days** . They certainly put Storylines into the public arena, especially for children and their families, through introducing the fun of reading stories, of poetry, and the exciting world of books, and meeting authors, illustrators and storytellers. It was also a wonderful way for authors and illustrators to get together with their readers.

I remember the first Family Day at the Auckland Memorial Museum when 13,000 people turned up at the museum and unexpectedly experienced the excitement of children and their families interacting with authors, illustrators, and stories. Some arrived in buses, and I am not sure that all those visitors, overseas tourists probably, expected to find a festival of books and storytelling, but I’m pretty sure they enjoyed it and probably thought this was a regular part of life in Auckland.

Who would not be moved, and thrilled, by queues of children clutching a book, or a bit of paper, to get Margaret Mahy’s signature... and they always got a personal comment as well; and the giant books, maybe three metres high, created by some of our greatest illustrators. Two of the giant books still exist: one at Kings School and one at the Faculty of Education and Social Work. Recently I saw a photo of Associate Professor Rebecca Jesson in front of one in an article in *The Education Gazette* about Reading Recovery and the Early Literacy Support – she tells me the background was deliberately chosen.



The Family Days were also the chance to involve a wonderfully wide-ranging group of volunteers who helped ‘spread the love’ and the excitement of the world of books and stories. It was hard work, but for me, as for many other volunteers, it was an amazing opportunity to get to know the growing numbers of children’s authors, illustrators, and storytellers as well as the joy of engaging with excited parents and children.

The early ‘noughties’ was a time of further expansion of children’s literature in New Zealand: Storylines was taking off with Family Days in each of the main centres with enthusiastic groups of volunteers in Wellington, Christchurch, and Dunedin as well as the far north – Kerikeri or Whāngarei. Wayne [Mills]’s Kids Lit Quiz was becoming internationalised, and the Duffy Books in Homes Foundation was established and getting books into homes of children who had never owned a book.

It was, indeed, an exciting time for children’s literature in New Zealand and for those who understood that access to good books encouraged reading, and that reading of books not only expanded children’s literacy competency but also enriched the lives of children and those of their families.

I’m going to jump ahead to 2017... After nearly two decades of the Family Days, Storylines understood that they were not catering to children in all parts of the country. Children in the regions and in smaller centres did not have the opportunities to have contact with, and learn from, authors and illustrators and be inspired by them to read their books. Moreover, Family Days were attracting predominantly very young families. Older children were not coming - probably because of sporting and other demands – or maybe it’s not cool to go out with mum and dad to Family Day on a Sunday.

And so it was decided to replace the Family Days with Storylines Story Tours.

As many of you know, the Story Tours take a minibus with four authors and illustrators to schools in the regions and smaller centres throughout New Zealand. Since 2017 the Story Tours have gone to almost the tippity top of New Zealand and the southernmost region of New Zealand, Rakiura Stewart Island, and from the eastern tip of Gisborne and the western coast of Taranaki; to early childhood centres, primary, intermediate and secondary schools. Over the past six years, thousands of students in hundreds of schools have had the opportunity to meet and talk with authors and illustrators. I have had the privilege of being the Storylines representative on five regional story tours, including one very small rural school in the heart of the North Island which had eight students.

During these weeks, with many hours ensconced in a van with four extremely talented creatives, eavesdropping on their vibrant discussions about books, people and the world, and, sometimes, having the temerity to join in, have been times I have felt enormously privileged to be part of Storylines and proud of its influence in keeping literature alive in New Zealand. It has also taken me to parts of New Zealand I had never been to, such as outback Canterbury and Marlborough and little settlements in the central North Island.

Of course, Covid interrupted Storylines’ tours to schools; however, as it is said, shutting one door usually leads to opening another door – and so it was with the Story Tours. Storylines,



as did many groups, went digital. There were, however, many challenges – for our wonderful administrator, Vicki, managing the technical aspects; for the authors and illustrators for whom live streaming was a new experience; and for the ‘hosts’ of the sessions, of which I am lucky to have been one. **Digital Story Tours** are now not just for lockdowns, but a part of Storylines reaching thousands of young people in all corners of New Zealand... and beyond. On one Digital Story Tour a school in Rarotonga logged into the session.

The Story Tours truly embody Storylines’ aim to promote public awareness of the value of books and reading for children and teenagers **and** to support the development of New Zealand children's literature through giving both emerging as well as experienced authors opportunities to meet with their readers. The authors and illustrators on a tour inevitably comment on their professional development from talking with, and working alongside, their peers. The Story Tours, I believe, are the jewel in Storylines’ crown.

Another aspect of Storylines I am proud to be associated with, and have personally gained so much from, is its international status as the **New Zealand section of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY)**.

Storylines’ initial membership of IBBY was to nominate our marvellous magical Margaret Mahy for the prestigious Hans Christian Andersen Award (HCA), the highest international recognition given to an author or an illustrator of children's books. The HCA has been awarded by IBBY for nearly 70 years – and in 2006 Margaret Mahy was acclaimed as the HCA winner at the IBBY Congress in Macao. Tessa and I accompanied her to the presentation of the Hans Christian Andersen Award and together with the New Zealand Trade Commissioner from Hong Kong, and a few other New Zealand Congress delegates, proudly sang a waiata after her presentation. Thankfully the international news media videos missed our embarrassingly pathetic rendering of Pokarekare ana.

The [2006] Congress was initially planned to be held in Beijing, and so the Congress organisers honoured Margaret’s planned visit where she was to be the guest of the New Zealand Ambassador. As Tessa and I were her handmaids we accompanied her to Beijing and were also treated royally with visits to the Great Wall and other notable places. I have a wonderful memory of Margaret singing Tom Lehrer’s ‘The Elements of the Periodic Table’ to the Gilbert and Sullivan’s ‘A very Modern Major General’ late one evening, standing beside a grand piano being played by the Ambassador’s wife.

Shortly after that IBBY NZ, that is, Storylines, was selected to be the host for the International Children’s Book Day and a few years later, in 2011 as a national section of IBBY, Storylines bid for and won the right to hold the 35th IBBY Congress in 2016. An enthusiastic band of Storylines members, some of whom are here today, were corralled by Rosemary Tisdall and I as the Directors of the Congress over a period of four years. Working closely with Rosemary was special time of my life; National Library became almost second home to me as we would meet almost daily. It was a hugely demanding time, but it was also hugely rewarding – and I thank Rosemary for our wonderful partnership, and of course the IBBY Congress team.



We set up a stunningly diverse programme with just under 500 delegates from 60 countries. There were presenters from many of the IBBY member countries and including some star keynotes such as Markus Zusak and Katherine Paterson.

A key task in the planning the Congress was raising the \$180,000 required to fund the Congress at the Aotea Centre – a challenging prospect. As Directors, Rosemary and I were responsible. Neither of us had been major fundraisers previously, and probably had never had to. At one stage it was getting desperate. The Storylines Trust had decided that if \$180K was not confirmed by Monday 31st March 2015, we would have to cancel the Congress.

Institutions and government departments, such as the Ministry of Art and Ministry of Culture and Heritage were very enthusiastic about the Congress being held in New Zealand but reluctant to put their hands in their pockets. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs were very positive – the then-CEO said “10,000. Is that all you want? Of course we can help – just get in touch with my PA” – but nothing eventuated. In frustration I wrote a personal letter to the then-PM and hand delivered it to his Chief Security Guard requesting he ask the then-PM to read it on the way to the airport. We live close by the residence of this then-PM and I often saw him leave for Wellington while on an early morning walk. The letter explained that without Government funding the Congress could not go ahead. Three weeks later we were at a small fundraising cocktail party in the neighbourhood, also attended by the then-PM. I found myself standing close to him and introduced myself and asked if he had read a letter about a congress given to him by his Security Guard on the way to the airport. “Yes,” he said, “sounds an amazing congress. Great it’s being held in New Zealand.” So cheekily, but politely of course, I said, “And so what are you going to do about it?” He looked at me for a few seconds and then said, “Leave it to me.” Within a week I had a letter from the office of the then-Minister of Education asking Storylines to forward an invoice for the Platinum level of support to the Ministry of Education!

That was a week before our deadline. At the end of that week, I had a meeting with the Chancellor of a certain university. His response was heart-warming and positive. “Yes,” he said. “We will support the Congress and would like to do so at the top funding level, Platinum.” Wow, my heart leapt – great! A bit later, after a chat and a coffee, he said, “I’ve been thinking about the level of funding.” (My heart sank. Oh well, I thought....) He then continued, “We can do better than that – we’ll go higher.”

“Oh, but Platinum is our highest level,” I said. “Well then,” he replied, “we can make a Diamond level, can’t we?” Excitedly, I phoned to let Rosemary know we were getting close to the required figure. On getting back my office at Auckland University I found confirmation from a large company that they would come in as Platinum sponsors as well. This was Friday... four days before our deadline on the following Monday. Someone was certainly looking after Storylines... or maybe fundraising isn’t that hard after all. Perhaps you just have to believe, passionately, in what you are fundraising for, and have the nerve to be a bit cheeky.



The Congress was an incredible experience. It opened with a powerful powhiri which included moving contributions from Joy Cowley, Kate De Goldi, Witi Ihimaera and a kapa haka by an awesome multicultural group of students from Bairds Mainfreight School.

An American delegate said to me a bit later in the day, “If I have to go home now, it has been worthwhile coming.” It was so exciting to have delegates from some many parts of the world, all committed to reading to empower and support children.

A number of papers discussed situations in which children could not access books in their own languages, or in any language. In the final address, the President of IBBY talked about the plight of refugee children in many parts of the world who had little access to books, especially books in their home languages.

Shortly after the Congress, IBBY called for applications to the IBBY Yamada fund for up to ten projects, with grants of USD\$5000 to support the reading of children for whom books were not easily accessible. Frances Plumpton and I applied on behalf of Storylines to purchase books for refugee children arriving in New Zealand – in their own languages. We were successful, due largely to the impact of the Congress.

Since 2017 Frances and I have worked with the Mangere Refugee Education Centre and have donated 465 books in 38 languages. It’s been such a rewarding experience. For example, at a function at the Mangere Refugee Centre to celebrate the project being underway, one of the Afghani interpreters working at the Centre told us she overheard a young Afghani boy say to his father, excitedly, “Dad I can read that one”, pointing to a book in Farsi.

Not only has the USD\$5000 gone a long way because of the exchange rate of the US dollar, donations of books and help with freight costs, but in 2019, at the Bologna International Book Fair where IBBY holds its AGM, and which Frances as a literary agent attends regularly, IBBY announced, totally unexpectedly, that New Zealand was to be granted a further USD\$10,000 to support its work with refugee children. Unsolicited funding such as this for a project must be (to use a word of the times) unprecedented. However, I think the timing of the 2019 Bologna Book fair, about three weeks after the horrific massacre in Christchurch, and our Prime Minister’s internationally acclaimed response, may have triggered IBBY’s gesture. Much of the success in managing to get books from remote parts of the world is due to Frances Plumpton. Her networks and knowledge have proved invaluable in this project.

Further evidence of the IBBY Congress of promoting New Zealand in the international arena was an invitation from IBBY Canada to partner with them in a digital celebration of International Children’s Book Day in March this year. They said New Zealand was chosen because of its reputation in publishing children’s books in the indigenous language, as they were endeavouring to do. The celebration, involving a live-streamed conversation between an elder the Cree nation, one of Canada’s first nations, and Ben Brown, New Zealand’s first Te Awhi Rito New Zealand Reading Ambassador, and reading children’s books in te reo



Māori and the Cree language, was watched right around the world by national sections of IBBY. For those of us involved it was wonderful experience.

Here I would like to applaud Storylines for advocating many years for a children's laureate or ambassador, and the successful appointment last year of the first Te Awhi Rito.

Another Storylines achievement, of which I feel proud and privileged to have been part, is the selection of the Storylines Notable Books, being announced today for the twenty-third year. Panels of six people made up of Storylines members, librarians, authors, and teachers select 'up to 10' books in each of five genres. I am consistently impressed by the quality of many of the books and have loved the opportunity to read the new books coming out each year, and I have learnt so much.

I am so proud of being part of Storylines and how it achieves its aims. I was privileged to have been the first Chair of the Storylines Children's Literature Trust Te Whare Waituhi Tamariki o Aotearoa, and am pleased the Trust Board is now in the very capable hands of Christine Young, and our new Executive Officer, Anne de Lautour. Storylines has been a gratifying part of my personal and professional life as a literacy education academic because I am confident that it is contributing, directly and indirectly, towards children's literacy in New Zealand.

However, there are many challenges ahead and, in this the last part of my lecture, I want to talk briefly about some concerns I have about literacy education in New Zealand today, and issues that have implications, and opportunities, for organisations such as Storylines and Duffy Books in Homes.

Recently media have reported a 'literacy crisis' for New Zealand children because international comparisons have shown we have dropped from the high rankings in previous assessments. I have little faith in international rankings: they do not always compare equivalent samples; in some educational contexts students are used to sitting formal pen and paper tests regularly, and students are motivated, and rewarded, to achieve highly in standardised tests; and in some contexts they are trained and practise completing such tests.

However, there is other evidence that students' literacy competence, reading and writing, in both primary and secondary schools, has been declining; there are persistent gaps between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnic groups and gender.

An excellent report produced by The Education Hub early this year identified a range of variables that have contributed to declining literacy competencies. Full details can be found in references at the end of this lecture, should you wish to follow this up. Most of these 'causes' of the 'crisis' are systemic and beyond the influence of organisations such as Storylines. There are two, highlighted below, which I believe are highly relevant as they implicate access to high quality books for our young people in schools and at home, opportunities for personal reading, and fostering an enjoyment of reading.

In summary these are:

- a lack of 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
- **a lack of opportunities for students to engage with complex texts and to develop critical literacy skills**
- **the number of young people reading for enjoyment and the amount of time young people spend reading is decreasing**
- effective pedagogy, supported by high-quality assessment
- high quality, 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
- high levels of absenteeism and transience, limiting the amount of [literacy] instruction some students receive
- significant disparities in the home literacy environments of children
- increased use of digital devices, and the way they are used.

In a 2020 report on *The literacy landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand*, Professor Stuart McNaughton, Chief Education Scientific Advisor, also noted the disparities in living circumstances, structural inequalities and discrimination as well as transience of students, access to resources and the ubiquity of digital devices. He added that issues with the preparation of teachers also contributes to our challenges in equity and excellence. You will recall I noted that literacy courses have less time in teacher education now than in previous years. He comments on the differences in literacy and language profiles of children at the emergent literacy level as an outcome of experiences with family/whānau and early learning services. While some students can read individual words accurately, they have limited language, both vocabulary and structure, that impacts on their reading comprehension.

While many of the contributing factors are systemic, Professor McNaughton argues in the report that inequalities can be reduced through learning activities that encourage the development of literacy and language skills. These are, and I quote, “*reading with children Years 1-3: shared (or dialogic) reading; guided instructional reading with systematic phonics; shared and instructional writing; personalised high-quality dialogue; and home reading and writing*” and *the inclusion of a high literacy ‘diet’; and summer learning programmes*. He does say “literacy” but I am sure he meant ‘literary’!

The Ministry of Education (MoE), partly in response to these two reports, has responded with the establishment of a strategy to develop and implement a ‘Common Practice Model’. In examining the MoE website for the research base being used to develop the ‘Common Practice Model’, it appears that research from only one university in New Zealand was referred to. Already a Structured Literacy programme has been developed, based on this research, and is being implemented in many schools. A contract was let to develop a new



set of readers which explicitly teaches systematic word identification, decoding strategies such as phonemes, letter-sound relationships, syllable patterns and morphemes. The new readers have 'decodable' texts, that is, limited and repetitive vocabulary, sentence structure, paragraph structure, and texts which have no story line; the early level texts consist of one-syllable words.

The Structured Literacy approach was developed by the International Dyslexia Association and was intended for use with students who have identifiable difficulties with basic skills of reading and not, as it is now being used, to replace the traditional story-based readers for all junior students in all schools.

While I have grave concerns about the basis on which this programme was contracted, this is not the place to discuss them. Many schools have responded very positively to the Structured Literacy programme, and some teachers have reported they like having a programme to follow; it is easy to use, and children enjoy succeeding with these limited decodable textbooks. For schools who also have a strong tradition of reading to children, shared reading and guided reading with children... and high-quality personalised dialogue as advocated by Professor McNaughton, as well as a commitment to providing their students with access to good books and a library, such a structured programme can provide an appropriate approach to support some of their students.

My concern is not that a structured phonic method using phonics is being implemented but that teachers are not being left to decide how, and for whom, to provide this structured constrained approach to teaching reading. The problem is that such an approach reduces the students' exposure to rich new language and does not focus on the pleasure of reading; it gives students little practice in using multiple cues essential when reading and interacting with print to gain meaning and to make sense of text. The diversity of our classroom populations suggests that young children need more, not fewer, opportunities to be exposed to rich vocabulary. Replacing literacy learning opportunities such as reading to children and shared and guided reading and writing with children, all rich text-based activities, with limited vocabulary decodable texts is not going to build children's vocabulary – and there is copious evidence that young people's vocabulary is diminishing for a range of reasons.

As an aside, I came across very recent University of Auckland School of Psychology research showing that children's vocabulary had diminished and which claimed that by turning off the audible notifications on their devices, parents can increase their children's vocabulary repertoire. There is other research identifying very low levels of oral language at school entry which may well be the result of fewer conversational opportunities in families experiencing a multitude of other pressures – and the ubiquitous use of devices and social media.

Of great concern however, is that nowhere in the documentation about the Structured Literacy programmes can I find any reference to reading aloud to students, personal

independent reading, or reading for pleasure. Maybe it is assumed that this goes on at home.

I argue that for many students time reading decodable texts is wasted in an overcrowded curriculum; time spent with interesting words and real texts would be more valuable. If we want eager and skilled readers, they need to experience the enjoyment of reading and be aware of power of critical literacy, more important in today's world than ever before.

This is unlikely to happen unless structured lessons with decodable texts are enriched with regular opportunities to listen to quality stories, opportunities for independent, paired or group reading time, for discussion of their reading, and to experience the pleasure of reading – and not just at home.

A recent article by Sally Blundell in *The Listener* noted that Duffy Books in Homes works to increase children's access to books, which is admirably true. However, she should also have noted Storylines, as Storylines Story Tours and Storylines Notable Books increase children's access to quality books as they put children in touch with authors and illustrators and have the potential to foster their engagement in reading. In this article Blundell cites Susan Paris, one of the editors of the recently published *Annual 3*, as saying that reading for pleasure is "not only vital for full literacy but also means they're much more likely to become life-long readers and better adapted, more rounded individuals". I whole heartedly agree. She also cites an AUT study from 2021 that argues that, although reading for pleasure appears in both the Early Childhood Curriculum and the English Curriculum, it is overlooked because of the focus on literacy achievement. This is probably true.

There is now a growing body of research providing evidence for claims of increased vocabulary and improved comprehension, as well as overall achievement, from reading for pleasure. In the UK, recent research reported that reading for pleasure at the ages of 10 and 16 had a substantial influence on students' cognitive progress, especially in terms of their vocabulary.

Just this last week, I received a copy of an article published in the most recent issue of the *New Zealand Journal of Education Studies* that identifies several recent studies which emphasise enjoyment of reading as related to achievement in reading. The authors, Ruth Boyask, Celeste Harrington, and John Milne and Bradley Smith, who advocate reading for pleasure, are probably the same authors cited by Sally Blundell. I mention their names as the second author is an active Storylines member. In this paper, not only do they show that reading for pleasure can increase engagement in reading but that it can lead to overall enjoyment of school, which, unsurprisingly, has been shown to lead to higher overall achievement in school. They argue for "placing reading enjoyment at the centre of reading education in Aotearoa New Zealand" and are working on producing a theoretical argument for including reading for pleasure in the curriculum. I warmly endorse their comments and look forward to their contribution.

In drawing this lecture to a conclusion, I want to look to the future. I use the whakatauki, Ka mua ka muri – looking back in order to move forward. My thirty years with Storylines have

been rewarding, as were my years in Faculty of Education and Social Work especially those times with colleagues who held similar values. The years ahead will bring more opportunities and challenges for organisations such as Storylines and Duffy Books in Homes, building on what they have achieved.

What do I want to see in the days ahead? I would like to see Storylines, Duffy Books in Homes and Read NZ:

- advocate for mandatory inclusion of reading for pleasure in the ECE and English curricula;
- have a greater overt focus on the literacy and personal benefits of reading for pleasure for young people;
- and have greater collaboration between these groups who are committed to young people's greater engagement with literature.

There's a lot already happening – Storylines is planning a seminar or workshop to discuss with other relevant agents such as the Ministry of Education, Books in Homes, and New Zealand Association of Teachers how to include more New Zealand books as part of the curriculum for secondary schools and NCEA requirement.

A refresh of the English curriculum is under way. Although the current English curriculum documents include reading for pleasure, there needs to be stronger emphasis on the place of quality literature in the curriculum as the focus today is predominantly on reading achievement. I am relieved that amongst those with responsibility for the 'English Curriculum Refresh' there are academics and practitioners sympathetic to the values of Storylines.

Likewise, my anxieties about the development of a 'Common Practice Model' have receded a little since learning there are strong people involved who will fight the narrow view of literacy being promulgated in some sectors, and who uphold the value of literature. And just today, I have heard that the upcoming issue of SET (those in education will know what I am referring to [research information for teachers provided by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research]) on reading for pleasure in the English curriculum

I'm going to conclude my lecture with the words of two people who say what I want to say more elegantly than I can. The first is our own dear David Hill who recently wrote in *The Newsroom*:

“What could be a more virtuous cause and a more feel-good image than supporting NZ kids' reading, and the authors who write affirmingly NZ books for them? Need I even mention the intellectual, social, emotional, psychological benefits that reading from an early age brings, the investment in well-balanced future citizens (and our next generation of writers) it represents?”

And Neil Gaiman, an internationally acclaimed author, who most you will at least have heard of, who wrote in *The Guardian* recently:



“The simplest way to make sure that we raise literate children is to teach them to read, and to show them that reading is a pleasurable activity. And that means, at its simplest, finding books that they enjoy, giving them access to those books, and letting them read them.... and that reading for pleasure, is one of the most important things one can do.”

And finally, the philosopher Wittgenstein who famously said *“The limits of my language are the limits of my world.”*

And now my last words... Please be active advocates for the pleasure of reading: encourage the teachers of your children or grandchildren to remember to read to their class; buy good books for the young people in your lives – your children, your grandchildren, and your neighbours’ children. If you don’t know what to buy, start with finding out what are the Storylines Notable Books each year. Be a model of reading for pleasure. Put your phone away and pick up a book to read yourself or share with a young person close to you.

And my very last words, thank you all for being here today and being such good listeners and my gratitude to my friends and my husband Mike, for being such a support.

Reports referred to in the lecture

1. The Education Hub
<https://theeducationhub.org.nz/now-i-dont-know-my-abc/>
2. [The Literacy Landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand: Professor Stuart McNaughton](https://auckland.figshare.com/articles/report/The_Literacy_Landscape_in_Aotearoa_New_Zealand_What_we_know_what_needs_fixing_what_we_should_prioritise_Report/12749321)
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