

# **TEACHER-PARENT PARTNERSHIP TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S READING DEVELOPMENT**

**Jeanne Biddulph**

School of Education  
University of Waikato

*Paper presented to the New Zealand Reading Association Annual Conference,  
Christchurch, May 1993.*

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## ABSTRACT

*Although New Zealand children have reached relatively high levels of achievement in reading in recent years, some experience difficulty learning to read and begin to fall behind their peers in this critical area. A number of measures are taken to address this problem but most involve high cost. This paper explores possible reasons for the difficulties encountered by these children, outlines a low-cost programme whereby parents are enabled to help their children, summarises ways in which the programme has been extended, and analyses factors that seem to contribute to the success of this cost-effective form of support. Issues relating to cultural difference, reading difficulties and programme success are considered.*

## INTRODUCTION

Results of IEA Reading Literacy surveys (Elley 1992) indicate that New Zealand children have a relatively high achievement level in reading, but this provides no grounds for complacency. The same research found that in the countries surveyed, children who speak minority languages at home show lower literacy levels, and that the differences in literacy levels between minority and majority language speakers are greatest in New Zealand. The results demonstrate the validity of Goldenberg's (1991, p. 560) comment that

*For all its excellent features, classroom literacy instruction in New Zealand has not solved the problem of disproportionate underachievement by low-income, non-white minorities.*

As many as 10% of New Zealand children seem to struggle to learn to read, fall well behind their peers, and remain functionally illiterate or semi-literate if special steps are not taken to help them (Biddulph, 1982; Cornish, 1985; McIlroy, 1976; Nicholson, 1980). This affects their ability to cope in the school system and society (Cambourne, 1988; Emmitt and Pollock, 1991). As an adult non-reader told the author, "It's a helluva lot easier to hop on a bus when you **know** where it is going, rather than where you **think** it is going." Factors that may contribute to the difficulties experienced by these low-progress readers are examined in the next section of this paper.

Some critics argue that books and reading are 'dying sacred cows' and that reading is inefficient as a means of communicating, whereas the screen is '...the most effective and efficient device for storing and retrieving and communicating information of any kind...' (Edwards, 1992). This view

seems to overlook the fact that literacy learning and teaching is about more than ‘learning to read the words’. Luke (1992, p.12), for example, argues that

*the teaching of literacy, reading and literature in schools is a normative, political practice, not simply the neutral transmission of ‘skills’ or the cultivation of ‘growth’ and ‘development’.*

Furniss and Green (1991) also believe that there is ample evidence that literacy teaching and learning in schools play ‘a key role’ in the cycle through which education systems produce inequality by distributing competence and knowledge unequally to children of different social groups. Other writers too argue that those who are literate tend to have more control over their lives, are less likely to remain oppressed (Freire, 1972) and are more inclined to comprehend and reflect critically on social situations and government policies (Cambourne, 1988). Luke’s (1992, p.9) view is that

*Literate practice and competence are significant forms of cultural capital: taken as markers of social class, indicators of one’s capacity for textual work, and signs of participation in gendered culture and identity. There is an extensive and compelling literature on the educational stratification of literate competence according to social class and ethnicity. Ethnographic, sociological and linguistic studies further document the significance of literacy in the very construction and regulation of subcultural and class identity and power, whether ruling-class or marginal, mainstream or subcultural.*

Language is rooted in culture and, as Emmitt and Pollock (1991, p.33) observed, this “influences the ways in which the language is used and the ways in which the individual perceives, thinks and acts.” The concept of literacy itself is culturally determined and different cultures value and use reading and writing in different ways, but it can be argued that educators have a responsibility to ensure that **all** students “have access to the language of power, that is, the language used for government, education and the media” (Emmitt and Pollock, 1991, p. 52). The question is how to provide that access, especially for the children who experience difficulties in learning to become literate within the school system.

Various initiatives have been taken in New Zealand to improve reading education. These include the provision of new forms of teacher education to try to increase the effectiveness of reading programmes, early intervention programmes (Reading Recovery), additional Resource Teachers and support people both within and beyond the school, and the publication of resources which portray a wider range of cultures. Most of these efforts have been relatively expensive to implement.

One form of the provision of extra people has been the training of parents as reading tutors to their own children. Varying degrees of success with children’s reading achievement using this approach have been reported both in New Zealand (Awatere, 1982; Fry, 1977; McIlroy, 1976; McNaughton, Glynn and Robinson, 1981; Penketh, 1980; Scott, 1982) and in countries such as Australia

(Richardson and Brown, 1978), England (Tizzard, Schofield and Hewison, 1982) and the U.S.A. (Heimberger, 1981; Sartain, 1981). Typically the programmes training parents have involved one-to-one contact between trainers and parents. The present paper reports on the effectiveness of a low-cost programme designed to be conducted by school personnel with minimal specialist intervention. It also describes ways in which the programme has been extended and disseminated, and considers possible reasons for its effectiveness. But first, possible reasons why a significant proportion of children experience difficulty in learning to read are explored. The programme design and implementation took these factors into account.

## **FACTORS THAT APPEAR TO INHIBIT CHILDREN'S READING DEVELOPMENT**

According to Clay (1987), learning difficulties in reading, writing and spelling are related to events in a child's life experiences rather than organic malfunctions in her/his brain and

*poor responses in reading and reading-like situations will always involve events as causes even when there is also the possibility of constitutional or organic causation (pp. 170-171).*

It is this view of reading difficulties that underpins the research and developments outlined in this paper.

There seem to be a range of 'events' which may contribute to some children's difficulties in learning to read, some of which are discussed below. These include (1) teachers' beliefs about and practices with respect to the learning and teaching of reading, (2) the problems generated when cultural differences between children's home experiences and the programmes and expectations of the school create mismatches which are not recognised or catered for adequately, (3) parents' beliefs and approaches to helping their children with reading at home, and (4) the fact that large class sizes make it impossible for teachers to provide the individual support many children need, especially in times of continuing policy and administrative change.

### **Teacher beliefs and practices**

Several beliefs and practices mitigate against children's development in language and reading in the school context (Brown and Mathie, 1990; Smith, 1985). These are usually held or adopted in good faith and not recognised as being educationally dysfunctional. They encompass a belief in the normal curve with respect to I.Q. (Ballard 1980), a commitment to behaviourist learning ideas (Cambourne 1988), and a lack of awareness of cultural differences and the effects these differences can have on children's language/reading learning in the school context (Holmes, 1982; Metge, 1990).

A belief that children's intelligence falls along a normal curve tends to result in some teachers dismissing 'slow' children as being incapable of developing any great facility in reading and hence not warranting special help. Normative test results (such as those of the New Zealand Progressive

Achievement Tests) appear to confirm for such teachers that some children just don't have the ability to cope (Smith, 1988). Further, some of these children may also be labelled 'dyslexic', a label which means many different things to many different people (Clay, 1987; Smith, 1985) and one which often becomes another means of rationalising and accepting a child's lack of achievement in reading.

As in a number of other countries, some New Zealand teachers' actions in the classroom are governed by pervasive behaviourist learning principles. Such principles incorporate a view of learning as a gradual accretion of a hierarchy of knowledge, and hence a need to break knowledge down into its small component parts and transmit these to children piece by piece, with appropriate reinforcement (Cambourne, 1988). Thus language, writing and reading tend to be seen as separate entities, reading is viewed as an 'outside-in' process, that is, a code-emphasis, or bottom-up view of reading. This model indicates that the reading process begins

*with the inward flow of graphic information from the page. This information proceeds to the inside of the readers' head in a strictly linear fashion where it is analysed bit by bit until some meaningful interpretation occurs in the brain (Cambourne, 1979, quoted in Burnes and Page, 1985, p.25).*

Teachers who hold this view often teach 'reading' by attempting to teach children sounds and words in isolation. They tend to overlook the fact that reading is a meaning-gaining process which is very dependent on the language, experiences and expectations readers bring to print and how they can link this prior knowledge with the visual information of the text (Clay, 1991; Lindfors, 1987; Smith, 1992). Recognition of schema generation (Adams 1990) and how this may be used to support children's learning is not yet widespread. An outside-in perspective on reading is usually accompanied by a reliance on oral circle reading as a major approach to teaching children to read, and this tends to reinforce reading as an exercise in accurate word-calling rather than generating meanings and reflecting critically on those ideas. Within this perspective, quantitative measures based on normative testing tend to be seen as the only valid means of determining reading achievement. Despite one teacher's comment that, "There are no teaching techniques that I know that are harmful" such practices are frequently harmful, particularly to children at risk. They are detrimental to the meaning-gaining nature of reading and to the development of the child's confidence and strategies as an independent reader. More appropriate, effective views and practices are the basis of the parent programme described later in this paper.

Some teachers perceive parents who inquire about their children's lack of reading progress as a threat (Nicholson, 1979) - possibly because these teachers feel insecure about their own understanding of the reading process. It is an outlook that precludes a valuable partnership being established to assist children with their reading. The comment of a parent of a 13-year-old boy, who had tried discussing her son's lack of reading progress with his primary school teachers, is typical of many made to the author. She said:

*We didn't know where to turn. We didn't know who to go to to get help and nobody would help us, and we just felt as though we were banging our heads against a wall.*

### **Cultural Difference/Clash and Language Difference/Deficit**

Lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity on the part of some teachers can generate the belief that a number of children come from homes which are 'impoverished' or 'deprived' in terms of language and literacy. Children from 'those sorts of homes' are considered to have a language deficit which makes the task of teaching them to read very difficult, if not impossible. The comments of several teachers illustrate this belief.

*It's not the teacher's fault; it's what they [children] come to school with. There should be an entry test and if they can't pass it, the parents should take them away for another term and prepare them better.*

*With all the books and equipment we've got now in our schools to help kids, it suggests that if they fail it's because of the home.*

*It's not the teacher's fault. Children can't relate to material provided because they are so lacking in background experience.*

While it is true that the language development of some children (from whatever cultural or socio-economic group) is restricted if they have had very limited opportunities to hear and use language in a supportive environment, it is critically important that teachers recognise and respond appropriately to the reality that many of the children they teach come from backgrounds which are language-different rather than language-deficit (Emmitt and Pollock, 1991; Wells 1978). Luke (1986, p .406) argues that

*virtually every child brings to the classroom a developing competence with, and understanding of, language (be it standard or non-standard) and a developing schematic repertoire for understanding the world (be it mainstream or culturally different). Far too many of these children of divergent backgrounds encounter highly unnatural and artificial curricula which cancel their existing competence.*

As teachers we need to utilize what children bring to classrooms to their advantage, but the view that some children have a language deficit is still common. Teachers who hold a deficit view are less likely to use teaching approaches which actively utilize the understandings that children bring to the school, and are therefore less likely to provide appropriate language/reading programmes for those children (Emmitt & Pollock, 1991; Wells 1978). In some cases teachers exclude these children from special programmes (such as Reading Recovery or Resource Teachers' support) because they are thought to be 'language-deprived' learners and therefore 'unlikely to benefit from extra help'. Often the parents of these children are considered 'hopeless' too and unlikely to be able to assist in their children's education. As one principal in a market-gardening area commented to a

new teacher, “Don’t expect much from the children around here as the parents can’t get their heads above the carrots.”

These ‘conventional wisdoms’ (the “linguistic mismatch” and “insufficient exposure” hypotheses) have been described as ‘patently inadequate’ by Cummins (1986) who believes that the variability of minority students’ academic performance under different social and educational conditions indicates that many complex, interrelated factors are at work. He argues that students from ‘dominated’ societal groups are ‘empowered’ or ‘disabled’ as a direct result of their interactions with educators in the schools. He identifies four institutional characteristics of schools which are critical in these interactions. They are

*the extent to which (1) minority students’ language and culture are incorporated into the school programme; (2) minority community participation is encouraged as an integral component of children’s education; (3) the pedagogy promotes intrinsic motivation on the part of the students to use language actively in order to generate their own knowledge; and (4) professionals involved in assessment become advocates for minority students rather than legitimizing the location of the “problem” in the students (p.21).*

The deficit or deprivation view has its roots in cultural difference - ‘culture’ here being referred to as

*a system of symbols and meanings, in terms of which a particular group of people make sense of their worlds, communicate with each other and plan and live their lives.’ (Metge, 1990, p.6)*

Most teachers in New Zealand tend to have a middle-class, European background and therefore do not share the culture of those children who come from a different ethnic, racial, religious, economic or class group (Metge, 1990; Simon, 1984). Differences between the language and culture of teachers and their pupils can create a range of misunderstandings and difficulties, and children’s learning suffers as a result (Alton-Lee, 1991; Cazden, 1988; Emmitt and Pollock, 1991; Holmes, 1982; Lindfors, 1987; Metge, 1990). The research of Alton-Lee and Nuthall (1992, p.14) identifies the critical nature of these differences.

*... the teacher and children have their own cultural perspectives shaped by their gender, class and race. These cultural perspectives influence their negotiation of the classroom culture and their public and private participation in curriculum enactment. The outcomes for children include not only how much they are able to learn from the official curriculum but also about their own identity, value and capability. The process of curriculum enactment itself is critical in that the children experience and learn culturally specific ways of participating in the process that influence their learning and well-being.*

Even when teachers do not hold a deficit model, the cultural differences that exist between them and some of their children are often such that the language/reading development of these children will be impeded, unless the differences are adequately recognised, understood and valued. The language and experiences of the children need to become the foundation on which their language/reading programme rests rather than an impediment to that programme (Wells, 1978).

The cultural differences between teachers and some children are manifested in a variety of ways. For example, the language of classroom interactions and written materials may differ significantly from the language of the child (Cazden, 1988; Clay, 1991). The difficulties created by this mismatch are compounded when the situations conveyed or the topics explored in the discussions and materials are beyond the experiences and hence comprehension of some children - rather like asking an adult to read, understand and use a complex computer manual before s/he has had any experience of a computer.

In recent years there has also been growing concern about the negative effects of the racist and sexist language and attitudes in the interactions, curriculum and materials of the classroom (Alton-Lee and Nuthall, 1992; Cawkwell, 1992; Luke, 1992). Alton-Lee and Nuthall (1992, p.37) found that

*they (the children) construct their own knowledge as they struggle with making sense of the enacted curriculum within the lived culture of the classroom. Unless they resist they learn to construct a world view that undermines their gender if they are female and their race if they are non-white.*

Luke's (1992, p.27) view supports this finding.

*Reading as it has been constructed in Western literate traditions is a gendered practice assigned, accomplished and renegotiated in various local communities and sites, enabling differing kinds of identity and power.*

Because the childhood of most teachers was filled with books and value was accorded the written word, some tend to overlook the fact there are other cultures which place primary value upon the spoken word and listening (Emmitt and Pollock 1991). Written text is more abstract and less context dependent than oral language, and assuming familiarity with the language of print/written stories and how books work immediately places children who have just oral/aural language strengths at a disadvantage (Wells, 1985). Another dimension relates to child questioning. Good readers interrogate text constantly to construct meaning. Brice Heath (1982) has demonstrated that 'ways of taking' from books are part of culture and are therefore more varied than teachers may realise. Because participation in literacy events differs considerably from culture to culture teachers need to be aware that the approaches and resources they use in school may be building on what some children bring to the situation, but may require 'substantial adaptation' on the part of others, or may even 'run directly counter to aspects of the communities pattern' for other children (Brice Heath, 1982, p.70). Other research (Tizard and Hughes, 1984; Wells and Wells, 1984) has also

demonstrated that there are many children who communicate readily and effectively in their home situations but are unable to respond to teachers' questions and interactions in the manner expected in the school context. When children do not respond in the ways expected in the classroom, teachers' notions of language deprivation or deficit are often reinforced. A common reaction is to 'talk-down' to such children with the result that the language models and opportunities for genuine interaction between teachers and these children are more limited than those provided for other children (Tizard and Hughes, 1984; Wells and Wells, 1984).

### **Parents' beliefs and practices**

The difficulties a child experiences within an inappropriate classroom programme are compounded when the adults who attempt to provide help with reading at home also use inappropriate, counter-productive strategies. In this situation both adults and children invariably become frustrated and angry when the children are unable to gain success (Biddulph, 1983a; Biddulph, 1984). Even when the classroom programme is informed and effective, well-intentioned but uninformed help at home usually leads to confusion and frustration for children, parents and teachers. It is understandable that much home help tends to be counter-productive as it is modelled upon inappropriate strategies experienced by the parents when they themselves were learning to read at school. It requires a special programme to break this cycle.

### **Constraints of large classes**

From experience of teaching and advising other teachers, the author has found that it is a demanding challenge to meet the reading needs of every child in a class, especially when class numbers are large. This is a problem even when a teacher understands the reading process, recognises cultural differences and caters for these in the school system, uses a repertoire of appropriate teaching strategies, and has access to sufficient relevant resources. Extra, competent help enables classroom teachers to meet children's needs more adequately. This realisation was a major reason for devising the parent programme described in brief below.

## **A PARENT PROGRAMME**

The research associated with the development and implementation of the programme to provide parents with understanding and support to tutor their own children in reading, together with the initial results of the effects of the programme, are reported fully in Biddulph (1983a). A summary follows.

### **The workshop programme**

The workshop programme is described in Biddulph 1983b. Briefly, the training programme consisted of four evening workshops, of one and a quarter hours each, spread over seven weeks.

Workshop 1: This attempted to create a supportive, non-threatening environment and began with parents briefly discussing and sharing their feelings and experiences of their child's reading. They were then provided with a page of suggestions for helping with reading at home. These suggestions were discussed and demonstrated by the author who worked with a low-progress reader. The use of library resources was recommended and parents were advised that librarians in the local area were aware of the programme and that they would help the parents and children to select suitable material to read together at home.

Workshop 2: Parents came to this workshop with their child. After a brief sharing of their experiences reading together during the previous week, parents and children listened to an audio tape of a low-progress reader reading material at an appropriate difficulty level and then at a difficulty level which was too high. The problems which occurred when the material became too difficult for the child were discussed and a simple strategy was described for ensuring that appropriate material was used. Parents and children then spent 25-30 minutes selecting suitable books from a wide range available, assessing difficulty levels, and reading the material together using the procedures outlined in the first workshop. The author moved around the pairs/trios acknowledging appropriate strategies and providing a positive model when necessary.

Workshop 3: This began with a discussion about difficulties that were being encountered and successes that had been achieved. The parents were encouraged to generate their own solutions, for example they talked about how they were applying the workshop suggestions, and shared titles of books and series which their children were enjoying. Most of the workshop time was spent on activities which were designed to give parents a better understanding of the nature of the reading process and the difficulties children experience, then considering further suggestions for helping with reading at home. The suggestions were discussed and demonstrated by means of role play, with the author acting as the child being supported by her parent.

Workshop 4: During this workshop parents reviewed their progress in tutoring their children and shared experiences, strategies and materials with each other. The author stressed the importance of encouragement, positive interactions and maintenance of the support at home. At the end of this workshop parents completed an open-ended questionnaire seeking their feedback on the programme and its effects.

### **The samples**

A sample of 48 children aged 9.5 to 10.5 years, but who were reading below an 8.5 year level, was drawn from seven Christchurch primary schools located in a range of socio-economic areas. From this sample matched pairs were formed, one child in the pair being randomly assigned to the treatment group and the other to the control group. Two series of workshops were conducted, one for 14 parents representing 11 children from one group of schools, and the other for 14 parents representing 13 children from the remaining group of schools.

## **Data collection**

Several instruments were used. The total score on Forms B and R of the GAP Reading Comprehension Test (McLeod, 1967) was used for the pretesting (two weeks prior to Workshop 1), delayed post-testing (approximately six weeks after the last workshop) and follow-up testing (approximately one year later) of all children in the sample.

In addition, a random sample of 12 treatment children and their matched control group pair (24 children in all) were assessed individually using a Department of Education Informal Reading Inventory (undated). Running records were taken (approximately one week before Workshop 1 and approximately seven weeks after Workshop 4) to determine changes in accuracy levels, comprehension levels and self-correction rates. Information was also gathered through pre- and post-programme interviews with these children on changes in attitudes toward reading at home, on the amount of reading done at home, and on the amount and type of help received at home. The parents of the 12 case study treatment children were also interviewed before and after the programme to ascertain their beliefs about their child's progress in reading and the nature, extent, and effect of any help which they had been providing at home.

## **Statistical analyses**

A three way analysis of variance was undertaken on the GAP scores with repeated measures over time (Winer, 1971 p.559). A Sign test (Siegel, 1956) was run on the change in status of the treatment and control case study children on the graded passages of the Reading Inventory from pretest to post-test. The levels gained, from pre-programme to post-programme, were determined by calculating the number of levels, as represented by the graded passages, through which each child had moved, that is, levels at which s/he could read with 90% or greater accuracy and at least 75% comprehension. The number of levels moved by each case study treatment child was then compared with the number moved by his/her matched pair in the control group to determine which child of the pair had made the greater gain.

## **Results**

In brief, the children tutored by their parents made significantly greater gains on the GAP Reading Comprehension Test during the period of parent involvement than the children in the contrast group. Their rate of gain over the following year was similar to that of the average reader (this occurring independently of any specialist assistance) whereas for the contrast group it was about two-thirds that rate (despite the fact that over half of them were receiving special help from their classroom teachers either in the form of individualised programmes or placement in 'special' reading groups) (Biddulph and Tuck, 1983). The data from the running records confirmed the significant gains made by the tutored children during the period in which their parents attended the workshop programme.

Prior to the study none of the children had passed Neville and Pugh's (1982) critical point of a reading level of approximately 8.5 years. At the follow-up 16 months later the majority (16 out of 21) of the tutored children had a GAP reading age greater than 9.5 years, whereas only two of the non-tutored children had reached this level.

The interview and questionnaire data suggested that the significant gains made by the parent tutored children were perhaps partly the result of extra time spent on reading, but more importantly were a function of the nature of tutoring provided by the parents. The parents themselves attributed their child's improvement to the fact that they, the parents, had been able to help their child more constructively and effectively, as a result of their participation in the workshop programme.

Other important outcomes were the development by the parent-tutored children of positive attitudes towards reading and towards help with reading at home, and by the parents of positive feelings about helping their children with reading.

## **PARENT PROGRAMME EXTENSIONS AND DISSEMINATION**

The programme has 'developed' in two ways; it has been extended beyond the original target age level, and it has been disseminated to a larger group of parents. The considerable growth of the programme since 1982 suggests many teachers and parents across a range of socio-economic and cultural groups, and at all levels of the school system, view the workshops as a positive step towards co-operation in the interests of children. There has been no indication that the programme is perceived in a negative manner, for example, as an attempt by teachers to impose their values and expectations onto reluctant, 'unhelpful' parents.

### **Extensions**

Two years after the development of the original parent programme the author adapted it for use with pre-school and new-entrant primary school children. The processes of the Early Language/Reading workshops are similar (that is, the demonstration, modelling, and active involvement of the parents and children) but the focus is more on talking and reading **with** young children, so the suggestions for helping them are slightly different.

During the same period the author worked with a Reading Resource teacher in a Christchurch secondary school to adapt the original programme slightly for use with parents of 13 and 14-year-old low progress readers. A further development was to use the programme to tutor adult volunteers, who then worked in both primary and secondary schools assisting low-progress readers on a regular basis.

The experience of working at secondary school level also revealed a need to adapt the programme further to enable parents to help their 13 and 14-year-olds (both low and middle-progress readers) gain meaning from reference materials. A Reference Reading workshop programme was developed in collaboration with the same Reading Resource teacher mentioned above.

The programme has been run successfully in schools with high proportions of Maori and Pacific Island children. A teacher whom the author knows well ran the workshops for a group of Maori parents whose children attended the total immersion school in which she taught. She reported that

*the reading programme went off very well. If there were difficulties it was getting the parents to attend ALL the sessions, which did not happen and for a variety of reasons. Everyone enjoyed the programme and found new confidence to sit with the children. They were pleased to see the natural progressions that children went through learning to read. Many parents learned to be more patient and tolerant with their children. Consequently they noticed the change in relationships between themselves and their child. The child was more interested in reading and found it no longer a task. I'm pleased we went through this exercise.*

At least one group of adult Maori volunteers has also been tutored in the programme so that they can assist Maori children learn to read in primary school classrooms. The teacher who led the workshop programme felt that it was worthwhile. During the workshops she encouraged the parents to talk about how they felt about being in the school and she noted that

*They all feel that it is much harder for Maori children to get on in the system because they 'have to become a Pakeha.' I pursued this, and found that it is the formal approach that we unwittingly use at school which makes these parents feel ill at ease... We talked about the lack of success for many Maori children at school and many of the group identified the major problem as lack of parental support at home for one reason or another. They themselves, as a whanau group, were having problems mobilising parent support. They all felt that a repeat of the workshops would be valuable, and I promised to run another series in 1991 if they could provide me with the recruits.*

Another group of people introduced to the programme were Christchurch librarians responsible for the children's section in their libraries. This arose from a request from some of the librarians who were invited to meet parents at Workshop One and subsequently found that the parents were visiting their local libraries and seeking advice about books suitable for low-progress readers. Some of the children's librarians reported finding their involvement very enlightening because they hadn't realised the nature of the reading difficulties that some children experience, nor had they been aware of how difficult it is for those children and their parents to find appropriate material in a library. Several realised that their own libraries had little, if any such material and they sought advice and funds to remedy this situation.

## **Dissemination**

The parent programme and its various adaptations have never been funded or disseminated in a formal way but they are now used extensively throughout New Zealand. The dissemination has occurred in three main ways. Firstly, the New Zealand Reading Association saw merit in the programme(s) and the author accepted invitations from branches in 11 centres to run weekend seminars and workshops to familiarise interested teachers and resource teachers of reading with the programme. Many teachers have requested the Workshop Leaders Booklet (Biddulph, 1983b) that outlines the workshop programme, and to date the author has distributed more than 1000 of these. The booklet for parents (Biddulph 1983c) has been reprinted many times and is now in widespread use throughout New Zealand. The author has also conducted three Advanced Studies for Teachers courses for about 50 teachers in total, each of whom conducted the parent programme or one of its variations with a group of parents in her/his school or early-childhood centre. In addition, shorter part-time courses have been run for interested principals and teachers. The author is aware that many of the Resource Teachers of Reading and teachers who attended the Reading Association seminars and part-time courses have conducted the programme with groups of parents. A number of people who have written asking for the resource materials have subsequently sent written feedback on the programmes they have implemented.

Reports from these teachers indicate that the responses of parents and children in almost all cases are similar to those of the original research. Typical comments made by parents are:

*You make it seem so easy - reading a possibility at last! You make it possible for parents to share their difficulties; the support gives them a positive approach.*

*He [my son] seems to be tackling more things with confidence because he feels better that he can read.*

*She seems more confident in all of her school and social activities.*

*It has been a time of us spending time together and the interest from home has helped [especially] knowing we will not try to jump in with the right words or push him longer than he can take. It has made him feel important that his teachers care enough to help Mum and Dad help him. Thank you for the time and care you have taken.*

*I think that the programme is excellent, relaxed and friendly - should be compulsory for all parents. I only wish that it was around when my other two children were at primary school.*

Possible reasons for the relative success of the parent programme are discussed below.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

There seem to be several reasons why the parent programme in its various forms has been relatively successful.

### **Fulfils a need**

Although some teachers believe that many parents do not care about their children's learning, the author and many other teachers have found that almost all parents want their children to be able to read well and are deeply concerned if they are encountering difficulties. The programme therefore meets a real and deeply-felt need among parents. It also meets two needs of teachers; firstly, a need for simple but effective strategies to help all children learn to read, and secondly, a need for extra assistance to do so.

### **Self-selection**

Teachers who attend workshop leaders' courses and who conduct the parent programme themselves are a self-selected group who do so in their own time on their own initiative. They tend to be caring, sensitive and supportive people who are able to understand and implement the tutoring strategies suggested and the workshop processes involved in the manner intended. The processes will only work if workshop leaders have these qualities and this commitment. This was demonstrated dramatically in one case of which the author is aware, when a teacher who lacked these understandings and qualities found that most parents simply did not appear for the second or subsequent workshops. It must also be acknowledged that parents who accept invitations to participate in the workshops are in a sense a self-selected group as well, and are therefore likely to be more committed than other parents to programme participation. However the rate of acceptance and retention has generally been higher than might have been predicted, and this probably reflects the fact that almost all the workshop leaders have the qualities outlined above and also make an effort to contact each parent personally soon after the invitations are sent home so that they can answer questions and provide reassurance where needed.

### **Partnership**

The workshop processes create several forms of partnership. Parents feel they are part of a group experiencing similar difficulties which can be overcome, and this is very reassuring. (Children too, find it reassuring to know that they are not the only ones having difficulty with reading.) Parents also begin to feel that they have a special role to play that entails a parent-teacher partnership, and teachers appreciate the value of such a partnership.

In addition parents and children form a kind of learning partnership which is more positive, constructive and effective than previous helping efforts at home have been. Various writers recognise that language learning is dependent on such positive feelings and relationships between the adult and the learner (Smith, A., 1988; Smith, F., 1985; Tizard and Hughes, 1984). Smith

(1992), for example, argues that methods can never ensure that children will learn to read, that children must learn from people and it is the relationships that exist that matter.

Teachers too have formed partnerships with each other to run the programmes within their schools and have found the experience satisfying and rewarding. In many cases these teachers have then supported teachers in other schools who are interested in implementing the programme. Those who have been involved in this wider support role report particular satisfaction from helping their colleagues in this way.

These partnerships, especially those between parents and teachers, help to bridge cultures and reduce the negative effects that can occur when the child's language and culture differs from that of the school. The helping strategies suggested throughout the workshops foster language/reading development by acknowledging, valuing and building from the language, experiences, interests and interactions of the children and their parents, an approach which research would seem to support (Cazden, 1988; Wells, 1978) This places parents and children themselves in much greater control of the children's reading development. The workshop programmes also enable teachers to gain greater awareness of the language, culture and circumstances of some of their pupils and their parents. As a result, teachers are then in a better position to work more sensitively and effectively within the classroom and school, and some who have implemented the workshops have commented on this outcome. Cazden's (1988) view supports these developments. She writes (p. 95)

*If, as I have suggested, teachers' familiarity with their children's personal and social world is critical to effective communication in school, then we also need to find ways to overcome the social and psychological distance between school and home.*

The co-operative approach which underpins the programmes reduces misunderstandings, fear, frustration, stress, guilt and anger in all three parties, and values the contribution that each can make. The workshop programmes help many of those involved to relate more positively to each other and to the process of reading itself. They also create an informed pool of adult volunteers who are willing and able to assist other children, parents and teachers in their schools and communities.

In schools where the workshop programme is valued, a change in the school culture itself often occurs. Teachers who have been involved in the programme have reported that their classroom programmes have changed to reflect the ideas on which the workshops are based. There is also a greater appreciation of the contribution that parents can make to their children's education and consequently a greater sense of power sharing with them. This genuine feeling of mutual support provides the best possible environment for children's learning, and school/community relationships are enhanced as a result. An informed power sharing is much more reassuring and helpful for teachers, parents and children than situations where, for example, some parents seek to dictate

classroom teaching approaches without adequate understanding of the processes involved, and teachers feel threatened by these pressures.

### **Consistent support for children**

The parent workshop programme provides both teachers and parents with a range of relatively simple tutoring strategies to help children with their reading development. Rather than parents and teachers working against each other (for example, by creating situations where the child is required to use one set of strategies at home and another set at school) the programme allows children to experience consistent forms of guidance. It also allows for ongoing support over time at home and the possibility that siblings will be helped in useful ways.

### **Positive responses generate further success**

Many teachers are quite anxious at first about conducting the workshop programmes, but as most parents respond positively and accept the partnership and information-sharing offered, the teachers find that their efforts are worthwhile and appreciated. Typical comments made by teachers include

*Although we were both a little hesitant to start with, we soon relaxed and began to enjoy what was to become heaps of fun. Our reasons for being a little hesitant had come from previous programmes which had turned into 'Why don't you do this?' or 'Children leaving this school can't do what others can' etc ... We would certainly run this course again. We found working together was great. It gave us confidence. Since this parents meeting, A has run a workshop in Maths. We can see opportunities for workshops in written language and spelling as well as developing oral language skills. Thank you J for sharing these workshops with us. I needed to be shown and encouraged into working with parents again.*

*Despite my own initial lack of confidence I found these workshop programmes to be very successful. ... All the parents obviously recommended these workshops to others because other parents have asked me when I will be running more. I am happy to do this... Professionally I have grown in confidence in working with parents... and also I can make them feel comfortable enough to share their fears about reading and see these grow to more positive attitudes. The parents own self-esteem also showed positive signs of improvement.*

This latter teacher was working in a city school in a predominantly lower socio-economic area attended by many Maori children.

Many teachers go on to conduct further workshops for other parents, and some have also felt sufficiently confident to conduct a workshop leaders' course for interested colleagues. From the parents point of view, the empathy and support they receive from teachers, the non-threatening nature of the workshops, and the positive way in which their child usually responds, encourages

them to continue giving their time, energy and newly-developed skills and understanding to support their child(ren).

## **Conclusion**

What began as a small-scale investigation into the feasibility of a special low-cost workshop programme to enable parents of nine to ten-year-old children with reading difficulties to help their children learn to read, has expanded into programmes to help children at other age levels, with apparently similar results. It appears that part of the relative success may be attributed to the programmes bridging a cultural gap that exists between home and school for some, maybe many children. In bridging this gap the workshops partially transform the culture of the school. They provide one means of achieving true partnership between parents and teachers, and are achievable at very low cost, on a self-help basis.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Dr Bryan Tuck and Dr Fred Biddulph provided valuable assistance with analysis of the research data.