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Kiwi kids once led the world in reading – this 1950s primary school syllabus still has lessons for today

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There is a well-known whakatauki (Māori proverb) that goes: “Ka mua, ka muri” – “walking backwards into the future”. It applies to many areas of life, but in education the idea of looking to the past to inform our way forward seems more relevant than ever.

New Zealand was once a world leader in reading. In the early 1970s, as leading literacy educationalist Warwick Elley [reminds us](#), Kiwi teenagers performed best of all countries participating in the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.

New Zealand students remained good readers throughout the 1990s, earning the top results for reading out of 32 participating countries in the first [Programme for International Student Assessment survey](#) in 2000.

Overall, New Zealand children are still above average. But while many children learn to read successfully, significant numbers do not. And concern about reading capability has led to a recent curriculum overhaul.

The reforms focus on raising reading standards and regular testing. But the lessons of the past suggest we performed better with less focus on raising test scores. In fact, it was a more flexible, balanced approach to English education that provided a strong foundation for literacy.

Some clues to why this was possible can be found in the 1953 Primary School Reading Syllabus from the old Department of Education. It was among the first of many research-based reading initiatives in the mid-20th century, along with Ready to Read books in the 1960s, and the Reading Recovery program developed by Marie Clay in the 1970s.

Given New Zealand was a conservative postwar society that was yet to grapple meaningfully with colonial history and Treaty rights, the document is surprisingly less rigid than one might expect.

In fact, it is largely compatible with contemporary ideas about teaching and learning. In some areas, the 1953 syllabus seems more progressive than the current curriculum, with clear views on inclusiveness and designing teaching to meet individual needs.

Ironically, many of today's parents and grandparents – some of whom support a “back to basics” school system – were educated using this flexible and purpose-driven approach.

New Zealand in 1953

According to the New Zealand Official Yearbook for 1953, the country was enjoying postwar prosperity with 72% of its exports going to other Commonwealth countries.

England was still the “mother country” and the young Queen Elizabeth's post-coronation visit – also in 1953 – fuelled intense royal fervour. Edmund Hillary conquered Everest, and a highly publicised air race from London to Christchurch helped popularise plane travel.

Society was far more egalitarian. In a population of just over two million, only 15 people received an unemployment benefit (there were a variety of other welfare payments such as war pensions).

At the same time, New Zealand did not view itself as bicultural in the way it does today. For many Pākehā, Māori culture was little more than a curiosity or a tourist attraction.

School was already compulsory from ages seven to 15, and roughly 17% of the population were enrolled in primary schools. These were the children taught to read according to the 1953 syllabus.

A brief A5-sized booklet of just 13 pages, it recognises reading as a central component of a rich and full life – and that it can be used for “useful, harmless or nefarious” purposes.

Competing with other temptations such as “the exploits of Superman and Mighty Mouse”, as well as cinema and radio, is one of its concerns. But its main aim is to “teach the child to read [...] in ways that will encourage him (sic) to use his skill freely and naturally”.



Postwar prosperity and a royal tour too: schoolchildren wave Union Jack flags at the Duke of Edinburgh during in early 1954. Getty Images

Avoiding a standardised approach

The syllabus outlines ideal components of a classroom reading programme: reading to self (silently) and peers (aloud), listening to story and verse, participating in dramatisation, word study and study skills.

Word study should include learning about phonics. But the syllabus tempers this with the advice that “there can be no doubt that too early a preoccupation with phonics may serve to kill interest in reading”.

This might have been written today by those concerned that structured approaches to literacy will crowd out other important parts of early reading education.

The 1953 syllabus says reading material should encompass fiction (including local authors), non-fiction, plays and poetry. While competent reading by all is the goal, the syllabus also states: “A uniform standard of achievement [...] is a mistaken aim.”

This recognition of variable individual capability is something critics say is missing from today’s curriculum. Expectations are set for each year at school, with teachers strongly encouraged to teach to the year level.

The fear is that some students will fall behind as their class moves on, while progress for others will be restricted if they are ahead of those expectations.

The 1953 syllabus cautions that the “results of standardised tests should be weighed against the teacher’s own observation [...] and modified accordingly”.

Encouraging teacher autonomy

By comparison, the new English curriculum is long at 108 pages, complex and prescriptive. It includes a range of aims clustered under the headings “Understand”, “Know” and “Do”.

The first encompasses five big ideas learners are expected to develop during their schooling. The second covers the knowledge required in English to become literate. The third outlines the practical steps learners will take in the different phases of their schooling.

To be fair, the new curriculum aims to make all children feel good about reading. It encourages using different kinds of texts, focuses on assessment activities that build on one another, and supports teachers to adapt for student differences.

And, given its contemporary context, there is an awareness of the important role of culture and the unique place of Māori in New Zealand that is entirely missing in the 1953 document.

But the new curriculum also contains directives the 1953 syllabus warned teachers against – namely a preoccupation with teaching phonics, and teaching linked to prescriptive progress measurement and outcomes.

Although brief, the 1953 document is arguably broader in scope and requires teachers to have greater skills. A strength of the old syllabus is that it encouraged teacher professionalism, autonomy and judgement in deciding the best next steps for each learner.

Overall, the 2025 curriculum seems the more constrictive document. The 1953 syllabus presents a view of reading that prioritises the human experience – reading as an aesthetic experience as well as a practical skill.

This article is based on original work by Jayne Jackson, senior lecturer and educational researcher at Manukau Institute of Technology, with the help of AUT’s [LitPlus](#) research group.
