Information Literacy at the Grassroots in New Zealand

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Information literacy papers and qualifications have been available to New Zealand teachers since 1986. Centrally coordinated and moderated accredited diploma papers for practicing teachers are now delivered as intensive, 175-hour, applied school-based papers, completed by groups of 10-20 teachers at school sites anywhere in New Zealand. Since 1991, over 5,000 teachers have completed these papers. Because there are no official positions for teacher-librarians, only a small proportion (200) have continued to complete full specialist information resource teacher qualifications (Dip. Teacher-Librarianship, Dip. Information Studies, Dip. Information Technology). However, the school-wide level of information literacy resulting from these intensive grassroots courses for classroom teachers is significant and may well be unique. Principals usually participate in the course alongside teachers, helping to ensure that information literacy is integrated into school-wide curriculum policy and programs and staff information resource and technology development initiatives.

The invitation to chart the development of information literacy in New Zealand in the context of power and politics was irresistible. The reality of powerlessness and politics has dictated that every available minute of the last 10 years has been spent building and ensuring the survival of New Zealand’s information literacy program within our “market-driven” education system. There has been little time for documenting and promoting what we have done beyond our borders. Depending on your professional perspective, you can look at it as tragedy (“The death of teacher-librarianship in New Zealand”), as an inspirational parable (“Phoenix, ashes, and how many lives has this cat got?”) or an extraordinary success story (“Evolution of a new species, the information-literate classroom teacher”). As a teacher, librarian, and teacher-educator, mine is the latter view, based on the undoubtedly controversial perspective that schools can have superbly resourced information centers, buzzing and humming with information resources, information technologies, and staffed with teacher-librarians, but ultimately, the information literacy of students depends largely on classroom teachers and what they do in relation to information literacy in their classrooms.

The Educational Climate

It is tempting to think of New Zealand as a clean, green paradise, removed from the economic, social and political realities that have created a decade of unprecedented turbulence in Western education. Not so:
The 1989 Education Act created a new administrative system for both schools and tertiary institutions ... There has been a fragmentation of functions and provision, different responsibilities for compulsory and post-compulsory schooling and also different bodies responsible for different parts of the curriculum process ... These changes have exposed gaps in the steering mechanisms of education, while at the same time have greatly intensified teachers' work. (Jesson, 1995, p. 143).

Developments in the teaching and learning of information literacy need to be set firmly in the context of the social, economic and educational challenges posed by a decade of "econometric rationalism" and reform in New Zealand. This has been a decade in which schools, teachers and educators have been ridiculed and reviled by politicians and the public alike, destructured, restructured, and subjected to suffocating increasingly centralist controls in the name of accountability. We have experienced a rhetorical environment of decentralization, competition, empowerment, and localized decision-making. The reality of the volatile nature of marketplace education is teacher exhaustion, demoralization, and deprofessionalization, evidenced in the fact that we can no longer recruit enough teachers. We have some 400 unregistered teachers in classrooms, and now import young Australian, Canadian, and British teachers. But, yes, we are the home of Whole Language and Reading Recovery, and both are alive and well!

The Past
The fate of teacher-librarians and teacher-librarianship needs to be set in this context. Until 1986 New Zealand did not train or employ teacher-librarians or school librarians, although teachers with library responsibility are often called teacher-librarians, and library assistants (some of whom have library qualifications) are often called school librarians. All schools have libraries, some booklined storerooms, others the equivalent of the best I have seen anywhere in the world. In 1986, an ambitious training scheme began, instigated by the Ministry of Education (then Dept. of Education). Twenty senior primary and secondary teachers were to be selected each year for newly created teacher-librarian positions (an additional, supernumerary staff position). Attendance at a one-year postgraduate diploma course was a precondition of this appointment (Gawith, 1987, 1991). It soon became obvious to the Ministry that 1986 = 20 extra salaries, 1987 = 40 extra salaries, 1988 = 60 extra salaries, and so on. By the time every school had a teacher-librarian it would an unsustainable fiscal drain. In 1987, the Ministry reduced the course intake to 15. In 1988, both course and employment scheme were axed by the Ministry. Ironically, the report following the Ministry's own three-year research project from 1987 through 1989 concluded:

Despite continuing problems and an uncertain future, the introduction of trained teacher-librarians into New Zealand schools has been successful. It has encouraged a wider and more diverse use of resources, introduced different per-
spectives on teaching and learning and perhaps most important, promoted self-
esteeem amongst considerable numbers of students, who are now realizing that
the acquisition of knowledge through resource-based learning can be both a
pleasurable and powerful process. (Lealand, 1990, p. 72)

The Dilemma
In 1990, after 18 months of relentless political struggle and lobbying by the
author and the first three cohorts of teacher-librarians, policy for the training
(but not employment) of teacher-librarians was reinstated by the Ministry.
This left the author (who began the initial course, contributed to the develop-
ment of the new policy, and, at the time of writing, still coordinates the
national program) with a dilemma. What was the point of policy for training
teachers as teacher-librarians (at their own expense) when they would not be
able to work as teacher-librarians because there were no positions? The
Ministry’s response was that if schools wanted them enough, they would
have to find the money from somewhere other than the salaries budget! The
existing positions would be phased out over three years.

By 1990, the 55 teacher-librarians trained on the 1986-1988 course were
scattered throughout New Zealand, some doing an excellent job with excel-
 lent support, some justifying their colleagues’ prognostications about class-
room refugees as they sank without trace into library automation, some
moving rapidly into deputy and principals’ positions, and others moving up
and out into management, Information Technology, and training positions.
It seemed obvious that the design of the new Auckland-based national
program (funded by the Ministry but designed by the author) had to harness
the skills and experience of these remaining trained teacher-librarians, and
also be able to harness the skills of graduates from the new program and
exploit distance learning techniques and technologies. By then, the 1989
reforms were starting to bite and signalled that anything new would only
survive the turbulence to come if it was exceptionally robust and flexible,
exceptionally appealing to teachers. Small specialist courses were doomed,
yet we were only funded to provide the equivalent of the previous program
(15 teachers a year). The Ministry’s requirement was that the course had to be
delivered nationally, part time, and the costs for teachers kept as low as
possible.

The Present
Seven years later, we are flourishing, with a program that is unique in the
world. Since 1991, 5,000 New Zealand teachers, nearly 10% of registered
teachers, have completed nationally accredited, intensive 175-hour informa-
tion literacy papers that contribute to one of our three specialist diplomas
(Dip. Teacher-Librarianship, Dip. Information Studies, Dip. Information
Technology) or to the national Higher and Advanced Diplomas of Teaching.
Two hundred teachers have completed the full specialist diploma. We now
have a full-time staff of six lecturers (all experienced teachers, two with master’s level qualifications in librarianship and four with teacher-librarianship qualifications), and a pool of 70 part-time site facilitators (teachers who are graduates of our program who tutor part time).

The vision of a flexible, modular, distance learning program supported by print materials, video and audiotapes, e-mail and audioconferencing, and a network of trained local facilitators was achieved within the first three years and became a nationally accredited award-winning program. However, we were still left with the initial dilemma—how to attract busy teachers to do (and pay for) an intensive three-year, part-time specialist diploma when there were no specialist positions for teacher-librarians.

Since 1992, we have reversed the traditional teacher-librarianship model and deliberately targeted classroom teachers with grassroots information literacy courses with the intention of building an information-literate school community that would see the value of supporting the training and (eventual) employment of the most skilled and credible teachers as specialist information resource teachers or teacher-librarians. This is an interesting reversal of the usual model where the most challenging task of the full-time teacher-librarian/library media specialist/specialist information resource teacher is to encourage all staff to integrate the teaching and learning of information literacy skills across the curriculum. By turning it on its head and starting at the grassroots, trying to ensure that every classroom teacher and every principal completes these 175-hour information literacy courses, we hoped that many of the teachers and principals would recognize, from a basis of their own experience of integrating information literacy skills, the value of a specialist information resource teacher/teacher-librarian and use any available discretionary funding to create such a position. To my knowledge this has happened in six schools, although in other schools specialist positions have been created for our graduates with information technology or learning support labels. Given the funding drought in schools, this is encouraging, even if it is a slow process.

What evidence have we of the impact of the program on the information literacy of students? Because there is no national testing, no comparative evaluation of schools’ performance, no graded tests of information literacy, the only measure we have for success is market demand. The fact that more schools are applying than we can accommodate means that the word has spread that this course benefits learners. Principals of schools that have completed the grassroots information literacy course are our most enthusiastic advocates. The growth in the demand for the program is the only measure we have of its success other than course evaluations. The evidence we have of lasting benefits to information literacy skills and levels is anecdotal, and the positive assessments many of “our” schools receive from the national Educational Review Office, which assesses curriculum performance on all national learning and skill objectives including information skills. There is a
new national Education Monitoring initiative that selects a small sample of schools and a particular area of the curriculum for in-depth monitoring of student learning. Information skills and social studies were monitored in 1997, and we await the results with interest. None of the schools, or teachers, is identified, however, so there is no way of establishing whether our program might have contributed to superior performance on the information skills tasks.

Having worked in this field for 20 years, I am convinced that the gains are significant and lasting, given a range of ifs. The foremost if is whether the principal ensures that the information process is planned into each curriculum area each year, each term, monitored and evaluated, and the results fed back into the next curriculum planning cycle. Where this is happening the results seem extremely promising. The challenge would be to find the money and the researcher with the expertise to conduct formal research. What is incontrovertible is that taking the course to the school, involving the principal, and ensuring that skills are practiced in the context of that school, those particular children, and the national curriculum works in the eyes of teachers because it is contextualized for them.

School-Based Courses

Ninety percent of our courses are now school-based. This means that a school principal contacts the Centre for Information Studies and agrees to enroll 10-20 teachers from her or his and neighboring schools. We undertake to deliver the course at the school in after-school and weekend workshop sessions held weekly or fortnightly, providing quality materials, a site facilitator (one of our graduates), audioconference sessions (one hour in every three-hour workshop) for feedback, sharing, presentations, and input from the coordinator (full-time lecturer). We guarantee detailed weekly or fortnightly individual feedback on assignment work. The ongoing application of the course material in the classroom during the 12-week course ensures that teachers confront head-on the problems of information literacy learning, guided and supported by skilled site facilitators and course staff (coordinators and markers) who have been through the courses and experienced the challenges of the classroom application of course principles and methods.

The foundation course, Infolink: information literacy, is the most popular school-based course. It is based on New Zealand’s own six-stage information process model that was adapted from the Irving/Marland (1981) model by the author after she had worked with Ann Irving and used the English model in 1983. The New Zealand adaptation was first workshopped in 1984, and published in 1986 before Eisenberg’s Big Six (Gawith, 1984, 1986). In 1987 South Australia produced an adaptation based on both English and New Zealand models, and other Australian states and territories have followed
suit. What we have now could be described as an Australasian consensus model.

In the Infolink course, the six New Zealand stages (Deciding, Finding, Using, Recording, Presenting, Evaluating) have been developed as six action research cycles that teachers implement in their classrooms. The stages form the structure of the course. Teachers work with students to plan, monitor, reflect on, and evaluate the learning cycle by cycle. The content of the learning is always tied into New Zealand’s national curriculum. The process emphasizes self-regulation and self-efficacy, and provides an explicit focus on cognitive strategies that we model and offer as a menu for teachers to use at each of the six stages. The structure is simple; the learning is often profound. The course is solidly grounded in an evolving theory and pedagogy of constructivist information literacy learning, supported by well-designed materials that focus on the notion that the best way to learn about constructivist information literacy learning is to learn that way oneself as a teacher. The term information literacy learning is used deliberately, although it is tautologous because it emphasizes that information literacy is a state that is not arrived at by magic or osmosis. It must be learned, and it is seldom learned if it is not taught. Metacognition, encouraging students to think about their learning, to assess the process as well as the product of the learning, is a thread that runs through all three diplomas.

Successive courses are based on a similar constructivist pedagogy, but focus on different aspects of information literacy: teachers as information users, school libraries and learning, reading and resource development, information technology and learning, integrating the essential skills across the curriculum, information technology across the curriculum, action research in information literacy, the specialist role of the trained teacher librarian, information in society, and telelearning. Each is 175 hours, and seven comprise a specialist diploma of teaching. All three diplomas have the grassroots information literacy paper Infolink as a core paper, and thereafter teachers select options to reflect their choice of emphasis—on teacher-librarianship, information studies, or information technology.

It is fascinating, but exhausting and uncompromising work for course participants, facilitators, coordinators, and markers alike. The courses have the well-deserved reputation of being tough and intensive, but also the enviable reputation for changing the face of learning in schools. Far from being “distanced” learning, coordinators, facilitators, and markers work closely and communicate regularly with principals and course participants. Our course completion rate (98%) is evidence of the care taken to communicate with and support each site in the light of its individual needs.

That it works for teachers and learners has been confirmed in a recent Ministry of Education Review (1993). However, the politicization of education begs several questions. How far can we push teachers who are suffering battle fatigue after a relentless onslaught of curriculum and administrative
"reforms"? How far can we push principals who see information literacy learning as a luxury, and networked classrooms, including the Internet, as an essential? Ultimately, it is a juggling act involving careful professional judgment and communication to promote the recognition that we are all driven by our shared desire: (a) to improve student learning; (b) to improve the ability of every New Zealand student to learn in an age of information; (c) to ensure that every New Zealand teacher is equipped to develop the information literacy skills of his or her students; and (d) to integrate this learning into every curriculum area.

Our 10 years' experience is a valuable resource. Building the expertise of course graduates back into the program as site facilitators has been a significant factor in our success. Not only does their involvement celebrate the information literacy learning achievements of some of New Zealand's most successful teachers, but it allows them to continue to develop their understanding and skills and to feed these skills back into the program. Their participation contributes to their status in their schools and local education communities and provides a fulcrum for local meetings and information literacy interest groups.

New Zealand now has a powerful core of information literacy teachers and support from some of New Zealand's leading principals and educational organizations. Our graduates are at the forefront of educational life in New Zealand. For example, two have recently talked about their work at the International Association of School Librarians Conference in Vancouver. One is currently in Antarctica as teaching fellow on the LEARNZ program (http://www.icair.iac.org.nz). Two are currently working for Sunshine Online (http://www.sunshine.co.nz). One is new products manager for Apple Computers, and another is Apple Education's training manager. Seven now work for the National Library as School Library Advisers. Several are now principals or involved in teacher education and teacher development contracts. Their success has been inspiring and humbling, testimony to the success of the 1990 decision to develop information literacy training for educators, not just training for teacher-librarians. We have developed strategic alliances with politicians and business leaders who are frequently our audioconference guests along with leading authors, educational commentators, and principals. We have developed partnerships with telecommunications and technology suppliers. We have won several major international awards (e.g., the Telecom Education Foundation award) and fellowships, and contribute regularly to conferences and publications in New Zealand. In short, we are a success, but ...

The Future
The lessons of power and politics leave no room for complacency. Survival in a "fiscally challenged" institution that sees face-to-face degrees as its current raison d'être is not easy. There is no infrastructure to support the technologi-
cal or administrative needs of continuous entry, distance, flexible, modular teacher inservice courses that rely heavily on efficient central services and support for site administrators. There is no time for research, for reflection, for innovation, for consolidating and building on past achievements. There is the requirement to do more with less, to drive oneself relentlessly, to ignore one’s own need to grow professionally and intellectually. There is an increasing gap between management and teaching staff, an increasing pressure to do more and more with technology with no technical support and with little concern for whether students of any age have the skills to deal with the information accessible through the technologies. There is subtle pressure in a marketplace environment to raise the marketing and quality management rhetoric, but to lower the demands of the courses in order to make them more accessible to exhausted teachers. There is the terrifying spectacle of these exhausted teachers being pushed through inservice after inservice, frantically learning the recipes without having time or energy to digest the learning.

The political reality of the present is, therefore, an interesting one. Our staffing levels at the Auckland College of Education are determined proportionally by our portion of the institution’s funding. The national funding pool is capped. The government is committed to inter-institutional competition. More institutions are being accredited to deliver teacher education. The same pool of funding now waters many more institutions. We deliver 30% more papers than we are paid, or staffed, to deliver. The rhetoric of the marketplace is nonsense in the face of reality—the demand is there. We cannot afford to expand because we cannot staff an expansion, and staff are already working to maximum workloads. We juggle supply and demand, responding less to market demand than political and institutional funding priorities.

New Zealand schools and educational institutions are now exhorted to perform like businesses, with the acceptance that some will succeed and some will fail. Whatever the politicians say, New Zealand schools and educational institutions should never have been forced to embrace the rhetoric of the market. Education, like health, is not a commodity. We have flogged it in the market. It is bankrupt and destitute. We never blame our educational policies and political agendas. We blame schools and teachers.

Ironically, the Centre for Information Studies has flourished in this tough market. With an average of only three lecturing and administration staff, to have reached 10% of New Zealand’s teachers and some 100,000 students in seven years, and to have achieved from the grassroots a thriving interest in information literacy learning and specialist information resource teachers is a significant achievement. Information literacy has begun to influence the reality of New Zealand education as well as the rhetoric. Information skills are now one of eight essential skill areas of the New Zealand curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1993) and one of the areas of learning being monitored in our new National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP).
have worked solidly and overtly at a political level since 1988. The political efforts compound exhaustion and consume energy that, in a different place and time, might have seen yet more unique and innovative developments in information literacy education to support a burgeoning growth in interest in information literacy. This interest is a tribute to the commitment and goodwill of the teachers of New Zealand—a country that had, when I came here in 1979, one of the best education systems in the world and some of the best teachers I have ever been privileged to work alongside.

Our Web site (http://www.new-zealand.edu/infostudies) will provide more information about the structure of our diplomas and the content of the various courses. We update our newsletter every term, and, if you request it, will e-mail you when the newsletter is updated. I leave the formal education system at the end of this year confident that a solid foundation exists for the work that still needs to be done.

References

Author Note
Gwen Gawith was, at the time of writing, National Coordinator of Information Studies Programs, Auckland College of Education. She now publishes two educational magazines, Good Teacher and Auckland Education (http://www.metacog.co.nz) and is intending to expand the website to include information literacy training programs in 1999.