

# Tyndale Park Christian School Trust: Phonics Based Literacy & Vocabulary Enrichment and Extension Programmes

## INTRODUCTION

Tyndale Park Christian School is a year 1-13 school with an enrolment of approximately 120 students from 80 families. It is located on Murphys Road, Flatbush amidst farmland. The school's website states as follows:

*Tyndale Park Christian School Auckland (Manukau) offers an education that supports the faith and practice of the Christian home. Our school offers a Christian primary school, Christian intermediate school and Christian secondary school. From year 1 to high school, your child will find a supportive and academic home...Our curriculum is based on Christian principles. We offer small class sizes and emphasise the three Rs: reading, writing and arithmetic. Children in our school learn to read in one year using a phonetics based program.<sup>1</sup>*

Enrolment is not restricted to families who identify as Christian, but every student is required to participate in all aspects of the curriculum, which includes Bible studies. Twenty five percent of the families live locally. Others come from as far away as Mangere, Maraetai and Drury<sup>2</sup>. School staff do not consider their families affluent; most make sacrifices to send their children to the school. Fees information is publicly available on the website. The school has developed over a 27 year time span, beginning with land and building materials for three classrooms bequeathed for the purposes of establishing a Christian school.

As an independent, non-integrated school, their state funding is minimal. There is a commitment to Literacy learning and "tried and true" phonetic teaching methods. This school does not have a Principal, but it has a School Manager who is responsible for the operation of the school and a Head Teacher who is responsible for monitoring the academic performance in the school.

The senior high school (Grades 11 and above) is offered the A.C.E. programme. Accelerated Christian Education is a complete package of individualized curriculum material, covering all grade levels from preschool through Year 13 and beyond. Each subject is presented in a series of self-instructional workbooks, called PACEs (Packets of Accelerated Christian Education), progressively graduated so that new concepts and truths build upon previously mastered ones. Some courses employ video sessions to enhance the learning process whilst others are supplemented with computer software programmes. The school's reasons for choosing the ACE system in preference to others included: a) Biblical world view; b) fits within the vision for Christian Education at Tyndale Park Christian School c)

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<sup>1</sup> [www.tyndalepark.school.nz](http://www.tyndalepark.school.nz)

<sup>2</sup> Information supplied by Tyndale Park Christian School

ability to integrate with existing Tyndale curriculum d) the qualifications gained in the programme are recognized for entrance to Universities and Technical Institutes.<sup>3</sup>

## ***PROGRAMME RATIONALE AND GOALS***

As a Christian school in name and focus, helping children to achieve literacy is a priority at Tyndale Park Christian School. God has provided a written word in the form of the Bible. Being able to access and understand the Bible requires a defined minimum standard of literacy. Beyond being a Christian school, a feature of Tyndale Park Christian School that further distinguishes it from most mainstream schools, and one that is directly relevant to the present context, is a resolute dedication to phonics methods for teaching literacy.

The school funding application to the AACT was for purposes of replacing worn out reading sets and library books, and adding improved, up to date resources seen as more effective for advancing the school's literacy programme across the school. Dictionaries and thesauruses, the subject of the 2007 funding application, were regarded as important supplements.

The following information regarding aims and objectives and projected outcomes is extracted from the school's 2006 and 2007 funding applications.

### ***2006 Programme Title: Phonics Based Literacy Programme***

#### **Aims:**

- To advance the students' God-given abilities in literacy;
- To advance students' reading writing, listening, comprehension and speaking skills using a systematic co-ordinated approach;
- To enable the students to develop competency in all areas of their education.

#### **Objectives:**

- Improvement in reading, writing, listening, comprehension and speaking skills of all pupils, especially the weaker students, through group reading cells and tutoring;
- Accuracy fluency and creativeness in reading and writing.
- An enjoyment and enthusiasm for reading and writing.

#### **Projected Outcomes**

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.tyndalepark.school.nz/christian-secondary-school-ace-courses> and information provided by the school.

- At the end of grade 1 year, the goal is for the student to read independently and fluently and write full sentences correctly.
- In the middleclasses from grade 2 to 8, the goal is for students to build on this foundation and further develop the skills necessary for the objectives listed above.
- In the senior classes, grades 9-13, the goal is for academic success for each pupil in the study programme he/she has embarked upon including ACE programme for grades 11-13.

### *2007 Programme Title: Vocabulary Enrichment and Extension Programme*

#### **Aims and Objectives:**

- To supplement the resources obtained through the grant received in 2006;
- To enhance the opportunities for students to enrich their vocabulary and validate their choices for spelling;
- To update and increase the range of dictionaries students will have access to.

#### **Projected Outcomes:**

Improved levels in PRETOS and reading vocabulary results. (grade 1-10 pupils).

### *Items Purchased with AACT 2006-2007 Grants*

#### **2006 Grant Amount: \$8055-00**

- Phonics teaching resources for grades 2 to 10 inclusive.
- Library books for grade 1-13 children. Literature books for the ACE programme grades 9-13.

#### **2007 Grant Amount: \$2720-00**

- an updated range of dictionaries appropriate to the different levels of students.
- 25 thesauruses for grades 7-10 students.

## **DATA SOURCES**

- 1) Ms Janis McArdle, AACT Trust Administrator, and I visited Tyndale Park Christian School in December 2007 and met with the School Manager. The purpose of the meeting was to explain the rationale for the evaluation, what it would involve, and face-to-face introductions.
- 2) Computer assisted literature for information on Phonics and Whole Language teaching methods.
- 3) The school's November 2007 report to the AACT, including children's accounts of AACT funded books they like.
- 4) Extended interview with the Head Teacher who is also the grade 9-10 teacher.
- 5) School holiday time visit to all classrooms, library, computer room and science lab. The visit provided an opportunity to look at the books, dictionaries and thesauruses purchased with funding from the AACT, as well as children's work, especially primary school level.
- 6) Return visit to spend half an hour in all of the classrooms, new entrant to secondary, observing English/Literacy teaching and use of books funded by the AACT. The class teachers adjusted their programme so that English/Literacy teaching was timed to fit with my visit. I was able to speak briefly with some of the teachers.
- 7) Assessment data in the form of Progressive Achievement Test (PAT), accompanied by a PAT Teachers Manual, and PRETOS (spelling test) results.
- 8) Written case study information provided by the Head Teacher for one student.

### ***Request to Interview Parents***

I requested to interview 6 parents, either in 2 groups of three, or individually if requested, at a time to suit them. I was particularly interested in interviewing parents who had transferred their children to Tyndale Park from another school. The underpinning rationale was to ascertain whether the parents felt Tyndale Park Christian School offered extra benefits with respect to literacy teaching that their child's previous school did not, and exploring that further. The information was seen as an important supplement to information from teachers. An undertaking was given that names of students and parents would remain anonymous in my reporting. My request was referred to the school's Board of Trustees. I subsequently received a letter advising that the request had been declined, stating the reason: *"As it is not our policy to have outside agencies interviewing parents we are not able to assist you in this matter"*.

Evaluation is a form of research. As such it has to meet standards of methodological rigor if conclusions are to have validity. Multiple methods and triangulation of observations contribute to methodological rigor.<sup>4</sup> The logic of triangulation is based on the premise that:

*No single method ever adequately solves the problem of rival causal factors...Because each method reveals different aspects of empirical reality, multiple methods of observation must be employed. This is termed triangulation.*<sup>5</sup>

The present evaluation achieved a degree of methodological triangulation through use of classroom observations, interviews with teachers, a case study supplied by a teacher and some quantitative test results. Notwithstanding, the research fell short with respect to data source triangulation, in having to rely too heavily on information from one source: i.e. teachers. This is not to imply an undervaluing of the opportunities offered by the teaching staff or to suggest in any way that the teachers were distorting information – quite the contrary. All school staff were very hospitable and helpful. Special thanks are given to the Head Teacher who was most helpful and generous with her time. The point is that people have different perspectives on, insights into, and knowledge of the same subject or event. Evaluation research gains richness and validity when it incorporates multiple knowledge sources and perspectives. Teachers know things about the children they teach that parents don't know. Equally, parents know things about their children that teachers will never know. Even when there is shared knowledge, perceptions and interpretations will vary. Parents are major stakeholders in their children's education.

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<sup>4</sup> Patton MQ (1987). *Qualitative Evaluation Methods*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

<sup>5</sup> Denzin NK (1978) *Sociological Methods: A Sourcebook*. New York: McGraw Hill. Cited in MQ Patton (1987) *Qualitative Evaluation Methods*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW: PHONICS AND WHOLE LANGUAGE METHODS OF LITERACY TEACHING**

Despite having “a very homogeneous education system with a uniform approach to reading instruction and intervention”<sup>6</sup>, New Zealand surveys show large disparities in literacy achievement in schools. While this observation dates back to a report written in 2002, the report’s authors are no less concerned in 2008 that disparities in literacy achievement appear not to have been significantly impacted by literacy teaching and remedial strategies. At the heart of the present evaluation are issues around the adequacy of Ministry of Education literacy teaching and intervention strategies in mainstream schools. Specifically, are the strategies broad enough to cater to the needs of children from diverse social backgrounds, who vary hugely in reading related knowledge and skills at school entry? This is a key question in assessing the contribution of the phonics teaching methods at Tyndale Park Christian School.

The Whole Language (WL) reading strategy that prevails within New Zealand state schools directs children to place emphasis on sentence contextual cues (guessing) rather than letter sound (phonics) strategies<sup>7</sup>.

*The focus of (the Whole Language) approach is on learning to read by reading, with minimal attention being given to the development of essential word level skills and strategies. Instead, beginning readers are urged to use preceding passage content, sentence context cues, and picture cues as the primary strategies for identifying unfamiliar words in text.*<sup>32</sup>

Reading Recovery constitutes the main thrust of the NZ Ministry of Education for reducing reading failure in schools. It is an early intervention strategy developed by Dr. Marie Clay (Auckland University) as a supplement to Whole Language Reading strategies, to help children who continue to demonstrate difficulties in learning to read after a year of formal reading instruction. Children selected for Reading Recovery are provided with 30-40 minutes “daily one-to one pull-out (i.e. from class) instruction” over a period of between 12 and 20 weeks by a specially trained Reading Recovery tutor.”<sup>8</sup> Reading Recovery is essentially a more intensive version of what occurs in regular New Zealand classrooms.<sup>9</sup>

Research by Massey University’s Dept. of Learning and Teaching Professor William E Tunmer and colleagues<sup>10</sup>, indicates that, while children with an abundance of literature cultural capital at school

<sup>6</sup> Tunmer WE, Chapman JW, Prochnow JE. (2002). Preventing negative Matthew Effects in at-risk readers: a retrospective study. Massey University. Final phase 1V report to the Ministry of Education, Wellington NZ.

<sup>7</sup> Bill Carlson. (2007). Reading Recovery: Just the Facts? AVKO Educational Research Foundation [www.avko.org/Essays/reading\\_recovery.htm](http://www.avko.org/Essays/reading_recovery.htm)

<sup>8</sup> Tunmer WE, Chapman JW, (2004?) Reading Recovery: distinguishing myth from reality. Massey University.

<sup>9</sup> Thompson GB (1993) Reading instruction for the initial years in New Zealand schools. In GE Thompson, WE Tunmer & T. Nicholson (Eds.) Reading Acquisition Processes. Clevedon UK: Multilingual Matters.

<sup>10</sup> Tunmer WE, Chapman JW, Prochnow JE. (2002). Preventing negative Matthew Effects in at-risk readers: a retrospective study. Massey University. Final phase 1V report to the Ministry of Education, Wellington NZ.

entry tend to respond well to Whole Language teaching methods, the same methods discriminate against 20-25% of NZ school children. Reading Recovery is not succeeding in lifting the poorest readers to class average, fuelling a negative Matthew Effect (the poor get poorer). Social class differences in home literacy environment underpin essential reading-related skills and knowledge at school entry.

The research highlights major shortcomings of Reading Recovery in terms of a) not adequately addressing deficiencies in phonological awareness and b) inadequacies in teacher training/professional development to sustain and reinforce gains made during Reading Recovery following return to regular classroom learning. In a recent Radio NZ Nine to Noon interview (June 2008)<sup>11</sup>, Professor Tunmer reiterated the same concerns, i.e. 2001- 2006 data show that “the gap between good readers and those who are struggling is large and persistent”. Reading Recovery is not working for students who are most at risk of not learning to read. Moreover, “teachers colleges are not properly preparing teachers for the range of literacy challenges they encounter in schools.” Mary Chamberlain, who was part of the same interview, offered reassurances that professional development issues are being addressed by the Ministry of Education.

#### **NOTE:**

I made some inquiries of Principals and Associate Principals (APs) of decile 1 schools in Papatoetoe, Otara and Manurewa, using my own networks. Their comments were indicative of an eclectic approach to Literacy teaching. Many families have no vision of engendering a better future for their children. Principals and teachers in these schools have learned to make things happen through being resourceful. In the words of one AP, “we use whatever works”. Schools are using a range of programmes, some involving phonics, others not. An oral language programme, e.g. ‘Talk to Learn’, is the starting point for some schools, before embarking on reading and writing. Common themes were children commencing school with little understanding of letter names and letter sounds and lacking basic skills and strategies. This is partly a reflection of the large percentage who have not participated in pre-school education (around 80% for one school). There is variation in availability of kindergartens and pre-schools with trained Early Childhood Education teachers. For instance, a school whose children are from the most socio-economically disadvantaged families has no kindergarten in the vicinity.

It may be that higher decile schools are more disposed to Whole Language methods. Verifying this was beyond the scope of the present evaluation.

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<sup>11</sup> Radio NZ Nine to Noon Kathryn Ryan 4/6/08 interview with Professor Wm Tunmer & Mary Chamberlain, Ministry of Education Group Manager for Curriculum Ed and Learning - 28 minute audio [www.radionz.co.nz](http://www.radionz.co.nz).

## *USE OF THE LITERACY RESOURCES*

There are 2 levels or grades in each class at Tyndale Park Christian School. Children do not move from grade 1 for Literacy teaching until they are able to read.

All classrooms have shared in the resources purchased with the AACT funding. Class sets and study guides purchased for use in grade 1-10 classrooms were chosen to facilitate literacy teaching using a phonics method. Once children have mastered phonics fundamentals at grade 1, Christian principles are embedded in the stories. For example, I observed use of a grade 2 reader, which prompted a simple discussion of feeling left out. 'Work ethic' was the subject of a reader entitled "Mr Toil" used with a year 5-6 class. Book titles chosen for years 9-13 were from the ACE curriculum list. Some of the themes I noted were truth and wisdom, courage and being willing to take a stand, 'success' in Christian terms, humility, justice, temperance, beauty, joy and peace, faith and hope, love, time and eternity.

All children have a dictionary on their desk. They are age grade appropriate, beginning with 'Jolly (picture) dictionaries' for grade 1. Children are encouraged to use the dictionaries and thesauruses (grade 7 and above). A point of interest for me was the inclusion in grade 2 readers of words with which children would not be familiar, but which they were able to read by sounding out, e.g. retorted, retreated, parakeet, clambered.

As well as class sets, each classroom has a small mini- library of books appropriate to the grade level. I noted that some of the books being used in the school are old and showing their age.

## OUTCOMES

Quantitative assessments of achievement were derived from 2008 Progressive Achievement Testing and PRETOS. Progressive Achievement Tests are intended primarily to assist classroom teachers to make decisions about the kinds of teaching materials, methods and programmes most suitable to their students.<sup>12</sup> They provide information “to assist classroom teachers in determining the levels of development attained by their students in the basic skills of reading comprehension and the use of vocabulary”.<sup>13</sup> The proof reading tests of spelling (PRETOS) devised for children aged 8-13 are broad measures of a child’s ability to discriminate between misspelt words and correctly spelt words. Presented in the context of meaningful paragraphs, the tests provide a measure of spelling achievement within the context of a proof-reading task, as well as giving diagnostic information about individual pupils’ spelling accomplishments. The abilities tapped by PRETOS are broader than those associated with the traditional assessment of spelling.<sup>14</sup>

### *Progressive Achievement Test Results*

Results obtained from Progressive Achievement Tests “are converted first into ten levels of achievement....These level scores can then be converted into age percentile rank norms (which) indicate the relative position of each child when compared with a nationally representative group of similar age.”<sup>15</sup>

Tyndale Park Christian School provided April 2008 PAT age percentile results for 69 grade 4-10 students. Results for reading comprehension showed that 64% of the students were equal to or above the national median. Of that 64%, a high proportion (77%) were in the top one third. PAT age percentile results for reading vocabulary for the same group showed that 61% achieved equal to or better than the median. Of that 61%, 64% were in the top one third.

With respect to reading comprehension and reading vocabulary, just under half of students who were below the median (44% and 48% respectively) had been at Tyndale Park Christian School for one year or less. Around a quarter of students who were above the median (23% and 29% respectively) had been at Tyndale Park Christian School for 1 year or less. Some commenced in January 2008 or more recently. Some of the lower percentile rankings were for children from non-English speaking backgrounds. New students (i.e. 1 year or less) were most numerous in grades 9 and 10, due a transfer in of students from another Christian school which closed its secondary teaching unit.

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<sup>12</sup> Reid NA, Elley WB. (undated). Progressive Achievement Tests of Reading: Teachers Manual.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*

<sup>14</sup> [www.nzcer.org.nz/default.php?products\\_id=415](http://www.nzcer.org.nz/default.php?products_id=415)

<sup>15</sup> Reid NA, Elley WB. (undated). Progressive Achievement Tests of Reading: Teachers Manual.

### *PRETOS Results*

The tests are devised to provide both recognition and production scores. The recognition score is a measure of the ability to recognise misspelt words. The production score is a measure of the child's ability to spell a word correctly, having recognised it as an error. Scoring is in percentiles based on a normative sample.

The school provided PRETOS recognition and production results for 42 grade 4-8 students, 2 of which I excluded because they were for students who were new to the school. 90% of the 40 remaining students (36/40) were above the median for recognition and 92.5% (37/40) were above the median for production. These are excellent results.

### *Case Study*

A case study provided by the school showing gains made by an individual student from a non-English speaking background is not included for reasons of maintaining confidentiality.

### *Classroom Observations*

My main conclusion from observations was that Phonics teaching methods give students a set of tools for reading. Often students are presented with words that are quite new to them and they vocalize them correctly. This was particularly noticeable in the case of grades 1-4 children. At the same time children are made aware that, while the phonics tools apply most of the time, some words are exceptions and have to be memorised. Students are encouraged to use their dictionaries, which are within easy reach on their desks.

### *Summary*

The results indicate a high success rate at Tyndale Park Christian School in assisting children to read, comprehend and spell at their chronological age level or better. It is of interest that, for both reading comprehension and reading vocabulary, almost half of the students with a percentile ranking below the national median had been at Tyndale Park Christian School for less than a year. It is not known whether students who had been at Tyndale Park Christian School for 1 year or less had any exposure to phonics teaching methods in their previous schools.

A question that was of particular interest was whether students in general were advantaged by the phonics method of literacy teaching at the school. PAT scores on their own did not justify any conclusions on that question. For example, the same PAT score may represent excellent achievement for one student, but poor achievement for another who is not being extended. If a school population is achieving at a high level, it is always for a combination of reasons. At Tyndale Park Christian School, possible contributing factors might be that parents are actively supporting and enhancing their children's learning, that the children have superior study and homework habits, or possibly the school is attracting higher ability children, etc. The mere fact that parents are willing to make sacrifices to pay for their children's education suggests that parental interest and support is true of children at Tyndale

Park Christian School. And most certainly there is an emphasis on work ethic, which could be expected to foster good study and homework habits. Something that was evident from my classroom observations and children's accounts of books they like was that reading is an enjoyable activity for most, if not all of these children.

PAT scores show that Phonics teaching methods are working, but whether Phonics teaching methods are opening doors that would otherwise remain unopened, it is impossible to say. Interviews with parents of children who had been in schools which rely on Whole Language methods of literacy teaching would have provided a more complete picture.

The PRETOS results for spelling were more persuasive evidence of the merits of phonics teaching methods because achievement was at such a high level. Undoubtedly, children's use of dictionaries also contributed to the very commendable spelling results. The fact that children made good use of their dictionaries was a reflection of teachers' active encouragement of dictionary use, their insistence on correct spelling and not settling for less, and each child having a dictionary within arm's reach.

## CONCLUSIONS

At Tyndale Park Christian School, there is a very strong emphasis on building sound foundations in the basics. As well as offering a Christian education, a feature of Tyndale Park Christian School that further distinguishes it from most mainstream schools is a resolute dedication to phonics methods for teaching literacy. A successful 2006 funding application to the AACT made possible the replacement of worn out reading sets and library books and the addition of improved, up to date resources seen as more effective for advancing the school's literacy programme across the school. In 2007 AACT funded dictionaries and thesauruses enabled all children at the school to have an age appropriate dictionary on their desk and access to a thesaurus. One to two years on, it is clear that these resources are valued and are being well cared for.

Results derived from NZCER<sup>16</sup> validated assessment tools indicate a high success rate at Tyndale Park Christian School in assisting children to read, comprehend and spell at their chronological age level or better. In the absence of other information about the children, it was not possible to arrive at any conclusions from PAT results about whether or not they were advantaged by the phonics method of literacy teaching at the school. The PRETOS results for spelling were more persuasive evidence of the merits of phonics teaching methods because achievement was at such a high level. Undoubtedly, children's use of dictionaries also contributed to the very commendable spelling results. The fact that children made good use of their dictionaries was a reflection of teacher's active encouragement of dictionary use, their insistence on correct spelling and not settling for less, and each child having a dictionary within arm's reach.

The Auckland Airport Community Trust receives funding each year from Auckland International Airport Limited and distributes these funds by way of an annual contestable grants distribution process. To date the Trust has allocated \$1.25 million and it was the view of the Trustees that it was timely for processes for the distribution of grants to be independently evaluated. One of the tasks of the evaluation was to explore impacts of the AACT's funding decisions, not only on direct beneficiaries, but upon the wider community. Interest in wider community benefits was a reflection of the AACT's perception of its accountability to the general public and obligation to be open and transparent in making funding decisions.

Tyndale Park Christian School's resolute faith in phonics methods for teaching literacy, translated into practice, emerged early in the evaluation as an area where Tyndale Park Christian School was ostensibly filling a gap that existed in a community where Whole Language teaching methods held sway. Teachers offered anecdotal accounts of parents who had removed their children from other schools and enrolled them at Tyndale Park Christian School for that very reason. Unfortunately, it was not possible to explore the teachers' claims by interviewing parents. Parents would have been commenting from a different perspective and knowledge base of their child. Most importantly, parents are major stakeholders in their children's education. From my own professional perspective,

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<sup>16</sup> New Zealand Council for Educational Research

triangulation of data sources is a criterion for 'good' evaluation research. Despite an offer from the AACT Administrator and the evaluator to meet with them and discuss concerns (this was not taken up), the school's Trust Board adhered to its policy of "not allowing outside agencies to interview parents." The wishes of the school were respected. Consequently, while there can be little doubt that children at Tyndale Park School derived, and are still deriving benefit as direct beneficiaries of the AACT's funding grants in 2006 and 2007, there was not sufficient evidence to reach any conclusions about the contribution that Tyndale Park Christian School is making to the wider community through its methods of teaching literacy.

