



The 'PM Readers' versus 'Ready to Read' Stories as Instructional Reading Texts: Some Comparative Analyses

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INTRODUCTION

There are often calls for comparisons to be made about the suggested effectiveness of different teaching approaches. This is particularly the case with literacy teaching. Sometimes such calls are made that compare approaches, methods or materials and over different time periods. Such comparisons are often difficult to make, due to things like teacher effects including age, qualifications, experience, class size and the curriculum requirements of the time. However, the information presented in this paper is designed to make a simple comparison between some characteristics of a selection of the New Zealand basic reading texts that have been used in regular junior (i.e., years 1-3) classrooms over the last three decades. The main purpose of the paper is to present data that compares some of the characteristics in two sets of Department of Education/Ministry of Education reading series that have formed the basis of New Zealand junior class texts for teaching reading since 1975.

While it is true that most junior class teachers don't rely *solely* on the 'free-to-schools' *Ready to Read* series of books for their *instructional* reading programmes, these books certainly feature very strongly in their programmes. The main reason for this is that these books are distributed free to all state and integrated schools on the basis of pupil enrolments. Most schools also purchase other junior readers to supplement the standard *Ready to Read* texts. However, because most junior class teachers are very familiar with the *Ready to Read* series (and use it as the 'main diet' for their programmes), this series formed the focus for the paper. The *Ready to Read* series also features strongly as a resource in the Reading Recovery programme. The *Ready to Read* series has been available since the early 1960s and was revised in the mid 1980s (see Nicholson, 2000).

The Price Milburn (PM) Reading Series

Appearing in parallel with the *Ready to Read* series was the Price Milburn (PM) series, but as the *Ready to Read* series have increased in number, the *PM Readers* began to lose popularity with schools. A second reason why the *PM Readers* became less popular was the perceived lack of 'natural language' structures in the sentence patterns in these books. This was very different from the *Ready to Read* books in which the language structures are seen to more accurately reflect children's natural language. As an example, words like 'Mother' and 'Father' in the *PM Readers* become 'Mum' and 'Dad' in the *Ready to Read* books. The *PM Readers* have been updated and reprinted in the

1990s, and although it is gaining popularity again in many schools, it does not generally feature ahead of the *Ready to Read* books as an instructional teaching series. However, the *PM Readers* were used in most schools up until the mid 1990s, and indeed, in many of these schools was probably the main series used for early instructional reading up to book reading level 14.

The Supplementary Readers

Prior to 1986 the progression through the four colours (i.e., red, yellow, blue, green) of the 'Little (PM) Books' was followed by the Department of Education supplementary readers with titles such as: *Hungry Lambs*, *Boat Day*, *Donkey's Egg*, and *Sweet Porridge*, before teachers allowed children to embark on the school journals. During the early 1980s a parallel *Ready to Read* series of supplementary books including titles such as: *The Big Bed*, *Horrakapotchkin*, *Giant Soup*, *Crinkum Crankum*, *Night is a Blanket* and *Dog Talk* were introduced for children who had successfully completed the earlier 14 book levels.

To bridge the gap into the regular school journals the Ministry of Education has published (since 1984) an additional *Ready to Read* series of special journals titled *Junior Journals*. These journals contain stories for children who have equivalent reading ages between 7.5 and 8 years (which represent the 'top' levels on the *Ready to Read* colour wheel).

The current situation

Although schools use a variety of texts and series when teaching reading in junior classes, most schools make regular use of the stand-alone *Ready to Read* stories for instructional reading lessons. Furthermore, the *Junior Journals* are also frequently used to cater for the students who may be reading at the upper levels of the colour wheel. Success with these journals usually ensures that the students are able to then read the early (part one) regular school journals.

METHODOLOGY

The investigation

The purpose of this paper is to compare some text-level components of the key early reading materials that were used in primary schools during the period between 1970 to 1985 with the reading materials used in schools between 1986 and the present time.

The main sets of reading materials compared in the study included the following:

- *1970-1985* – The Price Milburn *PM Reader* Series, the early *Ready to Read* Supplementals (e.g., *Big Bed*, *Horrakapochkin* etc.) and the Department of Education's 'Supplemental Series' (e.g., *Hungry Lambs*, *Boat Day* etc.).
- *1986-present* – The *Ready to Read* Series included both general stand-alone storybooks and the *Junior Journals*.

Text-level component comparisons

The following two text-level components for each series were analysed:

- The average word counts per story
- The average number of illustrations per words per story

Hypotheses for the investigation

It was hypothesized at the outset that the average word count per story would be smaller in the later (i.e., post-1986) *Ready to Read* reading materials compared to the pre-1986 *Ready to Read* series, (including the early Department of Education Supplementary *Ready to Read* books) and the *PM Reader* Series. If this hypothesis was shown to be correct, then it was further hypothesized that, *by the time they reach the upper book reading levels (i.e., above level 21), most pupils would have read more words in their instructional reading lessons prior to 1986 than they perhaps currently do.*

The second aspect of the study investigated the relationship between the numbers of illustrations per words per story for each series. A major emphasis in current instructional reading methodologies in New Zealand junior classes is to encourage (beginning) readers to (where possible) focus on the illustrations as a way to identify many unfamiliar words. While this strategy may be helpful at the lowest book reading levels, it becomes less effective as the levels increase in complexity. It was hypothesized that there would be more illustrations per word count in the post 1986 *Ready to Read* series of books and journals than in the parallel earlier series of *PM Readers* and Departmental supplementary readers. And, this would contrast with the pre 1986 materials where there were less illustrations per word count.

Instructional reading levels

Comparisons were made between the different series and for each reading level. The *Ready to Read* 'colour wheel' levels (using the **Guided** reading levels) were used as the basis for the comparisons. Table 1 presents a summary of the comparative series. The **Guided (G)** reading level on the *Ready to Read* colour wheel was selected because the focus of the study was to investigate word counts and illustration frequencies on texts used for instructional reading purposes.

Table 1: Summary of the Reading Materials Analysed as a Function of Reading Level and Date

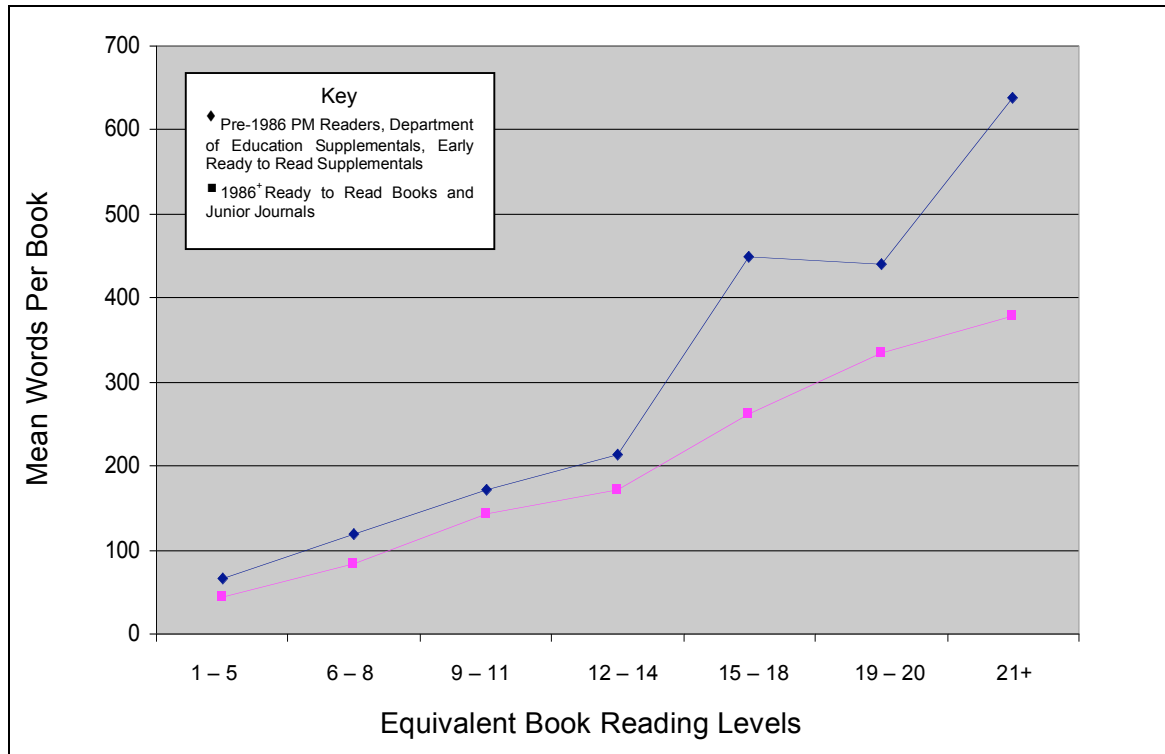
<i>Equivalent Book Level</i>	Pre 1986 (n=86)		1986-Present (n = 87)	
	<i>Series</i>	<i>Number of stories analysed</i>	<i>Series</i>	<i>Number of stories analysed</i>
	<i>PM Readers</i>		<i>Ready to Read Stories</i>	
1-5		15		22
6-8		16		10
9-11		17		11
12-14		13		10
15-18	<i>Department of Education Supplementals</i>		<i>Ready to Read Stories</i>	
	Hungry Lambs	2		13
	Boat Day	2		
	<i>Ready to Read Supplementals</i>			
	Big Bed	2		
	Horrapochkin	2		
19-20	<i>Department of Education Supplementals</i>		<i>Ready to Read Stories</i>	
	Donkey's Egg	2		5
	<i>Ready to Read Supplementals</i>		<i>Junior Journals (Ready to Read)</i>	
	Crinkum Crankum	2		9
	Giant Soup	2		
	Mauí & The Sun	1		
	Nana under the Plumtree	1		
21+	<i>Department of Education Supplementals</i>		<i>Ready to Read Story</i>	
	Sweet Porridge	2		1
	Stars in the Sky	2		
	<i>Ready to Read Supplementals</i>		<i>Junior Journals (Ready to Read)</i>	
	Dog Talk	2		6
	Night is a Blanket	2		
	Great Grumbler & The Wonder Tree	1		

RESULTS

Words per story

The data in Figure 1 show the differential word counts (per story) for the predominant instructional reading texts used in junior classes prior to 1986 compared with the word counts in the more recent *Ready to Read* series.

Figure 1: Word Counts Per Story as a Function of Publication Series



For the first year (i.e., levels 1-14) of instructional reading a simple word count comparison between the words in the *PM Readers* and the *Ready to Read* story books was investigated. (The Department of Education and Ministry of Education supplemental readers are used for comparative analysis only beyond reading level 14). For these early book reading levels (i.e., 1 to 14) it is apparent that the number of words per story was greater in the *PM Readers* than for the *Ready to Read* stories. The earliest *PM Readers* (i.e., levels 1-5), contained on average, 67 words per story compared with only 45 words per story for the *Ready to Read* stories at these levels. This word count difference remained greater for the *PM Readers* up to level 14 where the mean words per story for the *PM Readers* was 213 versus only 171 words per story for the equivalent *Ready to Read* stories. This word count difference increases dramatically (and again in favour of the pre 1986 texts) as the reading levels increase in difficulty. At the book reading levels 15–18 the pre 1986 texts contained on average, 448 words per story compared with only 261 words per story for the *Ready to Read* stories. By the time the reading materials reach the book level of 21+ the pre 1986 stories averaged 638 words per story compared with only 379 words for the *Ready to Read* texts.

Illustrations per page and per words

The results in Tables 2 and 3 show the average numbers of pages, illustrations and words per story as a function of book reading level and date. The layouts of the *PM Readers* (i.e., levels 1-14) are all consistent with the text

printed on one page followed by the accompanying illustration on the adjacent page. However, both the text and the accompanying illustrations in the *Ready to Read* stories (at book levels 1-14) are generally presented on the same page. There are also generally fewer words accompanying each illustration, where the text and the illustration appear on the same page (which occurred in the *Ready to Read* series). There is not much difference between the illustrations per story count for the first 14 book reading levels. However, the main difference between the illustrations-to-pages count for the pre and post 1986 series (beyond reading level 14) is that the earlier series include a lower average number of illustrations per page than are present in the later (i.e., post 1986) series. In fact, it is common for most of the stories in the later *Ready to Read* texts (including the *Junior Journals*) to still include at least one illustration per page.

Table 2: Average Number of Pages, Illustrations and Words Per Story as a Function of Book Level and Date of Use

<i>Equivalent Book Level</i>	Pre 1986			Post 1986		
	<i>Pages</i>	<i>Illustrations</i>	<i>Words</i>	<i>Pages</i>	<i>Illustrations</i>	<i>Words</i>
1-5	15.0	8.3	67.2	7.7	7.7	45.8
6-8	15.0	8.9	118.1	9.8	9.4	84.6
9-11	15.0	8.5	171.3	11.0	11.1	143.4
12-14	15.0	8.1	213.1	12.7	12.7	171.6
15-18	10.5	9.5	448.5	10.2	10.9	261.3
19-20	10.8	7.5	441.5	8.3	8.6	334.6
21+	8.4	6.1	638.1	8.5	7.8	379.4

This high incidence of illustrations continues throughout the entire *Ready to Read* series from the earliest levels up to the highest levels. It seems clear that the publishers of this series view the presence of illustrations as a major component to the stories.

The data presented in Table 3 shows this trend more clearly with a summary of the illustrations-to-words ratio for each of the book reading levels as a function of the date. For the first 11 book reading levels it is evident that the reader is presented with fewer illustrations per words in the *PM Reader* series compared with the *Ready to Read* Series. By book level 12 it is even more apparent that there are more illustrations-to-words in the *Ready to Read* texts since 1986 compared to the pre 1986 *PM Readers* and Department supplementary readers. In other words, the pupils who were given reading instruction using the *PM Readers* and Department of Education supplementary readers prior to 1986 were presented with texts that had fewer illustrations per words than is currently the situation. This is further evidence that the current (Ministry of Education-driven) instructional literacy philosophy views reading development as a process that is heavily dependent on context-based information sources and in particular, the illustrations. Furthermore, this illustration-based philosophy is emphasized throughout all reading levels of the colour wheel. At the top level (for the post-1986 *Ready to Read* stories), for

example, there is an illustration for every 48 words of text compared to an illustration for every 104 words in the pre-1986 series.

Table 3: Summary of the Illustrations to Words Count as a Function of Book Reading Levels and Date of Use

Equivalent Book Reading Levels	Pre-1986	Post-1986
1-5	1:8.3	1:5.9
6-8	1:13.2	1:9.0
9-11	1:12.1	1:12.9
12-14	1:26.2	1:13.5
15-18	1:47.2	1:23.9
19-20	1:58.8	1:38.9
21+	1:104.6	1:48.6

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper compared the word and page counts and numbers of illustrations per story in two junior class reading series (including, the Price Milburn (PM) 'little books', some early Department of Education supplemental readers, and Ministry of Education *Ready to Read* supplementary books) with some more recent *Ready to Read* texts. It was hypothesized that the numbers of words per story in the pre-1986 instructional reading materials would be higher than they are in the current *Ready to Read* texts. It was also hypothesized that there would be a greater frequency of illustrations per words per story in the more recent (i.e., post-1986) instructional texts than was the case prior to 1986. Analyzing data from a total of 86 (pre-1986) texts and 87 (post-1986) texts, it was shown that both these hypotheses were correct. At first glance it appears that prior to 1986, the pupils (in their first two years of school) were required to *read more words* at every book reading level during instructional reading than is currently the case. The data also suggest that there were less illustrations per words per story prior to 1986 than is currently the case. This finding suggests that the publishers of the *Ready to Read* series of early instructional readers support the view that it is important for early readers to continue to rely on and make use of context-based sources of information (and in particular the illustrations), to help them identify unfamiliar words. While this strategy may be acceptable during the very early reading stages (e.g., up to level 8) it soon becomes ineffective as a method of word identification. It is important that young readers develop effective phonological processing skills as early as possible; however, a continued high presence of illustrations per words per story only encourages a continued reliance on such information (at the expense of word-level information).

In sum, the following points are made:

1. Schools do not use just these series of readers in their junior reading classes. There are also many other series such as *Story Box* and *Story Chest Readers* and the *Oxford Reading Tree* series which form part of the junior class instructional

reading programmes in many schools. However, because the *Ready to Read* series of stories are published by the Ministry of Education, and are supplied free to all state and integrated schools, it is very common for this series to be used for instructional reading lessons in most junior classrooms.

2. It is common for children to be promoted through the lower book levels after reading very small numbers of stories at a particular level. Sometimes promotion may be based on successful reading of less than five titles at a given level and this is particularly true of the *Ready to Read* books. However, promotion through the different colours (hence different levels) of the *PM Readers* seldom occurred before all (or most) of the titles at a particular level were read first. Given that there were at least 15 different titles at any one colour level, this represented a better opportunity for consolidation of reading skills before promotion occurred than would be the case with the *Ready to Read* series.
3. Furthermore, given that there were higher word counts in the *PM Readers* than the *Ready to Read* series, it appears that early promotion through the lower book levels can sometimes present teachers with an inflated rating of the true reading ability of some children. While this may not necessarily be a problem with children who are successfully developing early reading fluency, it may be an issue with children who have reading difficulties.
4. The higher frequency of illustrations-to-words in the more recent *Ready to Read* series (through all levels up to 21+) appears to reinforce the view that early reading development is based heavily on the reader's ability to gain meaning from illustrations. The high numbers of illustrations present in these texts are likely to encourage teachers to have children focus on these when identifying unfamiliar words (rather than encourage word-level identification strategies). Although Shouler (2003) correctly acknowledges that the presence of 'supportive' illustrations in the *PM Readers* 'help the reader comprehend the text when they illustrate information central to the text' (p. 39), the continuing presence of high numbers of illustrations at the higher levels of the colour wheel may actually discourage a word-based focus. This appears to be an issue with the *Ready to Read* series.

Probably the main conclusion to be drawn from this paper is that for children who are experiencing reading problems in their first year of school, (and up to book reading level 14) the use of the *PM Readers* may offer a more consistent consolidated resource for teaching early reading skills in guided reading lessons. There is also an absence of repetitive sentence structures in the *PM Readers* compared to the *Ready to Read* books where such repetition continues to occur even up to book level 14 in the *Ready to Read* series. The text *Te Tio Bay* (Johnson, 2003), for example, begins with the sentence 'The round sun shines, the round sun shines, down at Te Tio Bay'. The story continues with each page beginning with an opening repetition. Such repetition encourages

memorization of text at the expense of word-level processing abilities. This may not be a particular problem at the very early reading levels, but should not be encouraged beyond the initial levels.

Young beginning readers need to be exposed to many different forms of texts. The *Ready to Read* and *PM Readers* are two such series that are used in many schools. Most schools would correctly use a variety of texts in their junior classes. However, the concern is that because the *Ready to Read* books are available free to all state and integrated primary schools that this series may well become the main source of reading material used for instructional reading lessons. This paper suggests that there may be some shortcomings with having a reliance on this series as the main source for instructional reading purposes. This is particularly a problem with children who have difficulties learning to read.

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