



## TLRI interview: Jeff Smith on NEMP (National Education Monitoring Project)

Jeff Smith says NEMP is a treasure trove of research data and pointers to research questions. And it is open to anyone interested in probing.

For 15 years, NEMP, based at Otago University's Educational Assessment Research Unit, has assessed New Zealand children on almost all aspects of the curriculum. Each curriculum area goes under the spotlight on a rotating four-year cycle. In each case the monitoring project assesses the work of a random sample of 1,440 Year 4 students and 1,440 Year 8 students from 260 schools.

“One of the big advantages for researchers is that if you see something in NEMP, you can say it's the case for all New Zealand, because of the nature of the sample. It is not like being a researcher and persuading a principal to let you look at one group of kids in one school,” he says.

NEMP consists of a variety of tasks that students are asked to do, sometimes one to one with a teacher, sometimes working independently and sometimes as a group. The latter enables judgments to be made about how well students work in teams.

The information is collected in different forms: videotapes, observations from teachers working one to one with students, and student written material. University students are used to mark simple written material, whereas a panel of school teachers are called in where judgement calls are needed for more complex material. The resulting data are analysed statistically and reports are then written that try to capture the findings across the particular curriculum area.

Jeff says the reports are thorough but only go so far. “We do look at things like the relationship between gender and performance, but that is kind of where we stop. There are a lot of additional questions that could be asked of the data sets.”

“Anybody could say ‘I'm really interested in science and students in the bottom four deciles’, and we could ship you off the data. You might want to look at gender differences in processing and deeper thinking tasks. So you could go back through the tasks, categorise them, make a scale and analyse them to your heart's content.”

He has a particular interest in art and would love to do more work with those data sets, particularly comparing art with other subjects.

“One of the questions we look at is when they talk about their art, did they show self-regulation—monitoring the process and self-evaluating? This is on the video tapes but it is not the stuff that ever gets

analysed in the final report. There are an untold number of stories there. Our primary focus is on reporting what children know and can do, so the more academically oriented questions are left until later or for others.”

Maths is another area where he believes the data could yield answers to many research questions.

“If there is someone interested in maths education, but they’re really not sure what the issues are—give us a call! We really want to make NEMP as useful as possible. I love having these data sets looked at.”

Videotapes in the collection include children chasing balls and running round cones as part of assessing the physical education curriculum.

“New Zealand with its Push Play campaign is very interested in the physical fitness of our school kids. You want to know how many kids are overweight? We’ve got it on tape.”

As you’d expect, there are rich NEMP data on all aspects of literacy. One of the areas Jeff would like to see more analysis of is the link between listening skills and reading comprehension.

“At the elementary level, if you knew how often kids get read to at home, you could probably predict their comprehension skills. I think a lot of the problem we see with reading comprehension is kids with listening problems.”

Buried in the NEMP data is much that is relevant to the key competencies in the new school curriculum.

“You could go back and rescore according to key competencies, such as the ability to work with others, managing self and so on.”

How do researchers access NEMP data? The reports themselves are readily available, and Jeff says they are very open to having researchers turn up in Dunedin.

“They can come to Dunedin and review tapes—we’ll stick them in a room. Some people ask for a selection of the tapes and we send them off.”

Material is retained for four years, so each curriculum area can be compared with the previous round, but lack of storage means only a random sample of the raw data—about a quarter of the total—is kept beyond that.

There are many areas he would like to investigate if he had the time, particularly in art and reading. He would like to look in more detail at how children develop the ability to really comprehend and to engage with reading.

Another area that fascinates him is the interaction between students and the teacher administrators of the tests. They are trained teachers who are brought in for the task—they don’t know the children.

“Some of them can get the children to do anything, and with others it’s much more perfunctory. You can just see it when you look at the tape. What is it the good ones are doing that gets the kids to work harder, to engage? It’s not just enthusiasm, it’s something more. Maybe it’s the essence of a good teacher—and it’s all on tape.”

*Professor Jeff Smith is co-director of the National Education Monitoring Project at the University of Otago.*