

THE DRAFT LITERACY LEARNING PROGRESSIONS- RATIONALE FOR KEY DECISIONS

Introduction

This paper provides the rationale for key decisions that shaped the draft Literacy Learning Progressions. The nature of the development meant that it drew heavily on the expertise and experience of a small development team. Although the references cited at the end of this paper comprise the key evidence, and description of research and theory that informed the team's work, many decisions were made on the basis of the professional judgment of these experts. That is how new knowledge is created. The progressions will be in draft form throughout 2008, providing an opportunity to check how well these decisions rest with a wider group of experts, including those who will be using the progressions with their learners.

Background

In late 2006, the Minister of Education directed the Ministry to develop an aspirational goal and associated expectations for student progress and achievement in literacy. This arose from concern that the evidence from data on literacy achievement was still showing a group of learners who were not making the progress they needed to make in order to achieve success in their schooling. The Minister agreed to the Ministry's proposal to develop literacy learning progressions within the context of reframing the national Literacy Strategy. In particular, the Literacy Strategy will increase its emphasis on raising teachers' expectations and ensuring that teachers focus on accelerating early literacy learning.

Purpose of the Literacy Learning Progressions

The purpose of the draft Literacy Learning Progressions is to provide teachers with a professional tool that outlines the competencies their students need if they are to meet the reading and writing demands of the New Zealand Curriculum. The literacy learning progressions describe the knowledge and skills the students need to have developed at specific points in their schooling if they are to engage with the texts and tasks of the curriculum, and make expected progress.

Developing a Conceptual Framework for the Literacy Learning Progressions

Early Thinking around Scope, Content, and Structure

The Ministry of Education determined at the outset that the progressions had to build on existing resources and approaches to literacy teaching and learning in New Zealand schools, as well as be aligned to the English curriculum. These existing resources and approaches are underpinned by the definition of literacy that:

Literacy is the ability to understand, respond to, and use those forms of language that are required by society and valued by individuals and communities

Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5-8 p18

Using this definition, the Ministry has developed guidelines for effective teaching that are based on the understanding that literacy learning has three main aspects:

- learning the code of written language
- making meaning of texts
- thinking critically about texts¹

These three aspects provided the **scope** of the progressions. The **content** was developed within that scope by determining components for reading and writing. The early thinking about both the scope and content was then checked against sources such as the *Report of the National Reading Panel* (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Preliminary work then involved using that scope and content to explore a number of options for developing a **structure** that would meet the project's objectives. One option was to develop profiles of readers and writers at six monthly intervals as they develop their expertise along typical pathways. An alternative was to develop more detail under the framework provided by the English curriculum.

Early development also included identifying the knowledge and skills that are common to both reading and writing, and some work was done to draft a single set of progressions for these particular components, for example the development of vocabulary.

There was discussion about the possibility of separating knowledge and skills (for example as they are in the Number Framework), but this approach did not seem to

¹ The ways in which these three interrelated aspects develop are described in the Ministry's handbooks, *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1-4* and *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5-8* (Ministry of Education 2003a, 2006)

work easily for reading and writing. The decision was made to integrate them along the lines of the competencies model developed in the OECD project, *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies* (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005). It was considered that this approach was more in keeping with the ways in which reading and writing strategies have been thought about and taught in New Zealand schools.

The team reviewed the curriculum and assessment frameworks used in other systems for the purpose of clarifying expectations for students' progress and achievement in literacy learning, to see how they were structured, in particular how they dealt with students' increasing range, fluency and independence. Some of these are expressed as national benchmarks, for example the Australian literacy benchmarks for years 3, 5, and 7 (Curriculum Corporation, 1998).

The *draft Foundation Learning Progressions* that had been developed for the adult/tertiary sector also provided a model of how learners' knowledge and skills could be described at successive points as they built their expertise in reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Tertiary Education Commission, 2006).

Consultation with the National Literacy Reference Group (NLRG)

The Ministry established the National Literacy Reference Group in 2005 to provide advice on the reframing of the Literacy Strategy for schools. This group meets annually and was convened in June 2007 to guide the development of the Literacy Learning Progressions. Members were presented with a draft conceptual framework and asked to reflect on a number of questions.

Questions for the NLRG

- Where should the Reading & Writing Progressions start and end?
- What should the “signposts” represent?
- How complete should each “signpost” be?
- How specific should they be?
- How should we describe and organise the content for reading and writing (the components)?
- How do we deal with constrained and unconstrained skills and knowledge, and the relationship between the components?
- How do we deal with the iterative nature of learning? And the complexity? But still ensure that expectations are clear?
- How much do we need to say about texts and tasks?
- What “overlays” or exemplification would help teachers to personalise learning for their students?
- What links should be made to other tools and resources?

As well as providing clear guidance through their responses to these questions, the NLRG also articulated what they considered to be risks, in particular that the progressions could become the de facto curriculum. The group reinforced the specification that the progressions had to be clearly aligned with existing documents, including the draft framework for English language learning.

The Brief for Developing the Literacy Learning Progressions

With the input from the NLRG, the Ministry refined its brief for the development of the Literacy Learning Progressions in early July 2007. The progressions had to:

- be set in context of New Zealand Curriculum and the Literacy Strategy.
- align, where possible, with current literacy materials (including assessment tools) used in New Zealand schools and the theories about literacy learning these are based on. In particular, the Literacy Learning Progressions had to reflect the articulation of practice outlined in the Ministry of Education's publications, *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1 to 4*, and *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5-8*².
- make links between reading and writing, and highlight where appropriate, the importance of oral language in underpinning reading and writing.
- make the expectations for student progress and achievement clear. Expectations at specific points could be a mix of actual and aspirational achievement.
- be produced in a way that enabled teachers to easily engage in the content as a whole, possibly even produced as a wall mural. In particular, the document needed to be "slim".

² These handbooks, which were developed on the recommendation of the Literacy Taskforces (1999) are based on the evidence about dimensions of effective literacy practice identified in both New Zealand and international studies.

The Development Process (July to September 2007)

Expertise of the Development Team

The development team comprised academics, researchers, curriculum developers, and professional learning developers³. The team was supported by a writer, an editor, and a designer all of whom were very familiar with the literacy materials provided for New Zealand schools. Where possible, the team consulted other experts and drew on research to inform decision-making. However, decisions were also made on the basis of the team's professional judgment, based on their collective extensive experience in both national and school-based literacy research and development.

An Iterative Process

The development itself took place over a four month period, and at a time when most of the team were already busy with other work. This meant that the project director and the writer worked with the rest of the team in small sub-groups and on an individual basis, in an iterative process.

Throughout the development, feedback was sought from teachers, leaders and other educators who would be key users of the proposed progressions. These users were shown draft prototypes of the progressions, and their comment was sought on aspects such as scope and specificity of the competency descriptors. They were asked about their use of current assessment tools, school-based tools and their teaching and learning needs. They were also asked to highlight any risks they were concerned about, so that these could be addressed during the development.

Design-Lead Development

From the outset, the development team worked with an idea of what the progressions should look like in their finished form. A designed prototype was drawn-up that met the specification that the progressions were to be both "clear" and "slim". In particular, teachers needed to be able to see the full set of progressions at a glance. The constraints determined by the prototype helped the development team to be disciplined in their decision making about content. It also dictated elements such as the way colour could be used to code various aspects as well as how the content could be structures (for example sub-headings are not used in the

³ The members are listed in Appendix One

competency descriptors because of the potential to create confusion with the themes used to structure English in the New Zealand Curriculum).

The basis for key decisions taken during the development

The draft Literacy Learning Progressions are intended to support the implementation of two key aspects of the Government's schooling strategy: the national Literacy Strategy and the revised New Zealand Curriculum. This positioning underpinned decisions about what the progressions would cover and how they would be structured.

Scope and Content for Reading and Writing

The national Literacy Strategy determined the definition of literacy and the approach to literacy learning and teaching that underpins the progressions as well as providing the framework to connect the teaching tools and texts that are used in the exemplification.

The components for reading and writing are based on the aspects of literacy acquisition described in the Ministry's handbooks, *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1-4* and *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5-8*. There are some slight shifts in focus that were reached after considering more recent work on the dimensions of effective literacy practice (for example, Snow et al, 2005; Pressley, 2006). In particular there is more emphasis on developing students' knowledge about text types as well as more focus on both the development of grammar and vocabulary. Motivation and metacognition were also considered to be critical dimensions of reading and writing, but the team decided that it was too difficult to develop meaningful progressions for each of these, and it would be more appropriate to consider them as essential threads throughout the progressions.

The team developed the following outline to guide scope and content:

Reading Components

- Concepts about print
- Decoding, including:
 - Alphabetic principle
 - Phonological awareness
 - Automaticity
- Vocabulary
- Knowledge of language and text features (including grammar)

- Comprehension
- Critical Thinking

Writing Components

- Encoding (and its relationship to spelling) including:
 - Alphabetic principle
 - Phonological awareness
 - Morphological knowledge
 - Automaticity
- Vocabulary (and its relationship to spelling)
- Knowledge of language and text features
- Purposes and Audiences
- Writing Processes (planning, composing, revising, editing)

While the development was underway, the outline of scope and content was being checked against the curriculum maps used in the assessment frameworks for the national and international assessments of literacy that are used in the New Zealand education system. In particular the content and coverage were examined in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), the OECD’s International Programme for Student Assessment (PISA) and asTTle (McMahon, internal report).

The team also continued to explore ways to make the links between reading and writing as explicit as possible. Even through to the late design stage, those dimensions shared by reading and writing were laid out in one block of descriptors, but eventually they were separated into reading and writing, even if this meant repeating them in each set, to ensure that the project met its objectives of making expectations for student progress and achievement as clear as possible. The blocks of competencies for reading and writing are set alongside each other in the final design.

Positioning as a Professional Tool to Support the New Zealand Curriculum

The demands of the New Zealand Curriculum shaped the Literacy Learning Progressions as a tool for teachers.

As language is central to learning and English is the medium for most learning in the New Zealand Curriculum, the importance of literacy in English cannot be overstated.

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The role of the progressions as a tool is to help teachers identify the reading and writing demands of the curriculum, and to specify the literacy knowledge and skills the students need at successive points if they are to be successful in meeting those demands.

Students need to engage with texts in order to access the eight learning areas of the curriculum, as well as to develop the key competencies. In addition, English literacy knowledge and skills are integral to the key competencies of “Thinking” and “Using language, symbols, and texts” as well as to the learning area, “English”.

Although much of students’ literacy learning will take place in English, it is the significance of the role of literacy in **all** learning that lead to the decision to position the progressions as a tool for the whole curriculum, rather than develop it as further elaboration of the English curriculum⁴. The team looked at the achievement objectives for each learning area, and gathered examples of the texts and tasks used in programmes designed to meet those objectives, for example in the *New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars* (Ministry of Education 2003b).

Determining where to Place the Signposts

The adult Foundation Learning Progressions were based on descriptive standards as the end point⁵. The descriptive standards for adult reading and writing describe the competencies (knowledge, skills and attitudes) that adults need if they are to meet the everyday reading and writing demands in their work, life, and learning settings. The “signposts” are the significant clumps of learning for most adults on a typical pathway towards that end. They are deliberately **not** tied to the levels of the National Qualification Framework.

The original intention for the school literacy learning progressions was to do something similar, that is, decide what the significant signposts (descriptors or descriptions of competencies) on typical pathways would look like, and then overlay these signposted pathways on to the levels of the schooling system. However, it was soon apparent that this approach would make the progressions too complex. Instead, we decided to start with the structure of the schooling system and describe the knowledge and skills needed at specific points of the system.

⁴ However, it was still important to ensure that the progressions aligned well with the objectives in the English curriculum, especially since the English curriculum has the development of literacy as its central focus.

⁵ Ministry of Education (2005)

The levels of the system were selected rather than curriculum levels as a means of ensuring that teachers maintained a focus on where students needed to be at particular points of their schooling in order to make the progress expected of them. The decision was made to indicate the curriculum levels along the bottom of the progressions and to use curriculum-based tasks as exemplification.

The progressions start at school entry to show the kinds of literacy practices and understandings that five-year olds have that enable them to meet the demands of literacy instruction from their first day at school. The development team was careful not to describe this set of knowledge and skills in a way that might label some children as failures. Early childhood educators provided advice, in particular using appropriate exemplification from *Te Whariki* (Ministry of Education, 1996a).

The first four sets of progressions are described at six-monthly intervals in order to meet the Literacy Strategy's focus on accelerating learners' progress in the early years. The first four stages (or sets of competencies) are described in terms of the time students have spent at school. Hence:

- after six months at school
- after one complete year at school
- after two years at school
- after three years at school

In addition, because the foundations for literacy are laid during these years, many texts and tasks are designed for the purpose of teaching reading and writing, rather than as curriculum-based tasks.

By year 4 the students' year level becomes more significant than the time they have spent at school. Consultation with the key education sector groups confirmed that from year 4 the progressions should describe students' literacy expertise at transition points in their schooling.

The initial plan had been to finish the progressions at year 8, but the advice of those literacy experts working in secondary schools was that the texts and task demands were significantly different at year 10, where students not only encounter a wide variety of texts (many of which are written for a general adult audience) but are required to engage with them with much less support from their teachers. Hence the structure:

- by the end of year 4
- by the end of year 6
- by the end of year 8
- by the end of year 10

How to Structure the Progressions to Deal with Increasing Expertise

Because learning is complex, iterative and uneven, producing a single set of progressions to show how a diverse group of students develop fluency and independence in reading and writing was a particular challenge, (for example, Clay, 1998). The development team took the approach that literacy learning is cumulative and builds on existing expertise. Certain knowledge and skills are prerequisites for further learning, and for most students the way these are developed follow a similar pattern. Several options for structuring the progressions were investigated to show these characteristics, while still adhering to the “clear and simple” guiding principle. For example, the introductory stems are carefully worded to support the concept of developing expertise.

The structure was influenced by Paris’s writing on “constrained” and “unconstrained” knowledge and skills (Paris, 2005). A description of these concepts can be found on page 4 in the introduction to the *draft Literacy Learning Progressions*. The descriptors are laid out with the constrained knowledge and skills at the top of each list, moving through to the unconstrained knowledge and skills at the bottom. Knowledge and skills are introduced at the point they are expected to be under control, and able to be demonstrated by students “largely by themselves”. There are two clear implications from the decision to structure the progressions in this way.

- Students will be beginning to develop these competencies earlier than when they appear in the progressions, and
- Students will continue to use and build on them after, they are mentioned.

The terminology “largely by themselves” acknowledges that, in the classroom setting, students will still be receiving a small amount of support, for example of the kind that they might expect to get in a guided reading lesson, or when teachers help students frame up a report.

The concepts of competencies being “under control” and able to be used/applied by students “largely by themselves” are central to the development of metacognition (for example, Davis 2007).

The Descriptors

Each stage or set of competencies describes the reading and writing expertise that students need to be able to demonstrate if they are to meet the reading and writing demands at that point in the system.

As noted earlier, various options were explored for describing the knowledge and skills that students need to be able to demonstrate as they built their expertise, including separating knowledge from skills, but the decision was made to keep them integrated on the basis that the strategies used in reading and writing are a product of knowledge and skill being used in combination.

The level of specificity was carefully controlled to ensure that descriptions were clear but that they also retained enough richness to demonstrate the complexity involved. The development team was concerned that the descriptors could become checklists. Various options were explored to mitigate this risk, including turning the bulleted lists into a running narrative – a rich description. However, this approach did not provide enough clarity about the competencies (knowledge and skills) teachers needed to ensure their students had.

The context, that is, the descriptions of texts and tasks assumed more importance as the development proceeded. The team took account of the socio-cultural context for students' learning as well as the curriculum context. Particular attention was paid to how the stems were worded.

Should the Descriptors be Aspirational or Actual?

The development team looked at evidence about New Zealand student achievement in reading and writing from a range of sources: international surveys (PIRLS and PISA), national data sets and norms from assessment tools (asTTle, NEMP, PATs, the Observation Survey), regional (Reading Recovery data, data from schooling improvement clusters), and local (data from a range of schools).

For some competencies, particularly in the early years, although the norms in assessment tools showed most students were performing at a particular level, there were compelling cases to “shift the goal posts” in order to support the emphasis of the Literacy Strategy on accelerating early literacy learning. Therefore, some knowledge and skills, for example, concepts about print, have been deliberately introduced earlier in the progressions than is current practice in many classrooms. The level of Ready to Read texts that students should be reading is also more demanding than is currently the case in many classrooms.

In other cases, the actual student achievement is below that required to meet the demands of the New Zealand curriculum. This is especially the case in writing.

The descriptors are determined by the reading and writing demands of the curriculum at that point in the system, not the students’ current reading and writing achievement. Whether the descriptors are actual or aspirational therefore depends on how well aligned current literacy achievement is with the curriculum literacy demands, including the need to make good progress in the early years in order to meet the demands later in the curriculum.

The Reading and Writing Demands of the New Zealand Curriculum: texts and tasks

The progressions attempt to make reading and writing demands of the curriculum explicit by indicating the forms and types of texts students are required to read and write as they engage in curriculum-based tasks as well as describing some of their features.

Earlier iterations of the progressions described the texts students were required to read as “age-appropriate”. However, it became clear that such labelling was inadequate for its purpose in the progressions, because the reading age of a text is only a rough guide to its complexity and is not a valid way to describe the reader’s expertise. We decided to describe the features that make texts more or less complex, and the challenges in the reading and writing tasks that students are required to undertake as they engage with these texts. Because this is a significant shift in approach for many teachers, we included a note in the introduction to the progressions (see page 6, *Literacy Learning Progressions*). This approach was

confirmed in discussion with the team at the New Zealand Council for Educational Research that had just completed the revision of the PAT Reading Comprehension (Darr et al in press).

The team analysed a wide range of teacher materials to identify the texts forms and types that are most commonly used in both reading and writing tasks across the curriculum. The examples we selected were influenced by our awareness that around 80% of texts that students are required to read or write from year 5 onwards are transactional texts (for example, McDonald and Thornley, 2005).

Notes for teachers

From the earliest conceptual framework the intention was to include notes for teachers throughout the progressions. The purpose of these is to add a comment, a prompt, or even an alert where it seemed particularly pertinent. Space constraints in the final version meant that the number of these was reduced.

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