



Shifting the dial on literacy

Context: why are we doing this?

Literacy skills are key to ensuring that children and young people can access curriculum content, progress and achieve in all learning areas, and are equipped for life after school (preferably with a qualification). Adults with baseline literacy skills are more likely to gain higher qualifications, be employed, have higher incomes, and report good health. Census data shows those with higher skills and higher education may be more likely to volunteer, trust others and to feel they have a voice in politics.

Aotearoa New Zealand has attained relatively good median scores in international surveys for reading literacy for school students, but in recent years there have been significant declines in these scores. National and international research shows there is a wide range of range of experiences that can affect the development of baseline early literacy skills upon entry to school and during primary and secondary schooling. These variations in achievement reveal inequities in our system across and within sub-populations of learners such as those defined by gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status. Some learners will identify with multiple of these sub-populations and therefore are more likely to experience inequities than others. For example, some ethnicities are more or less concentrated in areas of high socio-economic advantage. We need to shift the dial on literacy so that our education system can achieve more equitable outcomes and ensure the next generation of learners can meet their potential and fully participate in New Zealand's society and economy.

From 2023 the assessment of literacy and numeracy for NCEA will become more explicit, focused, and consistent than before. An immediate concern is that a significant number of learners currently entering secondary school are a long way below curriculum expectations for literacy and will need additional support to ensure they are able to meet the new NCEA literacy requirements¹. However, this immediate concern is underpinned by the longer-term goal of equipping learners with the functional literacy they require to contribute to their well-being and life opportunities. Unless we change what we are doing early in the pathway, the lack of functional literacy to meet both the qualification and life goals will continue to be a problem.

This paper is the summary of initial advice provided to the Ministers in late 2019, which is available on the Ministry's website. *The Literacy Landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Prof Stuart McNaughton, 2020) Chief Science Advisor to the Ministry of Education informed this advice.

¹ The new literacy standards that are being developed as a co-requisite for NCEA will be at levels 4 and 5 of the *New Zealand Curriculum*. Students achieving the co-requisite should have mastered literacy at curriculum Level 4 and be on their way towards mastery at curriculum Level 5. The literacy standards will refer to reading and writing and will not include oral language.

Based on the current context and evidence-base, this paper considers potential longer-term system changes for improving literacy learning from early learning through to Year 13 in English-medium education. It also looks at possible short-term approaches to accelerate literacy learning for those who enter secondary school having not received adequate support to meet curriculum expectations and who will need to face more rigorous NCEA requirements.

What do we mean by 'literacy'?

The curriculum documents, *Te Whāriki: He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa Early childhood curriculum (Te Whāriki)* and *The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC)*, outline the broad expectations of teaching and learning in services and schools, including the important learning for literacy.

Te Whāriki has a strand focusing on communication, which includes a focus on oral language and early literacy skills. Early learners are supported to become increasingly capable of understanding and using oral language, recognising and using print symbols and concepts, enjoying hearing, retelling and creating stories, and expressing feelings and ideas.

The English learning area of the NZC contains two interconnected strands, each encompassing the oral, written, and visual forms of the language. These are:

- making meaning of ideas or information they receive (Listening, Reading, and Viewing); and
- creating meaning for themselves or others (Speaking, Writing, and Presenting).

Literacy knowledge, skills and capabilities are needed to access all learning areas in the curriculum. Learners need to develop subject-specific literacy knowledge, skills and capabilities, as well as generic ones. In a growing digital world, the Technology learning area in the NZC, with its focus on digital literacy skills, is of particular importance. These digital literacy skills include being able to effectively interpret, critique, manage, share, and create meaning through a range of evolving digital communication channels.

The picture of literacy teaching and learning in New Zealand

There is huge variation in literacy achievement, and this adversely impacts more ākonga Māori, Pacific learners and learners living or attending school in areas with high socio-economic deprivation

There are many learners doing well in our system in terms of aspects of their literacy outcomes, including:

- Ākonga Māori, Pacific learners, and learners from diverse ethnic communities
- English language learners
- Learners experiencing socio-economic disadvantage

- Learners with dyslexic-type traits, hearing or sight impairments, language and communication challenges or other learning support needs.

But learners in these groupings are disproportionately represented in the statistics of those who are not doing as well in aspects of their literacy learning – particularly those who can be categorised in more than one of these groupings. Some of the underlying drivers for these inequities in achievement are explored in the section below about barriers to learning.

The variation in literacy achievement reflects opportunities to learn, starts early and persists

Many learners do not get the opportunities to learn that they need in the early years, for a variety of reasons. If learners start with less developed literacy skills, they seldom get an opportunity to catch up – this means that inequities impacting from early years are compounded along the learning pathway.

Barriers to learning faced by some students in the education system

While the system has evolved over time and there is great variability in current educational approaches, it largely continues to fail those learners from non-European cultures; those who speak home and community languages other than English and those with learning support needs. These learners commonly face unrecognised barriers to learning in a system that fundamentally has not been designed to meet their learning needs or engage with their aspirations and cultural context.

Racism, bias, discrimination, and lowered expectations

Multiple research sources have found that Māori ākonga, Pacific learners and their whānau and families experience various forms of racism, bias, and discrimination in the English medium education system. Experiences include failing to respect culture, language, and identity e.g. mispronounced names; deficit theorising; under-assessment of learner capability; lowered expectations of achievement; teachers making racist comments (inadvertent or otherwise) or failing to intervene when others do.

Māori ākonga receive fewer positive and more negative comments with less teacher interactions overall than other learners. They are also more likely to feel underrated and undervalued at school.

Research shows Pacific learners and their families are also more likely to receive negative feedback. Different cultural expectations can also affect quality of relationships and teaching practice. For example, some Pacific learners and families may refrain from asking questions of teachers or looking them in the eye as a sign of respect. As a result, many teachers may make incorrect assumptions that Pacific learners and their families are uninterested in education or are lacking in knowledge and capability.

Lowered expectations, particularly when manifested through streaming, same-ability grouping or ineffective pedagogies, can result in a ‘watering down’ of the curriculum thereby reducing opportunities to learn.

Cultural bias and cultural continuity

We have heard from many learners and their whānau and families that their identities are not reflected or esteemed in the English medium education system. This can cause disengagement from learning due to a lack of perceived relevance or can make learners feel they have to give up or devalue their own cultural world view to achieve in education.

Many teachers have not developed critical consciousness about racism, bias and the culturally located nature of all teachers and learners. As a result, they may inadvertently design learning activities that privilege dominant forms of cultural knowledge, practice and identities over others.

Culturally responsive pedagogies require educators to be open to learning, understanding and valuing cultural knowledge and practices different from their own that learners bring to school or early learning. This involves educators developing trusting and respectful relationships with Māori ākonga, Pacific learners and their whānau and families and seeking to understand their home and community experiences and world views. Educators can then design learning activities to value and build on the knowledge, language, strengths and aspirations that Māori ākonga and Pacific learners already bring with them to school.

Building relationships and sharing power with learners, whānau, families and communities

Culturally responsive pedagogies involve responding to learners in the context of their families. This means engaging with learners and their families and whānau in authentic, respectful and culturally appropriate ways. Building on these learning connections, family and whānau should be invited into the learning context to help develop class and local curriculum. This is particularly important for teachers of Māori learners. Due to rights and obligations flowing from Te Tiriti o Waitangi, mana whenua to have tino rangatiratanga or right to equity, authority and agency in education so that Māori are enabled to enjoy and achieve education success as Māori. Most importantly culturally responsive pedagogy involves teachers caring about the experience learners are having at school, listening to what they say and responding through changes in practice.

Valuing linguistic diversity in literacy teaching and learning

The competencies and developmental stages of linguistically diverse learners (i.e. bilingual and multilingual learners) are not well understood by many teachers. Outdated educational research, combined with structural racism and colonialisation, has influenced some teachers and families to believe that learning or speaking more than one language is of little value and even harms the development of competency in English. However, contemporary research indicates that maintaining or continuing the development of a home language, including within a school or early learning context, is highly beneficial for literacy development in English. As the New Zealand learner population is growing in linguistic diversity and bilingual competency, there is a growing need to develop teacher competences in working with these learners.

Learners with learning support needs

Learners with dyslexic-like traits or other learning support needs face some similar issues in our education system as learners who are not from Pakeha European backgrounds. Ableist assumptions have been embedded into the education system

typically resulting in lack of flexibility in teaching, learning and assessment and a dominating focus on learners' areas of struggle rather than on their strengths (e.g. focusing on misspelled words rather than on the vividness and creativity in a piece of descriptive writing). These unexamined assumptions can also result in lowered expectations for learners and a lack of full and rich opportunities to learn across the curriculum.

Inclusive teaching pedagogies involve teachers developing critical consciousness about how ableist assumptions embedded their teaching practice may be negatively affecting learners with support needs. Engaging with and listening to learners and their whānau and family is crucial to learn about and understand a learner's strengths, struggles, interests and successful strategies for learning. It is also the responsibility of educators to modify systems and processes within schooling to allow reasonable accommodations that allow learners with disabilities to operate on a level basis.

Achieving equity in English medium education

Many of the changes needed for equitable educational experiences go beyond the area of literacy learning. They involve supporting teachers to develop critical consciousness, confront bias and racism in their own and others practice and to approach learners and families from cultural backgrounds different from their own with openness and regard. System supports are also needed to support educators and learning contexts to fulfil their responsibilities as Treaty partners by making te reo me ngā tikanga Māori an everyday part of education and by partnering with mana whenua in local curriculum design.

Over the period from 2018 to 2020 the Ministry and government have launched the following new strategies and programmes that are intended to support these changes within the education system:

- Te Hurihanganui – including a Mana whānau strand that supports whānau to engage with education services
- Ka Hikitia – The Māori Education Strategy
- Pae Aronui – strategy for supporting great partnerships between whānau and education services
- Toikuranui – programme to develop local education initiatives with Māori
- Tau Mai Te Reo – The Māori Language in Education Strategy
- Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020-2030
- new PLD priorities focusing on cultural responsiveness and local curriculum development.
- Learning Support Action Plan 2019-2025.

However, there are some interventions that are specific to literacy that the government and Ministry could do more to support, involving the design and delivery of literacy teaching and learning activities. These are listed immediately below and are integrated through other sections of the paper:

- culturally responsive local curriculum: design learning to incorporate valued home and community literacy practices for Māori ākonga and Pacific learners, e.g. whakapapa and tikanga for Māori ākonga, memorisation for Pacific learners
- text choice – sourcing and selecting texts that reflect the cultural identities and experiences of all the learners in a learning context
- home/school partnerships - programmes or strategies that support schools and early learning services to build culturally appropriate learning-focused connections with whānau and families
- focus on literacy activities in homes and communities - including supports for whānau and family and community and making texts (including bilingual texts) available
- value home and community languages - use home and community languages as ways to engage with curriculum including displaying print materials and bringing fluent speakers into the learning context
- flexibility in modes of receiving and conveying information – ensure that learners are given a choice of modes to receive and convey ideas and information and that the thinking and ideas conveyed are assessed separately from aspects such as grammar, punctuation and spelling and weighted as more important.

Other system issues contributing to the current literacy outcomes

The Tomorrow's Schools Taskforce Review has noted that the early learning and schooling systems are highly devolved with great autonomy within learning settings. This autonomy leads to teachers and leaders having to discover for themselves what works best for learners under which circumstances, and this can become onerous and overwhelming. Our key centrally funded interventions have been implemented piece-meal and have not been modified over time to meet changing needs or up-to-date research evidence. We are currently missing opportunities to implement strategies and system shifts that taken together would likely have a significant impact on literacy learning outcomes in our education system.

Possible key issues within the current system

Area 1: Issues: Universal literacy teaching and learning in schools and early learning services

- We do not sustain a focus on literacy development through the whole of the learning pathway.
- Existing literacy resources prioritise some modes and miss others. Often the important linguistic, visual, audio, spatial and gestural aspects of literacy are missed.
- Many of the key literacy resources are 10 – 15 years old and are out of date.

- The Ministry does not currently provide enough guidance or supports to meet the specific literacy learning needs of some groups of learners, including ākonga Māori and Pacific learners.
- Our system doesn't ensure that all learners have access to texts and visual resources that value and reflect their identities, languages and cultures in their literacy learning experiences.
- Lack of guidance supporting explicit teaching of literacy skills in digital contexts.
- Lack of connections between literacy content knowledge, learning to learn, social and emotional aspects of learning.
- Early learning teachers lack tools to help them attend to and support individual children's progress in oral language and early literacy.

Area 2: Issues: Literacy capabilities, including cultural and linguistic responsiveness and inclusiveness across the education workforce

- Opportunities for educators to continuously develop literacy capabilities are left to chance so many may not have had the opportunity to develop essential literacy content and pedagogical knowledge.
- We do not provide enough support for leadership and whole school or early learning service (or cluster) practices to raise literacy progress and achievement.

Area 3: Issues: Systematic checks at key transition points to ensure literacy learning needs are identified and addressed in a timely way along the learning pathway

- The school system is not designed to prevent learners from 'falling through the cracks' and does not provide for regional or national oversight of literacy learning.
- Teacher judgements about learners' literacy skills are highly variable even when assessment for learning is undertaken and the results are often not used to drive changes in teacher practice.
- The nationally developed assessment resources (e.g. PaCT) are not consistently used limiting the ability to identify what works, for whom, under what circumstances to enable continual improvement at a system level.

Area 4: Issues: System functions and resources that impact literacy learning, particularly through targeted literacy supports (tier 2 and 3) in schools and early learning services

- We do not provide enough of the right kind of support and infrastructure to enable early learning services and schools to use the most effective approaches and practices for literacy teaching and learning
- The roles that impact on literacy learning have been developed ad hoc and are fragmented and sometimes ambiguous

- The intensive literacy interventions that the Ministry funds (Tier 2-3) are not always fit for purpose and do not work for a significant proportion of learners
- A tendency to provide a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to literacy teaching with a reliance on 'out of class' interventions to address needs of learners not succeeding alongside their peers.
- The Ministry does not use an inclusive design approach to frame resources, guidance and resources along the whole pathway allowing learners to have varied opportunities to receive literacy information, engage with it and present their learning.

Area 5: Issues: Educationally powerful relationships between home, schools and early learning services

- We are not doing as much as we could to support home learning for literacy
- The Ministry provides little or no support to maintain and build on first or home languages for literacy learning in early learning and schools.

How you can help

The Ministry is moving forward with the engagement that will provide much needed input to the development of the strategy for literacy. The preliminary research and fact-finding analysis has been captured and published in the background paper, *Shifting the Dial for Literacy*, designed to start our conversations with the sector and iwi.

We are looking forward to hearing from a wide range of voices and moving this work forward together.