

The New Zealand Curriculum

Update



Research into Practice

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Welcome to *The New Zealand Curriculum Update*

Curriculum Updates support school leaders and teachers as they work to design and review their school curriculum, in line with the New Zealand Curriculum and with current knowledge and understandings about effective classroom teaching.

Curriculum Updates are published in the *Education Gazette* and are available online at <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz>

This Update focuses on a research project that explored how the key competencies might be integrated with and developed through the teaching of reading.



Integrating key competencies and reading

From 2007 to 2009, researchers Juliet Twist and Sue McDowall collaborated with nine teachers to explore the integration of The New Zealand Curriculum key competencies and reading in the classroom.

They worked with the teachers to help them gain a deeper understanding of the key competencies and to help them put in place reading programmes aimed at fostering those competencies. Their report on the project is called *Lifelong Literacy*.

The teachers, who came from four schools, taught classes in years 3–6. The project was carried out by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) and was funded by the Cognition Institute.

The researchers had three main questions:

- What does an integration of [*The New Zealand Curriculum*] key competencies and reading [processes and understandings] look like in the middle primary school?
- How do students' opportunities to learn change as teachers work to integrate the key competencies with the teaching of reading?
- How does student engagement in learning change as teachers work to integrate the key competencies with the teaching of reading?

The big ideas from the research

Students' opportunities to learn and their engagement in learning can be lifted by integrating the key competencies.

When the key competencies are integrated into a classroom reading programme, space opens up for student thinking and for student experience to be brought into the learning. The researchers call this "interpretive space". There are many valid ways to understand text in an interpretive space. Students connect their own knowledge and background – their world – to the act of reading. This is very different from seeing reading as a matter of discovering the "one true meaning" of a text.

During the research, teachers and students learned to make use of who they were and what they knew to help make meaning of text. In each class, students at all reading levels participated. They were drawn into conversations that engaged them in reading as a dynamic, interesting, rewarding activity, which meant their opportunities to learn increased. The process also increased the engagement of teachers.

... when teachers began to model what a "real" reader looks like, for example, when they took part in informed discussions with their students, modified their interpretations in response to the interpretations of others, conveyed a love of literature and a belief that literature can illuminate understanding of what goes on in the social as well as personal sphere, we saw increased engagement of both students and teachers.

*Lifelong Literacy,
Executive Summary, page 10*

For teachers to successfully establish reading programmes that integrate the key competencies, they need a deep understanding of how texts work.

The key competencies do not develop within reading programmes to any real extent if the teachers have a limited understanding of how to explicitly use the language, symbols, and

texts of English. To be an effective teacher of reading, teachers must have a deep understanding of how texts are constructed.

Some teachers can readily select texts for integrating the key competencies and know how to use them in the classroom. Others need support to do this. The choice of text is important for integration to be successful.

You've got to read the right book to the kids. A book that has been chosen for a particular purpose, a book that makes them think about the right thing. The poem or book you read them can't just be something you grab off the shelf at twenty-five past one. You've got to ask yourself: "Why this book?" Teacher

Guiding questions He pātai

- How could I increase my understanding of purposeful text selection?
- How could I increase my understanding of how texts are constructed?

Focusing on individual key competencies

The aim of this project was to help teachers understand the transformative potential of the key competencies. The key competencies are interconnected and, in most learning contexts, are all in play. However, in each of the following case studies, the teachers focused on one competency as this allowed deeper exploration of the ideas associated with that competency.

> CASE STUDY

Participating and contributing

The teachers at Harakeke School¹ were active readers and writers in their out-of-school lives. However, they made little connection between their role as "teacher of reading" at school and reading in their personal lives. With the help of the researchers, they decided to place their "teacher as a reader" identity to the fore instead. They also decided to include time for the students to talk about the text with each other and to discuss different interpretations, rather than focusing on comprehending the "one true meaning" of the text.

It's slowing down, taking time, allowing these conversations. Sometimes kids will want to take it a different way – not forcing your ideas on them – they might see things from a different position. Teacher

One of the teachers selected a book she had read when she was younger. With the class, she discussed her personal response to the book. She modelled literary criticism as a collective endeavour, with everyone working together to make meaning of the text, draw on each other's expertise, sound out interpretations, and ask for clarification. She provided explicit instruction to the students when needed, but her reader identity was in the foreground.

I could stop being a teacher ... Sure, I would say look, where does it say this about this relationship? ... But I kept trying to bring it back to a more sort of informal setting. Teacher



Learning for teachers from the experience:

- Share your responses and contribute to the discussion as a reader of the text.
- Maintain the balance between responding as a reader and providing guidance as a teacher.
- Listen to students in an open way.
- Slow the lesson down, allowing time for conversations.

¹ To ensure anonymity for the students and teachers who participated in the research, the names of the schools are fictitious. Also, the photographs are to illustrate the ideas being discussed; none of them show students or teachers who participated in the research.

> CASE STUDY

Thinking

Both teachers at Harakeke School wanted their students to think about text beyond a literal level – to think more critically about it, to understand that texts can be interpreted in different ways, and to engage in deeper discussion about the ideas in a text.

The first two topics they chose to achieve these goals didn't work particularly well as they didn't lend themselves to multiple interpretations. The third topic focused on a controversial local issue. The lesson required students to interpret a variety of information and opinions about wind farms. Such interpretation enables the generation of new knowledge.

The teachers were quite apprehensive about using this issue but decided to go ahead, taking care to create a climate where views could be expressed safely.

The material included a video in which people voiced strongly held opinions. This provoked considerable discussion, with students recognising and questioning opinions rather than taking them at face value.

Comparing two points of view is something that works – having a theme with two opposing views on it. Teacher

Students were also shown a DVD presenting factual information about wind farms. While it appeared neutral and objective, it had been produced by an energy company and contained only positive information about wind farms. As a result of the practice they'd had recognising multiple meanings from the same text, the students were able to discern that the DVD was slanted to one side of the argument.

They knew it was facts – but [facts can be] presented in a positive way or a negative way – they all knew that it was being presented in a positive way. Teacher

It would be interesting if they could apply that learning to a new piece of text – not a wind farm but something where we provide them with some information and see if they can be equally sceptical about that. Teacher



Learning for teachers from the experience:

- Choose topics on which students see the need to generate knowledge.
- Choose texts that provide something to think deeply about.
- Provide overt instruction and opportunities for students to practise critical thinking about texts in relation to their reading and writing.
- Ensure students are encouraged to express their views and are able to do so safely.

Guiding question He pātai

- What topics would encourage my students to engage deeply with texts?

> CASE STUDY

Relating to others

The teachers at Koromiko School were concerned about their students' lack of empathy towards each other. They thought that the school reading programme might be a good setting to work on developing greater empathy. Their approach relates to the theory of personality transformation through the arts, which suggests that when fiction readers imagine themselves in the position of a character, they are taken beyond their immediate lives and can rehearse life skills at a safe distance.

The teachers helped students understand how characters in a picture book were feeling and why. They began by getting the students to identify concrete examples of what a key character in the text was doing ("He's crying", "He's got his mouth wide open"). They then supported the students to link an emotion to the action and to go from general to more precise language by suggesting specific words for the emotions ("shocked", "envious"). Then they asked the students to relate the character's predicament to their own lives.

After many opportunities to practise these steps, the teachers asked students how the characters were feeling. The responses provided evidence of developing empathy



towards the characters. ("If I was Jenny, I'd have been hurt, too." "I think he knows that parents can love you all the time, even when they love someone else." "He gets it that his mum knows how to share the love around.")

Learning for teachers from the experience:

- Draw attention to concrete examples of a character's actions.
- Support students to match emotions to those actions.
- Feed in language that describes the emotions precisely.
- Support students to relate the character's predicament to their own lives.

The research process

Early in the project, the researchers and teachers discussed the nature of the key competencies and the ways they might apply to reading. As a result of those conversations, and with support from the researchers, the teachers redesigned their classroom reading programmes. The researchers paired with the teachers to observe each classroom as the ideas were put into practice. Working together, teacher and researcher informally evaluated progress and planned the next steps in light of any questions raised. At the end of each year, the researchers and teachers came together to share insights.



CASE STUDY

Participating and contributing

One of the key findings from the research was the importance of selecting the right resources to support the work of developing the key competencies. The teachers at Mahoe School wanted to address their students' lack of agency as readers. They saw the students as passive discoverers of the author's meaning. The teachers believed their students' confidence as readers would grow if they could see themselves in the role of "literary critics" actively participating in a community of practice. The teachers had lots of ideas about how to ask open-ended questions to generate deep discussion, but they did not have enough understanding of text features to be able to explore texts fully with their students.

The researchers decided to write a resource that would increase teachers' knowledge of text form and construction. The resource uses the text *Cinderella: An Art Deco Love Story* (Roberts and Roberts, 2001). It looks at text features (e.g., vocabulary, simile, metaphor) and how they help us analyse the father in terms of his appearance and what he says, does, and thinks. Just as the teachers at Harakeke School used the contentious local issue of wind farms to spark discussion, this resource focuses on the ambiguous figure of the father and poses a question that encourages debate: how much is Cinderella's father to blame for her situation?

The teachers created their own lessons, using the resource. These allowed the students to function as literary critics. (As stated in *The New Zealand Curriculum*, "To be successful participants [in New Zealand society and the wider world], they [students] need to be effective

oral, written, and visual communicators who are able to think critically and in depth" (page 18).

The researchers thought this was able to occur because:

- The classroom was already on its way to being an authentic literary environment. The students knew that their job was to interpret and discuss ideas.
- The question posed about the father encouraged vigorous debate because the concept of parental blame is controversial.
- The character of the father is ambiguous, which also elicits varied reactions and sparks debate. The students showed a range of responses to the father, some sympathetic and some not.
- The resource gave the teachers the content knowledge they needed to make the link from the features of the text to the multiple meanings that can be drawn from it.

The students' participation and motivation increased, and they began to respond more confidently.

He was probably lonely and wanted a new wife. It's like [student]'s mum. She took her boyfriend back because she was lonely.

Student

The "Cinderella" resource is available on NZCER's shifting thinking website: <http://www.shiftingthinking.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Thinking-Object-Father.pdf>

Related resources

> Lifelong Literacy

Twist, J. and McDowall, S. (2010). *Lifelong Literacy: The Integration of Key Competencies and Reading*. Wellington: Cognition Institute.

> Children's Literary Engagements with Texts

Twist, J. and Hipkins, R. (2009). "Children's Literary Engagements with Texts: Preliminary Findings from the Lifelong Literacy Research Project." In *A Journey of Discovery: Facilitating the Initiation and Application of Schooling Research*, ed. M. Sinclair. Wellington: Cognition Institute.

> Curriculum Update number 4: Literacy, numeracy, and the key competencies across the curriculum

<http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz>

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www.learningmedia.co.nz
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The New Zealand Curriculum

Update

Living the key competencies

The project gave everyone involved the chance to think deeply about the transformative power of the key competencies and explore how integrating the competencies into a teaching programme might play out in the classroom. Initially the teachers didn't think their reading programmes would change much, but when they came back together after the first year of the project, the conversation was rich with possibilities and new challenges.

During the project, the teachers' conceptualisation of the key competencies shifted. They began to see the potential of the key competencies to transform teacher practice. As a result, they saw the need to make changes in their teaching approaches. One of the key changes was to

make greater use of background knowledge and experience – their own and that of their students.

The teachers recognised the power of drawing students' personal knowledge into reading conversations. They also saw that students need freedom to make their own decisions as readers.

They have to have the chance to choose their own texts. Adults won't read books they find boring, but we expect kids to.

Teacher

The teachers watched their students develop in the key competencies as the students learnt to draw on who they were and what they knew to make meaning of text.

By the end of the project, the teachers had come to believe that teachers of reading need to love reading and to teach in ways that reflect how they read in their out-of-school lives. In this respect, the integration of the key competencies into teaching reading is about who teachers are. The teachers in this project were able to be themselves and in so doing explicitly embody the key competencies. The researchers describe this as "living the key competencies".

Guiding question He pātai

- In what ways might I change my teaching practice to more fully integrate the key competencies into my classroom programme?