

Designing the Reading and Writing Standards for Years 1-8

Why were the standards created?

In December 2008 legislation was passed giving the Minister of Education the power to set national standards in reading, writing and mathematics. The standards were to set clear expectations for progress and achievement in reading, writing and mathematics for students in years 1-8.

Background

At the time that development began on the standards, work had just begun to analyse the feedback gathered throughout 2008 on the draft *Literacy Learning Progressions*. The progressions provide teachers with a professional tool that describes the literacy knowledge and skills that students need in order to be able to engage with *The New Zealand Curriculum* at various points of schooling, and to make expected progress over time. The work that had gone into developing the draft progressions, along with the feedback on the draft from principals, teachers, advisers, and academics provided a sound platform for designing and developing the standards.

The standards for reading and writing were developed alongside the development of the standards for mathematics. Both sets of standards had to meet a common design specification.

What sort of standard?

The New Zealand education system already has sets of national standards for a range of purposes. These include the standards (achievement standards and unit standards) that measure specific knowledge and/or skills for qualifications purposes, as well as the achievement objectives that operate as “fixed points of reference for assessing individual students”¹ in relation to the different levels of *The New Zealand Curriculum*. *The New Zealand Curriculum* achievement objectives require teachers to make qualitative judgments of the kind that they make constantly in their teaching practice. Such judgments are considered to be dependable provided that “(a) standards are developed and promulgated in appropriate forms, and (b) teachers are given the relevant conceptual tools and training”².

The national standards for reading and writing are designed to meet the policy that they will “describe all things children should be able to do by a particular age or year at school”³. Although the standards themselves focus on written forms of language, they take account of the significant role that oral language plays in students’ ability to read and write.

The approach to developing the standards was informed by work undertaken by the Ministry of Education in a number of work streams over the past 10-15 years⁴. It was also informed by an analysis of the well-documented risks of describing standards in terms of discrete sets of skills and knowledge at the micro level⁵.

¹ Sadler (1987) p191

² Ibid p194

³ Policy 2008: Education

⁴ See, for example, the assessment policy development articulated in Green paper on assessment, that led to the national assessment strategy.

⁵ See, for example, the research papers in the Cambridge Primary Review (2009)

The approach was guided by a set of principles agreed to by a group of experts in literacy, mathematics education and assessment convened by the Ministry in December 2008 (see Appendix 1).

After considering the intent of the policy, scanning the literature, and identifying the issues related to implementing national standards in the New Zealand context, the initial work to design the standards for reading and writing began. It was based on three key assumptions:

- The standard itself should be as comprehensive as possible i.e. at the global end of the granularity scale, and address the significant role of reading and writing in learning.
- Judgments about whether students meet the standard for their year will be made on the basis of several sources of information, not a single assessment.
- Reporting against the standard will enable parents to see if students are achieving at a level that enables them to engage in learning right now, as well as make the progress they need for success throughout schooling.

Although this paper documents the reasons for key decisions concerning the standards themselves, that is, what they would measure, some assumptions had to be made about how students' progress and achievement against the standards would be assessed and reported on in order to design and develop them.

The standards focus on the level of reading and writing that students need to engage successfully with *The New Zealand Curriculum*

The standards for reading and writing are established by the level of literacy expertise that students need if they are to meet the reading and writing demands of *The New Zealand Curriculum* at specific points in their schooling from year 1 through to the end of year 8. The intention is that by making the literacy demand explicit, teachers, parents and whānau, and students themselves are able to make a clear judgment as to whether or not their competence in reading and writing is enabling their learning across the curriculum, and that they are making expected progress over time.

The standards focus on the complexity or challenges of the texts students need to be able to read and write, not the items of knowledge and skills they draw on in order to do this. These items, which are nevertheless essential to students' being able to read and write, are described in the *Literacy Learning Progressions*. Thus the first major decision in designing the standards was not to make these sets of knowledge and skills the standards themselves⁶.

Reading and writing as interactive tools for engaging with *The New Zealand Curriculum*

The focus on students' purposes for reading and writing (rather than reading and writing as ends in themselves) is based on policy development lead by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). This work underpins programmes including the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The definition of reading literacy used in PISA "takes into account the active and interactive role of the reader. Literacy...provides the reader with a set of

⁶ Specifying fine-grained items of knowledge and skills as standards risks their being taught and assessed discretely as well as losing the point of the standards, that is, addressing the student expertise needed for a purpose.

linguistic tools that are increasingly important for meeting the demands of modern societies”⁷. The concept of interactive tools is further described in the work on the competencies model developed in the OECD project, *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*⁸.

Students learn to read and write for a variety of personal and social purposes as well as instructional purposes. The underlying knowledge and skills they draw on are the same, regardless of their purpose⁹. However, the focus of students’ reading and writing in the standards is placed firmly on *The New Zealand Curriculum*.

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.

The New Zealand Curriculum, Ministry of Education, 2007, page 16.

Students need to use their reading and writing in order to engage with all learning areas of *The New Zealand Curriculum*. Reading and writing are essential tools for many of the teaching and learning activities designed to support students as they develop the key competencies as well as knowledge and skills in all the essential learning areas. Thus successful engagement with the breadth of *The New Zealand Curriculum* depends on students’ ability to read and write, and their opportunities to learn are limited without these tools.

While some of the texts students read and write will be literary texts (and almost always taught within the English learning area) many will be procedural texts and information reports that are integral to learning in other areas of the curriculum¹⁰.

In the early years, most of the texts that students read or write largely by themselves within classroom contexts will be part of their literacy instructional programme. As their literacy knowledge and skills develop, students increasingly use their reading and writing to meet other specific learning purposes across the curriculum.

Where the standards are placed in the system

The policy indicated that standards for reading and writing (and mathematics) were to be developed for each year level up to year 8. The standards have used the same frame used for the *Literacy Learning Progressions*, where the early sets of competencies are described in terms of the time students have spent at school (i.e. after one year at school; after two years at school; after three years at school), and the later in terms of which year they are in (by the end of year 4, by the end of year 6, by the end of year 8). By year 4, the students’ year level becomes more significant than the time they have spent at school¹¹.

In developing the *Literacy Learning Progressions* this frame was selected to help teachers to maintain a focus on where students needed to be at particular points of their schooling if they are

⁷ OECD (2003) p108

⁸ OECD (2005)

⁹ The research undertaken in the Equipped for the Future Project demonstrated that, at least for adults, the underlying knowledge and skills used for reading and writing are the same regardless of their purpose. See Stein (2000) For this reason, the reading and writing students use to engage with the NZC is not referred to as “functional literacy” – a terms which somehow seems to denote a different, “lesser” type of literacy.

¹⁰ 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).

¹¹ Darr, C., McDowall, S., Ferral, H., Twist, J., and Watson, V (2008).

to make the progress expected of them over time, as well as being able to read and write the instructional materials used across the curriculum at that time.

This decision assumes that the topics and themes of most teaching and learning programmes are organised around year levels, within which differentiated teaching takes account of students being at different curriculum levels. Understanding the reading and writing demands of the curriculum at particular points in schooling should be a key factor in shaping teachers' expectations for students' literacy acquisition.

For purposes of initial consultation, draft standards were developed at four points: after one year at school; by the end of year 4; by the end of year 6; by the end of year 8, with the intention to develop standards for the points after two years at school and after three years at school.

There was an early question about developing standards for the points by the end of year five and by the end of year 7. Descriptors were not developed for these points in the draft *Literacy Learning Progressions* because of the difficulty in differentiating the literacy demand at these years from that of the following year. Essentially, during years 5 and 6, and years 7 and 8, the curriculum requires students to do much the same sort of tasks with similar types of texts. Over each of these two-year periods students develop their expertise by becoming more independent and fluent in using their reading and writing to meet specific purposes, as well as extending the range of texts that they read and write.

The final version of the standards therefore lists the same key characteristics of texts for years 5 and 6, and the same set for years 7 and 8.

The standards are established by the level of reading and writing expertise students need in terms of the curriculum demand at each level

The New Zealand Curriculum sets out how curriculum levels typically relate to years at school¹². All the standards, except those for reading in the first three years, refer to the demands of *The New Zealand Curriculum* in line with these indicated levels. The standards for reading in years 1 to 3 use the colour wheel levels established in the Ready to Read series¹³. The colours are well-understood by New Zealand teachers as a means of establishing expectations and describing progress and achievement in reading in these years.

The topics, themes and/or studies at the centre of most classroom programmes tend to be selected and organised for a particular year level and are used as the context for developing students' knowledge, skills and attitudes in the different learning areas of the curriculum. Typically teachers design tasks using a range of materials, including digital materials, as resources for ideas and information on these topics or studies for most of the students in the class. Similarly all students in a particular year are required to think about, record or communicate experiences, ideas and information related to topics, themes and/or studies as part of their classroom programme.

The reading and writing demands of *The New Zealand Curriculum* were identified through an analysis of the achievement objectives for each learning area, and examples of the texts and tasks

¹² Ministry of Education (2007a) p45 . (The ministry acknowledges that there are many students, including those with special learning needs and those who are gifted, who do not meet this pattern)

¹³ The Ready to Read series is the core instructional reading series provided to all New Zealand schools.

used in programmes designed to meet those objectives, for example in *The New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars*¹⁴.

The reading and writing tasks students use to meet learning purposes across the curriculum get harder

To use their reading as an interactive tool, students need to be able to read, respond to and think critically about texts in ways that are increasingly determined by their purpose for reading. Taking a similarly comprehensive view of writing means that writing is referred to in the standards as “creating texts” to emphasise the point that students will use different writing processes depending on their purposes for writing.

The standards address students’ increasingly sophisticated purposes for reading. These main purposes are described in most curriculum maps and assumed in suggested learning activities found in teaching materials designed to support various learning areas. Students almost always need to use their reading as an interactive tool in order to locate and evaluate information and ideas. In year 4, as in earlier years, they usually locate information and ideas within a text. As they move through each year of school students locate and evaluate information and ideas within and across a widening range of texts. They also do more with the information and ideas they find: in years 5 and 6 they are often required to integrate information and ideas in order to meet specific curriculum purposes, and in years 7 and 8 they are usually required to synthesise the information and ideas. As discussed below, the increasing complexity of the texts they engage with mean that students require more reading expertise in order to locate information and ideas (for example the information they need is not directly stated in the text, requiring them to make inferences) as well as to carry out the more sophisticated tasks of integrating and synthesising. There is also an expectation that students will work across an increasing range of texts with more independence, fluency and awareness.

The standards for writing take account of the role of students’ writing in thinking, recording and communicating experiences, ideas and information. This role was deliberately expanded from the “writing to communicate” role to include thinking and recording after an analysis of typical purposes for writing demanded across the curriculum. For example, students often write to generate ideas, or to explore links between ideas, or to note some information that they might want to refer back to at a later point. In these cases, there is no audience (other than themselves) and they do not need to follow all the processes associated with creating texts intended to be read by someone else.

The texts that students read and write get more complex

The texts that students are required to read and write as they move through the school system become increasingly complex. At the same time, the content (subject matter) they are reading becomes more abstract and specialised.

The texts student read

A text’s complexity is affected by the complexity of its content, structure and language - the kinds of information in a text and the ways in which that information is related and presented. Determining the level of a text is not straight forward as there are many factors including the characteristics

¹⁴ Ministry of Education (2003).

inherent in the texts themselves, what students have to do with the text (that is, the task) as well as the particular background and experience of the reader, for example how familiar a setting is to the student. It is for this reason that systems such as lexiles or reading ages¹⁵ have not been used to describe the reading demand at each level, although it is acknowledged that reading ages are commonly used to set and report against targets¹⁶. Instead the standards include a list of the characteristics of texts that are typical of texts at each level. Teachers need to make a judgment about the demands of particular texts by considering the particular purpose for reading (that is, the task associated with the text) as well as the students' prior experience and familiarity with the content or setting.

The key characteristics of texts that students read at a particular level are presented below the standard in the standards document as a guide for teachers. They are not part of the standard itself. The underlying frame for the characteristics covers content, structure, and language. This frame was decided on after considering a number of systems used to level texts used for instructional reading.

The team that developed the reading and writing standards acknowledged that many teachers would need to develop their professional knowledge about how texts become more complex¹⁷.

The texts students write

Because students use their writing as an interactive tool for a wide range of purposes related to the curriculum, they will need to use different processes, depending on their particular purpose, to create different kinds of texts. When teachers make their judgments as to whether a student meets the standard for writing they will therefore have to consider both process and product. The guide for key characteristics of students' writing addresses both; the heading for this section quite deliberately does not refer to texts alone.

The characteristics of the texts students write use the same underlying frame as that used to describe the texts students read: content; structure; and language. The frame is also commonly used in curriculum and assessment frameworks¹⁸.

Addressing Diversity

The National Standards apply to all students in English-medium schools, in the same way as *The New Zealand Curriculum* does.

The New Zealand Curriculum applies to all English-medium state schools (including integrated schools) and to all students in those schools irrespective of their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, belief, ability or disability, social or cultural background, or geographical location.

The New Zealand Curriculum, page 6.

However, the way teachers use the standards will be determined by the particular students in their classrooms, reflecting the teaching and learning programme they have developed for these

¹⁵ The Noun Frequency Method (Elley and Croft 1989) is often used to determine the reading age of materials. This is a useful guide, but does not always reflect the complexity of themes, or topics, of the structure of the text.

¹⁶ Such targets are often as simple as "students should be reading at their chronological age".

¹⁷ For example, many teachers rely on the "reading ages" provided as an indicator to the level of a text in the *School Journal*. The concept of reading age provides only a rough guide to the complexity of a text, and the term is not a valid way to describe a student's level of reading expertise.

¹⁸ See for example, Glasswell K, Parr, J and Aikman M, (2001)

students. Part 2 of the national standards introductory material has been developed to provide some initial guidance, particularly for using the standards with English language learners, and the Ministry's intention is to elaborate this guidance in on-line professional materials.

Illustrating the Standards

The draft standards included texts that exemplified the standard. The intention was to show the kinds of text that students would need to read and write at a particular level. However it was clear from feedback during the consultation period that many teachers saw these as benchmark texts to be used to determine whether students were meeting the standard.

For the final document, the decision was made to illustrate the standards with excerpts of texts rather than annotate a single piece of text, and provide more comment about the students' task along with greater detail about their purpose for engaging with the text and the tasks. The illustrations were sourced from classrooms and show authentic curriculum tasks. The intention is to illustrate typical behaviours of students meeting the standard as they engage with texts appropriate to that level.

The literacy-related knowledge, skills and attitudes are described in the *Literacy Learning Progressions*

The knowledge, skills and attitudes that students draw on in order to engage with the texts and tasks required by the curriculum at an expected level are described in the *Literacy Learning Progressions*. The items described in the progressions are all necessary but do not, by themselves, count as reading and writing. As they read and write, students draw on items, integrating them with varying degrees of control, efficiency, and automaticity¹⁹.

The original intention was to include the *Literacy Learning Progressions* in the document for the standards, but feedback from consultation on the *Draft National Standards* indicated that doing this drew the focus away from the standards themselves. The bulleted descriptors also tended to look like a checklist that had to be assessed, or possibly even taught, in a discrete way.

Therefore the decision was made not to include the progressions in the standards document. However, if students are not meeting the standard, then the intention is that teachers will look to the progressions for guidance as to possible gaps or weaknesses that need to be further investigated.

¹⁹ See definition in Ministry of Education, *Literacy Learning Progressions* (2010), Glossary, page 21.

References and bibliography

- Assessment Resource Banks (ARBs) in English, Mathematics and Science. Available at <http://www.arb.nzcer.org.nz>
- asTTle technical reports and user manual. Available at <http://www.tki.org.nz/r/asTTle>
- Borderfields Consulting (2009). *Literacy Learning Progressions: Report on Analysis of Feedback on the Draft Document*. Available at <http://www.minedu.govt.nz>
- Cambridge Primary Review. Available at <http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/>
- Croft, C., McDowall, S., & Rapson, G. Levels-based assessment of Writing: Scoring Guides from the Assessment Resource Banks. In *set 1*, 2002. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- Crooks, T., & Flockton, L. (2005). *Reading and Speaking Assessment Results 2004* (National Education Monitoring Report 34). Dunedin: Educational Assessment Research Unit, University of Otago.
- Crooks, T., & Flockton, L. (2007). *Writing Assessment Results 2006* (National Education Monitoring Report 41). Dunedin: Educational Assessment Research Unit, University of Otago.
- Curriculum Corporation (1998). *Literacy Benchmarks Years 3 & 5 Writing, Spelling and Reading*. Melbourne: Curriculum Corporation. Available at <http://online.curriculum.edu.au/litbench>
- Curriculum Corporation (1998). *Literacy Benchmarks Year 7 Writing, Spelling and Reading*. Melbourne: Curriculum Corporation. Available at <http://online.curriculum.edu.au/litbench>
- Darr, C., McDowall, S., Ferral, H., Twist, J., & Watson, V. (2008). *Progressive Achievement Test: Reading. 2nd Edition Teacher Manual*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- Department for Education and Skills. *Primary Framework for Literacy and Mathematics*. Available at <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primaryframeworks/literacy/learningobjectives>
- Elley, W. (2000). *STAR:Supplementary Test of Achievement in Reading for Years 4-6*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- Elley, W. B., & Croft, A. C. (1989). *Assessing the Difficulty of Reading Materials: The Noun Frequency Method*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- Glasswell K., Parr, J. & Aikman M. *Development of the asTTle Writing Assessment Rubrics for Scoring Extended Writing Tasks. Technical Report 6, Project asTTle*, University of Auckland , 2001.
- Hiebert, E. H. (in press). Standards, assessment, and text difficulty. In A. E. Farstrup & S. J. Samuels (Eds.), *What Research has to say about Reading Instruction*. (3rd edition). Newark D. E: International Reading Association.

- International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (2006). *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) Assessment Framework and Specifications*. Amsterdam: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.
- Luke, A. & Freebody, P. (1999). A Map of Possible Practices: Further Notes on the Four Resources Model. *Practically Primary*, 4 (2), pp. 5-8.
- McDonald, T. & Thornley, C. Literacy Teaching and Learning During the Secondary Years – Establishing a pathway for success to NCEA and beyond. *set 2*, 2005.
- McNaughton, S., Phillips G., & MacDonald, S. (2000). Curriculum Channels and Literacy Development Over the First Year of Instruction. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 35 (1), pp. 49-59.
- Ministry of Education (1996a). *Exploring Language: A Handbook for Teachers*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education (1998). *Assessment for Success in Primary Schools*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.
- Ministry of Education (2003a). *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 1 to 4*. Wellington: Learning Media .
- Ministry of Education (2003b). *The New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars*. Wellington: New Zealand: Learning Media and the Learning Centre Trust of New Zealand. Available at <http://www.tki.org.nz/r/assessment/exemplars>
- Ministry of Education (2003c). *Effective Literacy Strategies in Years 9-13*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education (2006). *Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5 to 8*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education (2007a). *The New Zealand Curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education (2007b). *Ready to Read Teacher Support Material: Emergent Level*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education (2007c). *Draft for Consultation: Literacy Learning Progressions – Meeting the Reading and Writing Demands of the Curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education (2008a). *Pasfika Education Plan 2008-2012*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.
- Ministry of Education (2008b). *The English Language Learning Progressions: Supporting Language Learning in English-medium Contexts*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education (2009a). *Ka Hikitia – Managing for Success: The Maori Education Strategy 2008-2012*, updated ed. Wellington: Ministry of Education.
- Ministry of Education (2009b). *Learning through Talk: Oral Language in Years 1 to 3*. Wellington: Learning Media.

- Ministry of Education (2009c). *Learning through Talk: Oral Language in Years 4 to 8*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- National Institute for Literacy. Available at <http://eff.cls.utk.edu>
- National Reading Panel (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel*. Washington DC: Government Printing Office. Available at <http://www.nationalreadingpanel.org>
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2003). *The PISA 2003 Assessment Framework- Mathematics, Reading, Science and Problem-Solving Knowledge and Skills*. Available at <http://www.pisa.oecd.org>
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2005). *Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo)*. Available at <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/47/61/35070367.pdf>
- Paris, S. G. (2005). Reinterpreting the Development of Reading Skills. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 40 (2), pp.184-202.
- Progressive Achievement Tests (PATs) website. Available at <http://www.nzcer.org.nz/tests>
- Sadler, D. R. (1987). Specifying and Promulgating Achievement Standards. *Oxford Review of Education*, 13 (2), pp.191-209.
- Stein, S. (2000). *Equipped for the Future Content Standards: What Adults Need to Know and Be Able to Do in the 21st Century*. Washington DC: National Institute for Literacy.
- Tertiary Education Commission (2008). *Learning Progressions for Adult Literacy*. Wellington: Tertiary Education Commission.

Appendix 1

Principles agreed to by consultation group 18/12/08

Principles (Related to identifying and measuring standards)

- Measure what is important in a way that enables effective instruction for growth and development for all students.
- Standards are based on a psychometrically defensible scale, multiple measures and the best available literacy evidence.
- Communicability, accessibility, utility, transparency for a range of audiences will be key considerations in the development of standards.
- Standards will require a well-informed mix of actual and aspirational tasks.
- Standards will contribute to system improvement.
- Standards will enable understanding of individual trajectories of development to promote progress and growth.
- The least well-served students will be better off in relation to valued outcomes of *The New Zealand Curriculum*.
- Integral part of curriculum teaching and learning.
- Standards trigger a response from all levels of the system for learners.
- Decisions about where student is at in relation to standards are drawn from multiple sources.
- Standards will be supported by exemplification in the form of multiple authentic student work showing what achievement could look like.
- The *Literacy Learning Progressions* (LLPs) underpins the development of literacy standards.
- That LLP is based on best available literacy theory and research.