



Why the New National Literacy Standards Won't Close Our Literacy Achievement Gap

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INTRODUCTION

There has been a great deal of discussion about national standards and testing in literacy and numeracy. While several rationales for the promotion of national standards have been provided, the main ones appear to include making reporting to parents more transparent through the use of what has been termed 'plain language' reporting, and reducing New Zealand's widening achievement gap (as highlighted by international surveys such as PIRLS). The current Minister of Education claims that parents want schools to tell them how their particular children are performing in literacy and numeracy and in language that they can understand. Apparently, these parents are also concerned about how their particular children are performing compared to other children across the country and hence the call for 'national' data. These parents appear to have a right to be concerned about their children as the gap between the highest and lowest performing students increases, with 15,000 students leaving school with inadequate literacy and numeracy skills. We discuss these two rationales for national standards, and the issues surrounding them.

RATIONALE 1: THE USE OF 'PLAIN LANGUAGE' REPORTING OF INFORMATION IN LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT FOR PARENTS

The Minister has called for more clear and direct, 'plain language' reporting of literacy information to parents. Clear and direct reporting to parents does not need to be a difficult issue to address at the school level if schools are aware of why parents may have concerns or confusions over the reporting of literacy achievement. One possible area of confusion may result from parents not having sufficient information about the type of literacy assessment tools that teachers use as a basis for their reporting.

Schools have a wide range of literacy assessment tools at their disposal, and are free to choose which ones they prefer to use. Some of these assessment tools (such as the PATs, STAR, SsPA, AsTTle and the Observation Survey) are normed for use in New Zealand schools. The data from such tests can therefore be used to compare children's performance norms with those of similar age or year level from throughout the country. Class teachers are therefore able to use the results from these tests to report individual children's performances, relative to other children, to their parents.

If we take the assumption that parents are confused with how teachers are reporting the assessment data, maybe one way of allaying such confusions might be for teachers to show, and discuss, their child's actual test results (including how they are scored) to the parents during the regular reporting interviews. The AsTTLe 'dashboard display', for example, is often placed in children's learning portfolios, but is very confusing to understand without careful explanation. It is still possible that the graphs depicted in the recently published National Standards document, showing examples of children's progress over time, might still lead to confusion for some parents. They may, however, be less likely to cause confusion for parents if they are familiar with the type of test(s) that were used by the teacher to form the basis for these graphs or snapshots in the first place.

There are, however, many other literacy assessments that are not normed, and reporting data for comparison purposes from such assessments is rather more problematic, especially if the assessments are subjective in measurement. The running record and the subsequent book-reading level information is one such subjective measure, and is also the assessment whose use is implied in the National Standards for Years 1 to 3. The National Standard quoted as a benchmark for the end of one year at school, for example, states that the students should be able to 'read, respond to, and think critically about fiction and non-fiction texts at the Green level of Ready to Read' and also that they 'read seen texts at Green with at least 90 percent accuracy' (Ministry of Education, 2009, p.10). While this level of accuracy is a guideline benchmark, it would also be of relevance for parents to know more about the particular text that was used as a basis for this benchmark assessment before any meaningful judgement could be made. Text features such as the genre need to be taken into account as well.

Further difficulties when comparing and recording individual child learning that is based on running records include whether the teachers have used 'seen' or 'unseen' texts, whether teachers asked comprehension questions following the running record, whether the running records were analysed for error quality, whether the running records were used solely for the purpose of finding the reading level for each child, and whether the purpose for taking running records was based on the teacher's or the principal's requirements (for a detailed discussion of these issues see Blaiklock, 2004; Timperley et al., 2004). In addition, even when there is consistent use of the conventions of running records, there are subjective outcomes due to differences in teacher knowledge and experience (Ministry of Education, 2000).

Schools are capable of providing parents with 'plain language' reporting on their children's progress, particularly if clarification and guidance accompany the reports to parents. This guidance could take the form of information on the assessments, how and why they were used and what they tell us.

RATIONALE 2: CLOSING THE LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT GAP

While the introduction of 'plain language' reporting might well allay some of the confusion surrounding what teachers report to parents, we argue that the introduction of national standards and national testing, *per se*, will not necessarily have any impact on the closing of the literacy achievement gap in New Zealand. To address this issue, it is necessary to look at the reasons why

there is such a literacy gap, and why the current discourse around national standards will not necessarily help.

Why does New Zealand have such a gap?

The government is right to be concerned about New Zealand's widening literacy achievement gap which has been evidenced in recent international literacy surveys such as the PIRLS surveys (Mullis, Martin, Kennedy, & Foy, 2007). However, we believe that the solution to this issue does not lie with the introduction of national tests or standards per se. Two years before the latest PIRLS in 2006 (which showed that New Zealand had dropped from 13th in 2001 to 26th place in 2006), it was predicted that the literacy achievement gap for New Zealand would widen after the 2001 survey (see Greaney, 2004; Tunmer & Chapman, 2004). We also discussed at that time the likely reasons for the continued downward trends. Our predictions in 2004 have been shown to be realised as New Zealand is now in 26th place (Mullis et al., 2007). Furthermore, the reasons for the continued downward trend that we put forward at that time (i.e., 2004) are equally valid today, with the continued bias towards the constructivist teaching approach that is present particularly at the early levels of reading and writing instruction.

The predominant constructivist whole language approach to reading instruction that is promoted in Ministry of Education publications (e.g., Ministry of Education, 2003, 2006), and in many of the Ministry-funded literacy professional development programmes, is suitable for most students but is not suitable for those students who have difficulties learning to read. For decades, New Zealand has subscribed to this 'one-size-fits-all' approach to literacy instruction and it is also reflected in how we both assess and teach reading. Even though there is strong research evidence demonstrating that fluent readers are first and foremost efficient decoders (see Adams, 1990; Pressley, 2006), the whole language teaching approach underplays the importance of this component as a necessary skill requirement for the development of efficient word identification processes.

Beginning readers are more often encouraged to use multiple-cues (e.g., semantic, syntactic, prior knowledge, grapho-phonemic and the illustrations) to work out a word (see Ministry of Education, 2003). The multiple cues theory is based on the premise of Goodman's (1970) psycholinguistic guessing game. However, the assessment and teaching of word-based phonological skills is crucial for ensuring the development of efficient decoding skills but the continued bias towards the all-encompassing multiple cues approach under-emphasises the relative importance of decoding. This lack of attention to the assessment of phonological skills is evident in the National Standards document.

Why national testing will not close the gap

While there is now a very large amount of international research evidence that demonstrates that phonological processing skills (including the precursor phonemic awareness sub-skills) are the key to successful reading development (Castles, Coltheart, Wilson, Valpied, & Wedgwood, 2009; Ehri, Nunes, Willows, Schuster, Yaghoub-Zadeh, & Shanahan, 2001), there are currently no assessment tools readily available to teachers nationwide that measure these skills. The current assessment tools measure several areas of reading performance (e.g., vocabulary, comprehension, spelling, word reading), but

there are no assessments that are readily available for teachers to measure phonemic awareness. Even the *Six Year Observation Survey* (Clay, 1985) that is used in most primary schools has no appropriate measure of phonemic awareness. Because there are no widely available assessments of phonemic awareness, teachers are less likely to even be aware of the significance of this issue and how it impacts on later reading development. Such a lack of teacher awareness also means that little or no attention is likely to be given to the teaching of such skills within the regular class reading programme (e.g., Cunningham, Perry, Stanovich, & Stanovich, 2004).

This lack of attention to the assessment and teaching of phonological based skills is evidenced in how teachers analyse running records. There is a tendency within the running record analysis procedures for teachers to become obsessed with noting whether or not the students are 'reading for meaning' rather than whether or not they are efficiently decoding the words. One reason for this 'meaning-related' bias in running record analyses is the assumption that reading acquisition is primarily a process in which children learn to use multiple cues (syntactic, semantic, visual-graphophonic) to *predict* words. For a detailed critique of this issue see Greaney and Tunmer (submitted).

Reading standards after one year at school

With regard to the discussion about the lack of valid phonological-based literacy assessment tools, the recently-developed National Standards in literacy do not include any new assessment tools. Instead, it is assumed that the current assessments are adequate. According to the National Standards' document, the reading standard that children should show after one year of school is 'read, respond to, and think critically about fiction and non-fiction text' (Ministry of Education, 2009). While this is a noble standard to achieve, there is no mention of the underlying phonological-based precursor skills that such readers require *before* they are able to do these things. The reason that children may be unable to 'read, respond to, and think critically about texts at the Green level' after one year at school is likely to be due to their inefficient phonological processing skills. But, because there are no tools that teachers can access to assess these skills, they will be less likely to address these issues in their classes. Teachers can't be expected to fix a problem (i.e., poor phonological processing skills) if they aren't aware of the problem in the first place (e.g., Cunningham et al., 2004). The following examples from the National Standards document illustrate the point we are making, that there is a heavy focus on context-based strategies with little attention given to the phonological-based skills that fluent reading is dependent upon.

In an illustrated example of the benchmark for a student at the end of one year at school, there are several strategies highlighted to illustrate relevant comprehension-enhancing skills for this level. After reading the appropriate text the National Standards document states that the student should be able to do the following:

- Search and find information in the illustrations to answer questions;
- Use a combination of processing and comprehension strategies to clarify a new and unexpected piece of information;
- Reread to check that they have read a sentence correctly;

- Re-examine the illustration;
- Draw on prior knowledge;
- Build on the discussion to make inferences;
- When reading aloud the student indicates through tones and expressions that the text is about making comparisons.

How are teachers supposed to assess these? If children have difficulty with any of these behaviours or strategies there is no indication in the standards suggesting likely reasons for those difficulties. We argue that these 'end product' skills can only be present if the student has also developed sufficient word-level, or decoding, competence. However, there is very little evidence in the National Standards document that such skills are deemed important. For example, while there are several context-based strategies highlighted in the National Standards that students (at the end of one year) should be familiar with, there are only two word-level strategies highlighted. The two examples of word-level strategies are:

- To work out 'rode' the student may use context including the illustration, prior knowledge and knowledge of language structures and letter-sound relationships;
- For compound words (e.g., grandma or sometimes), the student could look at the biggest familiar chunk, predicting and checking it makes sense.

The plethora of text-based strategies and skills highlighted in the National Standards gives the assumption that all the comprehension-enhancing strategies somehow operate without any relationship to decoding skills. The multiple cues view of reading presents the reading process as a combination of various sub-skills of equal importance. While this might not be an issue with standards at the higher levels (e.g., after year 3), this lack of attention to the importance and significance of word-level skills at the *foundational* level of instruction is a major issue.

The problem of relying on the multiple cues theory of reading, and the underplaying of the significance of word-level strategies, is further noted by Tunmer and Greaney (submitted) when they claim that:

The major shortcoming of the instructional philosophy espoused by Clay (2005a, b) and adopted by the Ministry is that it stresses the importance of using information from many sources in identifying unfamiliar words in text without recognising that skills and strategies involving phonological information are of primary importance in beginning literacy development.

It is important that the development of word-level skills is given major attention in the first two years of instruction, and that such skills should be acknowledged and reflected in any reading standards at this level. This would also further address the potential literacy achievement gap before it begins to widen in later years.

CONCLUSIONS

The implementation of any effective reading programme should be based on relevant assessment information. A key purpose of literacy assessments is that they be used to inform future teaching practice. It is difficult to understand how a teacher can implement relevant instructional programmes in literacy in the absence of formative assessment information. This is particularly relevant for the assessment of the component skills that are necessary for young readers when developing effective word identification skills.

There may well be many parents who find their school's assessment reporting protocols to be rather confusing. However, before this issue can be adequately addressed we suggest that schools could first identify where the confusion lies. Confusion may be due to parents' general lack of knowledge of, or familiarity with, the particular assessment tools that teachers use to report the reading progress of their children. If this is the case then perhaps schools may need to better familiarise parents with these assessment tools, including how they are administered and analysed.

A more contentious issue relates to whether or not the introduction of any form of national standards and tests *per se* would be likely to address New Zealand's widening literacy achievement gap. We maintain that if the New Zealand Ministry of Education continues to subscribe to and promote an outdated 'one-size-fits-all' constructive whole language approach to both the teaching and assessing of reading, at the same time ignoring the scientific evidence disclaiming this approach, then any national standards mandate that only includes the current assessment tools, will have little effect on closing our reading achievement gap.

We argue, therefore, that while the Ministry of Education continues to reject the research evidence from the international scientific community relating to the assessment and teaching of reading, that our literacy achievement gap is likely to continue to widen. We suggest that the Ministry of Education policies on the teaching and assessing of reading need to be revisited as, clearly, the reading standards appear to promote nothing more than a continuation of the status quo methods of assessment and teaching that have been responsible for our widening literacy achievement gap over the last four decades.

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