



The Issue of Mandating Literacy Assessments in Primary Schools: Examples from the United Kingdom and New Zealand

New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 10, Issue 2, 231-238, 2013

KEITH GREANEY
Massey University

ABSTRACT

A current issue of concern in New Zealand and the United Kingdom (UK) is the thrust of both governments to mandate some forms of literacy-related assessment practices in primary schools. In New Zealand, the National Government has recently mandated the national Reading and Writing Standards for Years 1-8 (Ministry of Education, 2009), and the UK Government has recently mandated a new non-word reading test for all 6-year-olds. In both countries it appears that one of the rationales behind these policies is an attempt to raise the literacy achievement levels of all students and in particular, those who are having difficulties. However, in both countries the teachers and teacher unions have continued to strongly oppose the introduction of these assessment-related policy initiatives. There are several reasons why the teachers and teacher unions are opposing the implementation of the respective policies, and some of these reasons are common to both countries. It is also contended that if the non-word (or any) reading test was mandated for use in New Zealand, there would be similar levels of disapproval as those that have occurred in the UK (and for similar reasons).

LITERACY ASSESSMENTS AND THE CURRENT STATUS QUO IN NEW ZEALAND

New Zealand teachers have had (and continue to have) access to more assessment tools in literacy than in any other curriculum area (Education Review Office, 1999) and many of these assessment tools (including their revised versions) have been available and used in primary schools for more than four decades. Assessments such as the *Burt Word Test* (Gilmore, Croft & Reid, 1981), *Running Records* (Ministry of Education, 2000) *Progressive Achievement Tests* (Darr, McDowall, Ferral, Twist & Watson, 2008), and the *Observation Survey* (Clay, 1998) have all been readily accepted within the school system with no opposition. Furthermore, even when new ones have been more recently introduced, (e.g., *e-AsTTle*, Ministry of Education, 2012a), the *Supplementary Spelling Assessment* (Croft, 2007) and the *STAR Reading Test* (Elley, Ferral & Watson, 2011), there has generally been positive acceptance from teachers. Schools have always been able to independently choose to use any of these assessments and at any time. However, while the recently mandated national *Reading and Writing Standards for Years 1-8* (Ministry of Education, 2009), may encompass various elements of progress

reporting (including data from a variety of both qualitative and quantitative assessment tools) that teachers may use to form their 'Overall Teacher Judgments' (OTJs) about their students' progress, there are no *explicitly* nominated or mandated assessment tools that teachers are *required* to use. It appears that while the *National Standards* themselves may not be particularly problematic, the compulsion to use them (and for every student) is more contentious. There is also evidence to suggest that even the act of mandating education policies by governments is sometimes viewed by teachers as 'intrusions' from politicians into education and that such 'intrusions' are seen to result in an undermining of teacher professionalism and in their ability to choose their own practices. This concern has been particularly evident in the United Kingdom (UK) with the recent mandating of the non-word reading test that all teachers are expected to use with 6-year-olds at school entry.

REACTIONS TO A GOVERNMENT-MANDATED LITERACY ASSESSMENT IN THE UK: THE CASE OF THE NON-WORD READING TEST

A non-word (sometimes called pseudoword) reading test is designed to assess a student's ability to read (i.e., decode) meaningless 'nonsense' words (e.g., tov, sterp, prowt, gletop, stropelding). The non-word reading test was first developed more than 35 years ago (Bryant, 1975) and is a measure of phonological recoding (i.e., the ability to decode unfamiliar words). Pressley (2006) states that 'many reading researchers believe that an especially good measure of decoding ability is pseudoword reading [that is] being able to read letter combinations that have the structural characteristics of real words but are not real words. Such words could not be known by the reader through previous exposure but must be decoded' (p. 170). This 'uniqueness' aspect of the non-words ensures that the reader has never encountered them before in any context and because non-words (by definition) have no meaning, the reader has only one strategy for decoding them, and that strategy is to use his/her knowledge of the orthographic/phonological (letter-sound) patterns inherent within the spelling. This letter-sounds spelling patterns knowledge forms the basis of efficient and fluent reading, and it is therefore relevant and important that teachers are given an assessment tool that would help them to identify their students' decoding ability. It is likely that if this rationale for the use of a non-word reading test was made accessible to teachers, then perhaps its acceptance may have been more forthcoming.

A meaningless test?

The concerns expressed by the various (UK) teacher unions suggest that there is, in fact, little understanding of the rationale on which this test is based. An example of this lack of understanding is evident when Ward (2011) noted that Russell Hobby (the General Secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, UK) had commented that, 'This [non-word test] doesn't address fluency, comprehension or reading for pleasure; it's just a test of 40 words'.

While Hobby is technically correct with this assertion, the non-word reading test is actually not designed to assess measures of reading comprehension or fluency. As has been discussed, it is a measure of how well a student is able to use letter-sound knowledge to decode non-words that contain meaningless but plausible, English orthographic spelling patterns. Because

non-words are both unfamiliar to the student and have no meaning, such words can only be 'read' by attending to the *orthographic* or letter-sound spelling patterns within the word. This requires knowledge of the alphabetic principle and it is this knowledge that is often missing in most students who have persistent reading problems. A real word reading test also assesses word reading ability but because many of the words may already be familiar to the reader (as sight words), it is difficult to establish the true level of conscious 'phonological processing' ability present. A low score on a non-word reading test is therefore a more accurate indicator of phonological processing ability and the results can therefore be used to help the teacher identify those students who may require additional explicit instruction in word-level word identification strategies. Clay (1991) also objected to the non-word reading test when she argued that 'decoding nonsense words cannot be used as the ultimate test for the final explanation of reading' (p. 8). While it has never been suggested that the non-word test be accepted as the *final explanation* of reading, Tunmer (1992) suggests that there may be a confusion between an activity that is designed for '*measuring* an underlying component skill of reading from using the activity to *facilitate* the acquisition of reading skills' (p. 206). In further support of this claim, Stanovich (1988) argues that 'The tools used to diagnose and to uncover causal explanations for performance in an educational task are not necessarily the same tools that will be used to facilitate performance of the task in the educational environment' (p. 211). It is suggested that this confusion between the purpose of the (non-word) assessment and the educational implications derived from its use are the reasons behind its opposition in the UK.

The label of 'failure' for those who score low

A second issue that some teachers have with the non-word reading test concerns the claim that the identification of students who do have low performances can lead to the possibility of labelling them as 'failures'. In support of this concern, Ward (2011) reports, for example, that the National Union of Teachers (NUT) said that 'the proposals to retest children who fail could cause children to think they are 'no good' at reading – especially as they will only be given a limited number of attempts at each word' (p. 2).

The situation in which students are given 'limited attempts' at tasks is actually a typical condition of most assessment tools, so this time restriction component should not be viewed as a problem that is specific to only the non-word test. Furthermore, it is difficult to understand why poor test performances should necessarily be viewed as synonymous with 'failure' rather than as an identification of a 'specific learning need'. If a particular assessment identifies a specific learning need (as occurs with nearly every type of formative assessment) then it should be viewed as an important and relevant part of the teaching/learning process.

The *National Standards* in New Zealand and the non-word reading test in the UK: similar concerns

The labelling of children as 'failures' is also a concern held by the New Zealand primary teachers' union (NZEI Te Riu Roa) when discussing the *National Standards*. In an NZEI website (nzei.org.nationalstandards) that highlights concerns about the *National Standards*, it is claimed that (like the UK

concern about the non-word test), the *Standards* 'could label children as young as 5 as failures'. This is an interesting claim given that the first *National Standard* benchmark doesn't appear until after the child has been at school for one full year. In other words, there is no benchmark for a child who enters school at age 5 years and teachers are not required to report against the Standards until after the child has received 40 weeks of instruction (see Ministry of Education, 2012b).

The adequacy of current assessments

Another concern about the introduction of the non-word test in the UK is highlighted in a National Union of Teachers (NUT) submission which claims that their teachers already have sufficient information about their students' learning from other sources within their classes and therefore another test was not deemed to be necessary. In the NUT's submission it was noted, for example, that 'It is fundamentally inappropriate to introduce a phonics screening test as a statutory requirement for all pupils in year 1. The proposed test will not provide teachers and schools with any additional information about pupils beyond that which they already have' (Ward, 2011, p. 2).

Political interference

A further reason for the opposition in the UK for this test was that its introduction was seen to result in an undermining of teachers' professionalism (Ward, 2011). In the *Times Educational Supplement*, Chris Keates, the general secretary of a national teachers' union (the National Association of Schoolmasters Union for Women Teachers/ NASUWT), was quoted as saying (when discussing the role of politicians and educational policy implementation) that 'it is the equivalent of telling surgeons that they can use only a scalpel to perform an operation [and] they wouldn't dream of interfering with a surgeon's practice. Why should teachers' professionalism and judgement merit less respect?' (Ward 2011, p. 2). Similarly, in a discussion that tracks the evolution of the *National Standards* and the role of government, Clark (2010) also alluded to this issue when he states that 'if academics should be wary about entering into the political sphere surrounding national standards, likewise politicians ought to tread carefully in the domain of the academic' (p. 118). From this perspective Clark demonstrates some sympathy with both the UK and the New Zealand teachers with regards to the relative roles of teachers versus politicians in relation to the introduction of education-related policies.

Flockton (2011) is also critical of the 'privileged' power role (and the trust) that politicians are deemed to have and how such power can be used for influence irrespective of their level of knowledge. Flockton argues, for example, that 'competence in the world of education, whether political or professional, means knowing your stuff and being able to give true, confident and balanced accounts of that stuff, [and that] those who are prevailed upon to invest their trust, must also know their stuff, otherwise they have no sound basis upon which to make their judgements' (p. 30). In relation to the government-imposed *National Standards*, Flockton is suggesting that such a policy is based on unsound judgements.

The issue of assessment data being misused

Another union concern that the UK teachers had with the introduction of the non-word reading test was apparent when they claimed that 'our members are deeply suspicious of the phonics screen. They wonder what the data will be used for' (Ward, 2011, p. 2). It appears from this comment that the UK teachers' have two concerns about the non-word test. The first is that because the predominant approach to teaching reading in the UK is based on a constructivist whole language instructional methodology that does not encourage the use of phonics-based teaching, there is no need for such an assessment tool at all. Furthermore, in New Zealand where the predominant teaching approach is also whole language, a mandated non-word test would similarly be opposed by the teachers. The second concern about the potential uses of the data also mirrors a similar concern that the New Zealand NZEI holds about *National Standards* data. In the NZEI website (nzei.org.nz/nationalstandards) four concerns about the *Standards* are highlighted, including the concern that (the publishing of) the data could result in 'misleading and damaging' school league tables.

Another (but not so obvious) reason for the resistance to the introduction of the non-word test in the UK relates to what Ferrari (2011) reports as, a prevailing phobia by teachers towards *any* type of quantitative test data. Support of this contention was made apparent in a speech by Tom Alegounarias given to the 2011 annual conference of the Australian College of Educators where he states that teachers may be 'reluctant to be associated too closely with any data that purports to sum up a level of achievement or pattern of attainment, no matter how popular it appears to outsiders, [and that teachers] are seen to engage with the issue of measurement only to resist it' [and that] 'this reluctance to embrace the use of student data was hampering efforts to improve education and overcome the effects of social disadvantage' (Ferrari, 2011, p. 7). Alegounarias further argues that 'to narrow the gap in results, teachers had to be able to measure and track students' performance' (cited in Ferrari, 2011, p. 7).

There is evidence that these anti-assessment views also exist within the New Zealand (*National Standards*) context where some principals argue against the use of assessments because of the likely negative connotations for those who score poorly. In a local New Zealand newspaper, a primary principal claimed that 'for those who can jump it is great, but for those who are struggling, it won't help, [and that] putting the bar higher doesn't necessarily make anyone jump higher' (*Marlborough Express*, 2009, p. 7). Another primary school principal's anti-assessment sentiments were evident when he also argued that (merely) undertaking an assessment doesn't result in better progress. He questioned the relevance of assessment to learning outcomes, for example, by asking the question: 'if we measure a kid's height it doesn't make them grow taller, so how is measuring kids nationally going to make them achieve more?' (*Nelson Mail*, June, 2009).

While it will not be expected that the act of undertaking an assessment would necessarily result in improvement in the task(s) assessed, it is difficult to understand how progress in areas such as literacy can be measured in the absence of some form of assessment practice? It is correct to assume that the act of measuring kids' heights will not 'make' them grow taller, nor would reading improvement necessarily improve, merely by assessing the reading.

However, regardless of what was being assessed, it would be expected that an outcome from the assessment procedure would, at least, indicate some form of progress or positive achievement over time. And, after all, most teachers would want and expect this to be a positive vindication of their teaching.

SUMMARY

Some of the issues relating to the mandating of literacy-related assessment tools (the non-word reading test in the UK, and the *National Standards in Reading* in New Zealand) have been compared. In both countries, the teachers and their unions have voiced their opposition and concerns towards these policies and there appear to be some similarities in the concerns that are also shared in both countries. It is suggested that a main 'trigger' for the non-acceptance of the policies in both countries is not the general introduction of the policies themselves but rather, that the respective governments have made them compulsory in all schools. Furthermore, in New Zealand, schools are required to use the *National Standards* to report their results to the Ministry of Education on an annual basis. The likelihood of introducing mandatory reporting of the results of the non-word reading test is also a concern held by the UK teachers' unions.

Finally, it appears that the introduction *per se* of assessment tools into a school system, are seldom problematic. Of more concern for most teachers and teacher unions is the *compulsion* to use them and/or to report any of the resulting data that may later become public information and/or used as a measure of teacher accountability. In New Zealand there is already a non-word test available to teachers (Parkin, 2003) and yet there has been no opposition to its general availability. However, if this test was to be mandated, it is highly likely that it too would be opposed by the teachers, as has happened in the UK, and for similar reasons.

It is easier for governments in countries that have a single centralised government-led education system and curriculum to be able to dictate and mandate centralised education policies for all schools. However, where countries have many different state jurisdictions (and often with many separate policies such as in Australia and the USA), it becomes more difficult to introduce/mandate country-wide policies for every school to follow. The mandating of the non-word reading test in the UK and the *National Standards* in New Zealand are two examples where centralised governments have made it possible to mandate these policies for all schools, without the support or even the input of the key stakeholder groups affected by the implementation. Although the reasons for the UK teachers' opposition to the non-word test were many and varied, embedded within those reasons was also evidence that there was a 'disconnect' between the teachers' knowledge and theory of how children learn to read and how children should be taught to read and the relationship between these questions and the rationale behind the non-word reading test. To address this 'disconnect' would require that teachers receive research-based professional development before the introduction of the policy. But the evidence from the implementation of the non-word reading test in the UK and the *National Standards* in New Zealand suggests that in both countries, mandated education policies (especially in the absence of stakeholder input and professional development), are likely to receive minimal acceptance.

REFERENCES

- Bryant, N. D. (1975). *The Bryant Test of Basic Decoding Skills*. NY: Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Clark, J. (2010). National Standards: The public debate – what was it all about? *New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work*, 7(2), 106-124.
- Clay, M. M. (1991). *Becoming literate: The construction of inner control*. Auckland: Heinemann.
- Clay, M. M. (1998). *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement*. Auckland: Heinemann.
- Croft, C. (2007). *Supplementary Spelling Assessment*. Wellington: NZCER.
- Darr, C., McDowall, S., Ferral, H., Twist, J., & Watson, V. (2008). *Progressive Achievement Test: Reading*. Wellington: NZCER.
- Education Review Office. (1999). *Student assessment: Practices in primary schools, 2*. Wellington: ERO.
- Elley, W., Ferral, H., & Watson, V. (2011). *Star Reading Test*. Wellington: NZCER.
- Ferrari, J. (2011). Teachers are 'phobic' over student test data. *The Australian*, Friday, 15 July, p. 7.
- Flockton, L. (2011). School Lines: A brighter future for our children and their teachers. *New Zealand Principal*, November, 29-30.
- Gilmore, A., Croft, C., & Reid, N. (1981). *Burt Word Reading Test (NZ Revision)*. Wellington: NZCER.
- Marlborough Express*. (2009), 26 June, p. 7.
- Ministry of Education. (2000). *Using Running Records: A resource for New Zealand classroom teachers*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.
- Ministry of Education. (2009). *Reading and Writing Standards for Years 1-8*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education. (2012a). *e-AsTTle Writing (Revised) manual*. Wellington: NZCER.
- Ministry of Education. (2012b). *School planning: National Standards template and guidelines*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.
- Nelson Mail*. (2009). 23 June.
- Parkin, C. (2003). *Non word Phoneme Recognition Assessment*. Lower Hutt: Triune.
- Pressley, M. (2006). *Reading instruction that works: The case for balanced teaching* (3rd edition). NY: The Guildford Press.
- Stanovich, K. (1988). Science and learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 21, 210-214.
- Tunmer, W. (1992). Phonological processing and Reading Recovery: A reply to Clay. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 27(2), 203-216.
- Ward, H. (2011). Phonics test turns out to be not so monstrous after all. *Time Educational Supplement*, September 11.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

KEITH GREANEY
Massey University



Dr Keith Greaney is a Senior Lecturer in reading studies in the Institute of Education at Massey University where he teaches papers in literacy-related issues at both the undergraduate and postgraduate level.

He also researches in the area of literacy learning difficulties.

Contact: k.t.greaney@massey.ac.nz