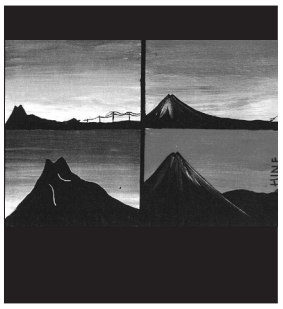
The Literacy Learning Progressions and the Reading and Writing Standards: Some Critical Issues



Dr Keith Greaney
Senior Lecturer, Massey University
Distinguished Professor William E. Tunmer
Massey University

ABSTRACT

The new *Reading and Writing Standards for years 1-8* (2009) and the *Literacy Learning Progressions* (2010) are the two documents that have been published to inform the New Zealand national standards in literacy. An earlier draft *Literacy Learning Progressions* document was circulated nationwide in 2007 to allow for submissions from interested parties. While most of the original content from the draft *Progressions* was retained in the final version, there was one major change. The draft document included two earlier benchmark assessment checkpoints; one at school entry and one after six months. However, both these earlier checkpoints have been deleted from the final *Progressions* document. We discuss some of the likely reasons why these earlier benchmark checkpoints may have been deleted and the implications of these deletions.

Position paper

Keywords: *Assessment, literacy, standards*

INTRODUCTION

The two major documents underpinning the recent National Standards (in literacy) are the *Reading and Writing Standards for Years 1-8* (Ministry of Education, 2009) and the *Literacy Learning Progressions: Meeting the Reading and Writing Demands of the Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2010). Both these documents have many overlapping aspects including the use of end-of-year benchmark descriptor points for the first 10 years of school. *The Reading and Writing Standards* (Ministry of Education, 2009) "provide reference points or signposts that describe the achievement in reading, writing and mathematics" (p.4), and the *Literacy Learning Progressions* (Ministry of Education, 2010) "describes and illustrates the literacy-related knowledge, skills and attitudes that students need to draw on in order to meet the reading and writing demands of the New Zealand Curriculum from Year 1 to Year 10" (p. 3). Furthermore the *Progressions* are designed to "alert teachers to what students need to know and be able to do, at specific points in their schooling, if they are to engage with the texts and tasks of the curriculum and make the expected progress" (p. 3).

With the thrust towards national standards, the implementation of these two documents has been promoted as a way to raise the literacy achievement levels of students who are struggling to learn to read. Any interventions and policies that help these particular students are laudable but we contend that the *Standards and Progressions* documents will likely have minimal impact on addressing the literacy achievement gap, particularly in the first years of school.

While the *Standards* appear to be nothing more than sets of descriptions of selected reading behaviours or exemplars of tasks that children at various ages may perform to illustrate general understanding of the text after having read particular passages, there is also an issue with the lack of focus on specific and relevant assessments in the first year of school. In this paper we discuss these issues further to elaborate our concerns.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS OF THE LITERACY LEARNING PROGRESSIONS

A *Draft Literacy Learning Progressions* document was circulated throughout New Zealand in 2007 to allow for interested parties to make submissions on the contents. Following the submissions period (Borderfields Consulting, no date) the final *Progressions* document was published in 2010. The key difference between the draft and the final *Progressions* documents was that in the draft version, there were two benchmarks set within the first year, one at school entry and one after six months. The third benchmark was set at one year and then yearly thereafter. However, the final document has the first benchmark set at after one year at school and the two earlier benchmark assessment points have been deleted.

In the draft *Progressions* document, there was a fold-out page outlining some of the literacy knowledge that teachers might expect children to have on school entry. Such benchmark knowledge included: developing a memory for spoken and written text; being able to read both their name and some signs and logos from their environment, and being curious about aspects of rhythm, rhyme and alliteration (p. 8). Similarly, a set of

benchmarks at the six months stage included: knowing that sounds combine to form words; being able to identify all letters by name and being able to match some letters to sounds, and decode simple regular words by using word-solving strategies such as letter-sound relationships (p.9). In the final *Progressions* document published in 2010 there is no mention of either the school entry or the six months benchmark points.

While the omission of these two earlier benchmarks in the final document do not appear to be particularly significant, we argue that such an omission suggests that the Ministry of Education's current policy in existence on early literacy teaching and assessment (prior to the *Literacy Progressions and Standards*) appears not to be negotiable and therefore, not in need of change. The inclusion of the earlier benchmarks would have gone some way to alerting teachers to some of the early literacy learning problems affecting very young children at the outset of their schooling. We discuss some of the possible reasons why the earlier benchmarks in the draft *Progressions* may have been taken out of the final document. We also discuss some of the likely impacts of these omissions.

SOME POSSIBLE REASONS FOR THE OMISSION OF THE EARLIER SCHOOL ENTRY AND SIX MONTH BENCHMARKS FROM THE FINAL PROGRESSIONS DOCUMENT

There appear to be two possible reasons why the Ministry of Education has withdrawn the school entry and six month benchmarks from the final *Literacy Progressions* document. The first relates to what may be perceived to be the most opportune time to assess early literacy progress. The second possibility relates to what is perceived to be the relative importance of 'constrained' and 'unconstrained' skills within the development of early reading. Each of these will be discussed further.

THE OPPORTUNE TIME TO ASSESS EARLY LITERACY SKILLS

While most schools would use some form of 'in-house' literacy-related assessment practices for students on school entry, these assessments are likely to include only basic letter knowledge and perhaps some measure of oral language ability. Furthermore, the first formal (and in-depth) assessment of literacy-related skills for nearly all primary schools only appears at the end of the first year with the *Observation Survey* (Clay, 2002). This end-of-first-year assessment has long been regarded as the acceptable benchmark point for measuring literacy progress after one year at school. In support of having the first assessment point at the end of Year One Clay (2005) also recommends that this check (i.e., *Observation Survey*) be done at the end of the child's first year of formal instruction because "the child should be given sufficient time to adjust to the school situation and a variety of opportunities to pay attention to literacy activities" (p. 12). In further support of this claim Clay also suggests that "a check around the child's sixth birthday maximises the opportunities, minimises the pressure on the child, and does not leave the child for too long creating habits of responding that might handicap him and be hard to unlearn" (p. 12).

It is clear from these statements that Clay is concerned that the young child should be given a full year to acclimatise to the school setting before any literacy assessments should be administered. The final *Progressions'* document with its absence of the two earlier benchmark checkpoints is reflective of Clay's view on not advocating for assessments before 12 months of schooling.

The Draft *Progressions* document however, with its earlier benchmark alert points at both school entry and again at six months, was not reflective of Clay's view and so these benchmark checkpoints appear to have been discarded in the final document. We suggest that this 'wait-to-fail' approach of not including earlier assessments before age 6 is likely to have detrimental effects on later learning, especially for those children who exhibit early literacy learning difficulties.

THE ISSUE OF 'CONSTRAINED' VERSUS 'UNCONSTRAINED' LITERACY SKILLS

Paris (2005) correctly argues that learning to read involves the development of both 'constrained' and 'unconstrained' skills and that the learning of 'constrained' skills usually takes less time than learning 'unconstrained' ones. According to Paris 'constrained' skills include letter knowledge and phonological awareness. These skills are classed as 'constrained' because they include a relatively small number of concepts and (according to Paris), are mastered by everyone. Vocabulary and comprehension skills on the other hand are less 'constrained' and continue to develop over a lifetime. In support of his claims Paris (2005) also argues that "constrained skills are distributed at different mastery levels between people only during the brief period of acquisition. They are mastered 100% by everyone eventually, whereas unconstrained skills are distributed between people on a norm-referenced continuum over a life-span" (p. 190).

A problem with this view is that Paris appears to downplay the importance or significance of the

'constrained' skills (e.g. alphabet knowledge, the sounds of written English and phonemic awareness) in relation to the foundational effects they have on the process of learning to read. Paris (2005) also states for example that "most children learn the alphabet between 4-7 years of age (or during the first year of formal schooling), and the time for an individual child to master the alphabet is usually less than two years" (p. 194). If this were true then why is it that nearly all adult dyslexics have very poor phonological awareness and awareness of many of the sounds of the alphabet? This statement suggests that Paris views the learning of the alphabet as, at most, a peripheral literacy skill that has little importance or relevance to the process of learning to read. He seems to ignore the overwhelming evidence in studies that demonstrate very strong correlations between early letter knowledge and phonological awareness knowledge and later reading progress.

The second criticism that Paris has with the early emphasis on 'constrained' skills is the issue of excessive assessment that may occur if too much importance is placed on them. In support of this issue Paris (2005) argues, for example, that "one danger is that excessive testing of constrained skills may lead to an over-emphasis on these skills to the exclusion of unconstrained skills such as vocabulary and comprehension" (p. 200). This concern was also expressed in a submission made about the draft *Literacy Learning Progressions* by a Reading Recovery teacher. This teacher stated that "there is a potential that the progressions, if viewed as benchmarks, will then be used as assessments in themselves and act as a prescription for teaching discrete sets of knowledge, for example high frequency words" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 15).

Paris (2005) also cautions "that policy makers and the public may equate success on constrained skills with reading proficiency. This would create a minimum competency approach to reading assessment that does not adequately assess children's emerging use and control of literacy" (p. 200). These views seem to be echoed by several respondents whose submissions are reported in the *Feedback Report on the Draft Progressions* (Borderfields Consulting, no date). In a subsection in this report titled "The risks with itemising knowledge and skills" (p. 14) there were also several other respondents who commented on the likely negative implications that would arise from placing a heavy focus on the assessment of early literacy skills out of context.

In summary, the overly cautious and ill founded views about the lack of importance of constrained skills held by Paris (and others) suggest the following: constrained skills have only limited importance over a limited timeframe; have a limited range of influence on reading achievement; will be learnt by everyone in a relatively short timeframe, and, will create a minimum competency approach to literacy assessment. Such views represent a misguided set of assumptions that are in opposition to the very large body of international research implicating a lack of basic (constrained) component skills as being the major cause of later literacy difficulties.

We mention Paris (2005) at length here because he has been referenced in both the final *Progressions and Standards* documents and we suggest that his views have had a strong influence on the final *Progressions and Standards* documents. We argue that the inclusion of the Paris (2005) reference has been used to support the Ministry of Education's decision to discard the earlier benchmarks which, by definition, had included reference to 'constrained' skills such as the importance of alphabet and phonological knowledge.

CONCLUSIONS

We began with a brief discussion on the evolution of the *Reading and Writing Standards* and the *Literacy Learning Progressions* documents. We have then attempted to explain why we think that the final versions of these documents do not include the earlier school entry and six month benchmarks, but rather, have retained the status quo of what has been in operation in schools even prior to the introduction of these two documents with regard to literacy assessments within the first year of school. We suspect that the current Ministry of Education policies relating to early literacy development and assessment have been retained in the documents on the basis of two key influences. The first relates to the incorrect assumptions and claims made about the relative importance of 'constrained' skills put forward by Paris (2005). These include the claim that learning such skills as alphabetic knowledge are not particularly significant because these skills are likely to be learnt by everyone and in a relatively short time-frame. A second false claim made by Paris is that an over-emphasis on the teaching of these 'constrained' skills is likely to also lead to an over-emphasis on their assessment.

The second influence that we suspect has encouraged the Ministry to abandon the two earlier assessment benchmarks that appeared in the *Draft Progressions* but deleted from the final document, is based on the claim made by Clay (2005) that the first literacy assessment point should not be made before the child has attended school for one year. Because the *Progressions* and

Standards documents do not advocate any literacy assessment benchmarks before the end of one year, and furthermore, because no phonological-based assessments are emphasised in the benchmarks, also suggests that the Ministry is satisfied with promoting the status quo that currently advocates for the Observation Survey (six year net) as being the most relevant assessment at this stage.

We do not therefore see that the *Progressions* or *Standards* documents will encourage teachers to work towards addressing the widening literacy achievement gap. The documents describe sets of comprehension-enhancing strategies that students should be able to do at a particular stage but there is little emphasis on the development of the important underpinning component skills that (if not present) will prevent these later 'end-product' skills, such as comprehension and vocabulary, from developing. But most importantly, these documents do not encourage teachers to undertake early assessments within the first year of school. Furthermore, even the Observation Survey (Clay, 2002) administered when children turn six, has no phonological awareness components. Because teachers have no tools to assess these important 'constrained' skills in the first year and because the Ministry of Education appears not to accept their importance, they (i.e. teachers) are likely to be unaware of the learning needs of their at-risk students.

While we were hopeful that the 2007 *Draft Progressions* with its additional emphasis on literacy benchmarks at school entry, and again at six months, would have gone some way in alerting teachers to the development of (or lack of) 'constrained' skills including early phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge and sight words, we were disappointed to note that these two earlier benchmarks had been deleted from the final document. We argue that the current 'wait-to-fail' approach as evidenced in the first benchmark being after one year of school (as promoted by Clay, 2005) combined with the incorrect claims about the unimportance of 'constrained' skills and their role in literacy development, (as evidenced by the lack of mention of early literacy assessment tools) appear to have influenced the Ministry's decision to retain the status quo with regards to the early assessment and teaching of literacy in the first year of school. If we are serious about closing the literacy achievement gap, it would have made sense to include a focus on the assessment and teaching practices in the first year of school, before the literacy achievement gap begins to take effect. However, the *Standards and Progressions* documents appear to ignore the international scientific research evidence implicating deficient phonological-based skills as being the primary cause of reading difficulties (see Tunmer & Greaney, 2008, 2010). Unless teachers have the relevant assessment tools that enable them to assess early phonological-based skills at the outset of schooling, they will be unlikely to develop relevant instructional programmes that address the learning needs of students. And it is these skills that have been shown to be lacking in most of those students who develop literacy learning difficulties. If we are serious about closing the literacy achievement gap it makes sense to focus on both the early assessment and teaching of these skills at the outset. The *Progressions and Standards* documents seem to overlook this fundamental point.

REFERENCES

Borderfields Consulting. (no date). *Literacy learning progressions: Report on an analysis of feedback on the draft.* (Author).

Clay, M. (2002). *An observation survey of early literacy achievement.* Auckland: Heinemann.

Clay, M. (2005). *Literacy lesson designed for individuals.* Auckland: Heinemann.

Ministry of Education, (2007). *Literacy learning progressions: Meeting the reading and writing demands of the curriculum.* Draft for consultation. Wellington: Learning Media.

Ministry of Education. (2009). *Reading and writing standards for years 1-8*. Wellington: Learning Media.

Ministry of Education. (2010). *The literacy learning progressions: Meeting the reading and writing demands of the curriculum.* Wellington: Learning Media.

Paris, S. G. (2005). Reinterpreting the development of reading skills. *Reading Research Quarterly, 40*(2), 184-202.

Tunmer, W. E., & Greaney, K. T. (2008). Reading intervention research: An integrative framework. In G. Reid., A. Fawcett., F. Manis., & L. Siegel (Eds). *The Sage handbook of dyslexia* (pp. 241-267). London: Sage Publications.

Tunmer, W. E., & Greaney, K. T. (2010). Defining dyslexia. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 43*, 229-243.

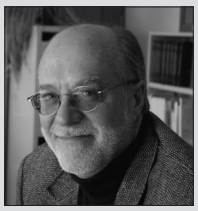
AUTHORS' PROFILES

Dr Keith Greaney

Dr Keith Greaney is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Educational Studies at Massey University College of Education where he teaches both undergraduate and postgraduate papers in literacy. He also researches in the area of literacy learning difficulties. Before coming to Massey he taught for 28 years in primary schools including as an RTR (now RT:Lit) for 12 years.

EMAIL
k.t.greaney@massey.ac.nz

Distinguished Professor William E. Tunmer



William (Bill) Tunmer is Distinguished Professor of Educational Psychology at Massey University, New Zealand. He received his PhD in Experimental Psychology from the University of Texas at Austin in 1979, specialising in the areas of theoretical linguistics, experimental psycholinguistics, and cognitive development. He has published over 100 journal articles, book chapters, and books on language and literacy development, reading difficulties, and intervention strategies, and has served on the editorial boards of Reading Research Quarterly, Reading and Writing, Language and Education, and Journal of Learning Disabilities. He is currently Associate Editor of Reading and Writing. In 1999 Professor Tunmer was awarded the Dina Feitelson Research Award by the International Reading Association for outstanding research in reading.

EMAIL
w.tunmer@massey.ac.nz