

Curriculum guidelines for early literacy: A comparison of New Zealand and England

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY literacy knowledge is generally seen as an important aspect of early childhood education. The way early literacy learning is promoted, however, varies greatly in different national curriculum frameworks. This article compares the approach taken in the New Zealand early childhood curriculum (*Te Whāriki*) with the approach outlined in the curriculum for young children in England (The Early Years Foundation Stage or EYFS). The curricula are compared in relation to (1) the description of literacy-related learning outcomes; (2) guidance for teachers on how to foster literacy learning; and (3) guidance on formative and summative assessment.

The EYFS contains more detailed information in each area of comparison. The article suggests that the lack of information on literacy in *Te Whāriki* may mean that children are provided with an inadequate range of literacy experiences in New Zealand early childhood centres.

Introduction

Early childhood professionals in New Zealand are accustomed to hearing praise for *Te Whāriki*, the early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996). Praise for the innovative approach of *Te Whāriki* has come from teachers and academics, nationally and internationally (for example, Alvestad & Duncan, 2006; Fleeer, 2003; Smith, 2003; Tyler, 2002).

Te Whāriki contains many admirable statements about early childhood education. There are few who would disagree with the introductory statement in *Te Whāriki* that declares the curriculum was founded on the following aspirations for children: 'to grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society' (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9).

It appears, however, that the rhetoric that surrounds *Te Whāriki* may not match the reality. No research has been carried out to show whether the implementation of *Te Whāriki* has made a positive difference to the learning and wellbeing of children across a range of early childhood services. Furthermore, concern has been expressed that the lack of curriculum content in *Te Whāriki* (in areas such as language, literacy, music,

mathematics, art and science) provides teachers with little guidance on how to provide children with a range of experiences in crucial areas of learning (see Hedges & Cullen, 2005).

In this article, I focus on one essential area of learning, namely early literacy. I analyse the information that *Te Whāriki* provides on this topic and compare it to the approach outlined in the curriculum used in England, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008a; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008b).

The EYFS is very different in structure and content to *Te Whāriki* and therefore makes for an interesting comparison. My analysis of the two curricula will be divided into the following three areas:

1. Early literacy goals and learning outcomes
2. Guidance for teachers on how to foster literacy learning
3. Assessment.

Early literacy goals and learning outcomes

Te Whāriki is divided into five broad strands: Well-being, Belonging, Contribution, Communication, and Exploration. Each strand is subdivided into three or four goals and each goal includes a number of indicative

learning outcomes. Literacy outcomes are included within the third goal of the Communication strand, which states: 'Children experience an environment where they experience the stories and symbols of their own and other cultures' (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 78).

Under this goal the following literacy learning outcomes (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 78) are listed:

Children develop:

- An understanding that symbols can be 'read' by others and that thoughts, experiences, and ideas can be represented through words, pictures, print, numbers, sounds, shapes, models, and photographs.
- Familiarity with print and its uses by exploring and observing the use of print in activities that have meaning and purpose for children.
- Familiarity with an appropriate selection of the stories and literature valued by the cultures in their community.
- An expectation that words and books can amuse, delight, comfort, illuminate, inform, and excite.
- Experience with some of the technology and resources for mathematics, reading, and writing.
- Experience with creating stories and symbols.

The general nature of the above learning outcomes can be partly explained by recognising that the outcomes are designed to be applicable to all children throughout the birth–five years age range. Hence the outcomes do not convey an expectation that older children may be capable of more complex learning than younger children.

In contrast, the EYFS is more explicit about age-related developmental changes (see *Practice guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage*, Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008a). The framework of the EYFS divides learning and development into six areas:

- Personal, Social and Emotional Development
- Communication, Language and Literacy
- Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy
- Knowledge and Understanding of the World
- Physical Development
- Creative Development.

Each of these areas is further divided into subsections. For example, Communication, Language, and Literacy is subdivided into the following: Language for Communication, Language for Thinking, Linking Sounds and Letters, Reading, Writing, and Handwriting.

Within each subsection, descriptive information is provided about what children may typically learn within the following overlapping age ranges: birth–11 months, 8–20 months, 16–26 months, 22–36 months, 30–50 months, and 40–60+ months.

Although information is provided about age-related changes, the EYFS guidelines recognise that there is considerable variation between children. Cautions are provided that the descriptions of learning should not be seen as age-related goals. It is also noted that 'children will not necessarily progress sequentially through the stages' and 'some elements may appear to have been achieved very quickly, others will take much longer (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008a, p. 11).

Specific goals are stated for the time that children complete the Early Years Foundation Stage. These final goals (known as the 'early learning goals') are designed to be at a level that children can achieve 'by the end of the year in which they turn five'. (Unlike New Zealand, where nearly all children start school on their fifth birthday, children in England start school in the term in which they turn five. Hence some children will begin primary school a few months before they turn five, whereas other children may be nearer five and a half years.)

The Early learning goals for literacy occur within five subsections of the Communication, Language, and Literacy division of the EYFS (Department for Children, Schools, and Families, 2008b, p. 13). (Additional goals that focus purely on listening and speaking are not included in the following list.)

1. Language for Communication

- Enjoy listening to and using spoken and written language, and readily turn to it in their play and learning.
- Listen with enjoyment, and respond to stories, songs and other music, rhymes and poems and make up their own stories, songs, rhymes and poems.

2. Linking Sounds and Letters

- Hear and say sounds in words in the order in which they occur.
- Link sounds to letters, naming and sounding the letters of the alphabet.
- Use their phonic knowledge to write simple regular words and make phonetically plausible attempts at more complex words.

3. Reading

- Explore and experiment with sounds, words, and texts.
- Retell narratives in the correct sequence, drawing on language patterns of stories.
- Read a range of familiar and common words and simple sentences independently.
- Show an understanding of the elements of stories such as main character, sequence of events and openings, and how information can be found in non-fiction texts to answer questions about where, who and how.

- Know that print carries meaning and, in English, is read from left to right and top to bottom.

4. Writing

- Attempt writing for different purposes, using features of different forms such as lists, stories, and instructions.
- Write their own names and other things such as labels and captions, and begin to form simple sentences, sometimes using punctuation.

5. Handwriting

- Use a pencil and hold it effectively to form recognisable letters, most of which are correctly formed.

A comparison of the early literacy outcomes for *Te Whāriki* and for the EYFS shows that the expectations for New Zealand children are markedly lower than those suggested for children in England. The comparison is made more complicated by the fact that children may be older or younger than five when they complete the EYFS. Nevertheless, it is readily apparent that the English curriculum is aimed at developing a much more comprehensive range of literacy skills than are covered in *Te Whāriki*.

The early literacy learning outcomes for *Te Whāriki* are phrased in general terms and focus on children gaining 'experience' and developing 'familiarity' with print and stories. The EYFS covers these types of outcomes in the goals that are listed under the 'Language for Communication' subsection. The other literacy-related subsections in the EYFS (that is, Linking Sounds and Letters, Reading, Writing, and Handwriting) contain numerous literacy goals that are not mentioned in *Te Whāriki*.

Goals in these subsections focus on children developing skills that are crucial for beginning reading and writing (see National Early Literacy Panel, 2008, for a review of research on early literacy skills). An emphasis is placed on learning about letters and letter sounds in order to begin to be able to read and write simple words. In contrast, *Te Whāriki* makes no mention of letter knowledge in any learning outcomes.

No rationale for the omission of letter knowledge is provided in *Te Whāriki*, nor is this discussed in explanatory writings about the development of the curriculum (for example, Carr & May, 1996). Cullen (2007) has suggested that the lack of attention to the component skills of literacy may link with the pervasiveness of the 'whole-language' approach in New Zealand primary schools. Furthermore, Cullen points out that the sociocultural perspective underlying *Te Whāriki* means that early childhood teachers may sometimes include literacy learning within other experiences but would rarely plan to teach specific literacy skills.

The greater attention to letter knowledge seen in the EYFS is reflective of the shift towards including more

phonics teaching in the early school years in England. This follows a major review of research into methods of teaching literacy (Rose, 2006). Although the review highlighted the importance of early phonics, it also emphasised that speaking and listening skills are the bedrock of literacy development. Hence it is important to see that the inclusion of letter knowledge in the outcomes of the EYFS does not take away from the emphasis that the curriculum gives to the development of language for communication and thinking.

Guidance for teachers on how to foster literacy learning

Te Whāriki provides little information about the provision of learning experiences related to the literacy outcomes that are mentioned in the document. Statements about learning that are included in *Te Whāriki* tend to be very general and reflect the sociocultural basis of the curriculum. For example; the introduction states:

This curriculum emphasises the critical role of socially and culturally responsive relationships for children with people, places, and things. Children learn through collaboration with adults and peers, through guided participation and observation of others, as well as through individual exploration and reflection (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 9).

Only minimal guidance is provided on how teachers can foster learning in particular areas. Some examples of learning experiences are included for the goals in each strand but these do not necessarily link with specific outcomes and are phrased in broad terms. For example, suggested literacy experiences include the following: 'Adults read books to infants', 'The toddler's name is written on belongings', and 'Children experience a wide range of stories' (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 79).

Information on how to use *Te Whāriki* for program planning is also very general. Early childhood services are advised to 'develop their own distinctive pattern for planning, assessment and evaluation' (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 28). There is no requirement to ensure that children are provided with experiences related to a core set of learning outcomes. Instead centres are advised to 'offer sufficient learning experiences for the children to ensure that the curriculum goals are realised' (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 28). The breadth of the goals, however, means that it would be possible for a centre to consider that it was covering all the goals of *Te Whāriki* even if the program contained no reading or writing experiences.

The non-specific nature of the guidelines in *Te Whāriki* might not be such a concern if teachers were provided with supplementary resources on how to foster

literacy. Currently, however, the Ministry of Education provides early childhood teachers with little information about ways to provide a range of literacy experiences for young children.

A very different situation exists in England. The structure of the EYFS makes clear links between specific aspects of literacy learning and guidance for effective practice. As noted above, EYFS publications include descriptions of the literacy learning that typically occurs for particular age ranges (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008a). Teachers can use this information to assist their understanding of individual children. Ideas on specific practice are given for each of the age-related descriptions of literacy learning that occur within the relevant subsections of the Communication, Language and Literacy section of the EYFS (that is, Language for Communication, Linking Sounds and Letters, Reading, Writing, and Handwriting).

Extensive additional resources are available to assist EYFS teachers in the provision of appropriate literacy experiences for children. Video clips of teachers engaged in effective activities can be found on the CD-Rom that accompanies *Practice guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage*. The Department for Children, Schools, and Families provides publications on emergent writing activities (*Mark making matters*, Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008c) and introducing children to letter names and sounds (*Letters and sounds: Principles and practice of high quality phonics*, Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008d). Online professional development courses on language and literacy are available to all EYFS teachers. In addition, commercial publishers have developed many resources that link with the EYFS guidelines. (A directory of these resources is located on the standards website of the Department for Children, Schools, and Families: www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/phonics/clld/.)

Both *Te Whāriki* and the EYFS emphasise the importance of play for all areas of learning. The EYFS is clearer, however, on the role of the teacher in guiding learning. Although *Te Whāriki* suggests that adults should support and extend children's play and interests, little information is given on the provision of teacher-led activities. In contrast, the EYFS guidelines state: 'All the areas must be delivered through planned, purposeful play, with a balance of adult-led and child-initiated activities' (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009a, p. 10). Adult-led activities are defined as follows:

Adult-led activities are those which adults initiate. The activities are not play, and children are likely not to see them as play, but they should be playful—with activities presented to children which are as open-ended as possible, with elements of imagination and active exploration that will increase the interest

and motivation for children. ... Practitioners plan adult-led activities with awareness of the children in the setting and of their responsibility to support children's progress in all areas of learning. They will build on what children know and can do, and often draw on interests and use materials or themes, observed in child initiated activities (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009a, p. 13).

The advice in the EYFS to provide a balance of adult- and child-led activities is supported by the findings of a recent European study of over 3000 children (aged from three years) in 141 early childhood settings (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004). The study found that 'in effective settings, the balance of who initiated the activities, staff or child, was about equal' (p. vi). Furthermore, the study concluded that 'children's cognitive outcomes appear to be directly related to the quantity and quality of the teacher/adult-planned and -initiated focused group work' (p. iv).

Encouraging practitioners to provide adult-led activities marks a distinct pedagogical difference between the EYFS and *Te Whāriki*. The provision of adult-led literacy-related activities, particularly for three- and four-year-olds, is likely to result in greater opportunities for literacy learning than is possible with the strategies outlined in *Te Whāriki*. Given that *Te Whāriki* is said to be a sociocultural document, it is somewhat ironic that the value of adult-led activities is not more clearly acknowledged. A sociocultural approach is not just about teachers and children interacting within social contexts. A sociocultural approach allows for teachers, as 'more knowledgeable others', to engage children in meaningful activities and to teach them specific skills in appropriate ways (Daniels, 2001). This could include the planning and implementation of teacher-led activities aimed at enhancing the early literacy skills of particular children.

Assessment

Te Whāriki includes some general statements about assessment (see Ministry of Education, 1996, p.30) but contains no requirement to assess any specific learning outcomes for children. Additional information on assessment is available in *Kei Tua o te Pae: Assessment for learning: Early childhood exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2004; Ministry of Education, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2009). The Ministry of Education has devoted large amounts of funding towards developing and promoting *Kei Tua o te Pae* but the value of the resource is limited by its almost exclusive focus on one type of assessment, namely learning stories.

Learning stories are an innovative form of assessment developed by Margaret Carr (1998; 2001). The technique requires a teacher to first observe a child engaged in a particular experience. The teacher then

writes a narrative 'story' that documents the learning that is said to have occurred in the observed context. The focus of a learning story is meant to be on a child's dispositions, rather than on knowledge and skills.

Despite their widespread use in New Zealand, there is little research evidence that learning stories are an effective way of assessing the complexities of children's learning. A particular concern is that learning stories have not been shown to be suitable for showing changes in individual children's learning over time. Learning stories tend to be situation-specific and are dependent on the subjective interpretation of a teacher (see Blaiklock, 2008; Blaiklock, 2010).

The literacy-related learning stories in *Kei Tua o te Pae* (see Book 17, Ministry of Education, 2009) provide some anecdotal descriptions of children listening to storybooks and being involved in early writing. However, no examples are provided to show how children's literacy knowledge develops over time. Furthermore, *Kei Tua o te Pae*, and other published guidelines on learning stories (for example, Carr, 1998; Carr, 2001) contain no suggestions to ensure that literacy learning is assessed at any point before a child begins school. Hence it is quite possible for early childhood centres in New Zealand to avoid making any assessment of children's early literacy skills.

The EYFS provides a much more systematic approach to assessment than is found in New Zealand. Assessment is both formative and summative. Formative assessment is ongoing and is based on observations of children in daily activities. Information from parents is also taken into account.

Guidelines on assessment are provided in the *Practice guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008a). As discussed earlier, *Practice guidance* includes descriptions of specific areas of learning that may typically occur during particular age ranges. The descriptions of early literacy development can help teachers to be aware of what a child may be learning. Alongside the descriptions of learning are 'look, listen and note' pointers that provide additional information about what teachers can observe.

Teachers are informed that 'these sections are not intended to be exhaustive—different children will do different things at different times—and they should not be used as checklists' (p. 5). Additional information on how teachers can gather and use assessment information to support children's learning is provided in the guidebook, *Progress matters: Reviewing and enhancing young children's development* (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009b).

Summative assessment occurs when children are at the end of the EYFS. Teachers are required to complete

the EYFS profile to provide a summary of observations and assessments of a child's learning up to that point. Children's progress is recorded on scales that are derived from the final early learning goals. The completed EYFS profile is made available to parents and to the teacher of the class when the child starts school.

In summary, it is apparent that the EYFS provides considerably more guidance on assessing early literacy than is available in *Te Whāriki* or *Kei Tua o te Pae*. The differences in assessment requirements may have implications for the provision of learning experiences. Knowing that literacy-related skills are to be assessed may help EYFS teachers to be aware of opportunities to enhance children's literacy skills. In New Zealand, the opposite scenario may exist. The lack of guidance given to New Zealand teachers may signal to them that literacy is not an important learning area during the early childhood years.

Conclusion

Te Whāriki and the EYFS show very different approaches to early literacy. *Te Whāriki* has few outcomes related to literacy, whereas the EYFS has many. *Te Whāriki* provides little information on how to plan and implement literacy activities, whereas the EYFS and associated resources contain detailed guidance. *Te Whāriki* has no requirements to assess literacy learning, whereas the EYFS requires formative and summative assessments.

It could be argued that the guidance the EYFS provides on early literacy amounts to a prescriptive approach that allows teachers little freedom in designing their programs. The EYFS, however, also emphasises the importance of teachers responding to individual children's needs and interests. Although there are many suggestions regarding what teachers can do, teacher ideas and initiatives are also seen as crucial.

It could also be argued that the emphasis the EYFS gives to academic outcomes is at the cost of attention to other areas of children's wellbeing. Including a focus on content learning, however, does not need to take away from the importance of other aspects of children's development. A focus on both academic and social skills has been found to be a feature of high-quality early education programs (American Educational Research Association, 2005; National Research Council, 2001).

One of the guiding principles of *Te Whāriki* is 'empowerment'. This is further described as assisting 'children and their families to develop independence and to access the resources necessary to enable them to direct their own lives' (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 40). Although early literacy skills receive little emphasis in *Te Whāriki*, becoming literate is a key way to empower children.

Tunmer and Prochnow (2009) suggest that:

...literacy should be conceptualised as a fundamental enabling skill, a tool by which readers can acquire the knowledge necessary for participating fully in the processes of society (social, cultural, and political) and for achieving their personal goals and developing their potential. ... The literate person can read to learn and write to influence (p. 182).

The literacy skills that children develop in the early childhood years are crucial for their later literacy success. A New Zealand longitudinal study by Tunmer, Chapman, and Prochnow (2006) found that measures of literacy-related skills at school entry (including phonological and grammatical awareness, letter knowledge, and vocabulary) accounted for nearly half of the variance in reading comprehension seven years later, even after controlling for socioeconomic status. Numerous international studies have also found that what children know about literacy-related areas before they start school has a significant impact on their progress in learning to read and write (see National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Given this research evidence, and given the example of a greater emphasis on literacy in the EYFS, it is time for the New Zealand early childhood profession to reconsider whether *Te Whāriki* is really providing effective guidance about how to help children get off to a good start in reading and writing.

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