

# Literacy and libraries in New Zealand schools

By *Miriam Tuohy*

## Snapshot

Miriam Tuohy describes the recent curriculum changes and the new focus on the Understand-Know-Do model. Miriam considers in more detail the New Zealand English curriculum and the role that school libraries can play in supporting and enriching its implementation. As we all face ongoing change, the experiences of our colleagues are invaluable.

## Our changing curriculum

In Aotearoa New Zealand, as in many places around the world at the moment, there are significant changes underway to our national curriculum.

A major refresh of the curriculum for state and state-integrated schools began in 2019. This programme of work was initiated during the previous governments' term. Further revision is continuing under the current government.

One recent curriculum change that aimed to provide greater clarity about 'the learning that matters' is the introduction of the **Understand-Know-Do** model described below. The first use of this model was in the Aotearoa New Zealand's histories curriculum (within the social sciences learning area), which became compulsory for students in years 1-10 from the beginning of 2023 (*Understand, Know, Do: A Framework to Inspire Deep and Meaningful Learning, 2022*).

- **Understand:** describes the big ideas and themes that students will develop understanding of across the 5 phases of learning.
- **Know:** outlines the meaningful and important content, concepts, and topics that exemplify and enrich students' understanding of the big ideas and themes.
- **Do:** describes the skills and actions that students practise, demonstrating what they know and understand.

The Understand-Know-Do model will become a common feature of our curriculum, added to each learning area as curriculum updates are made.

Further curriculum changes have recently been rolled out and there are more to come from the beginning of next year. These include requirements for the teaching of reading and writing, which have been mandated by the government:

- from the beginning of 2024, schools with students in years 0-8 must spend an average of one hour each day teaching reading, writing, and maths (Ministry of Education, 2024b)
- from the start of 2025, structured literacy approaches will be a requirement in all state schools and kura (Transforming How Our Children Learn to Read, 2024).

## The new English curriculum

The draft English curriculum for years 0-6 was released on 26 August 2024, and at the time of writing is open for consultation (Ministry of Education, 2024a). The draft document states 2 priorities for the revised curriculum, that aim to give schools clarity about what will be taught, when, and how.

**Ko te reo tōku tuakiri, ko te reo tōku ahurei, ko te reo te ora.  
Language is my identity; language is my uniqueness; language is life.**

*Purpose statement from the draft English curriculum for years 0-6*

1. **Establishing a knowledge rich curriculum grounded in the science of learning.**  
Changes to the curriculum are informed by research into how students learn best. Curriculum design and delivery takes into account factors such as cognitive development, students' cultural background, and emotional well-being.
2. **Implementing evidence-based instruction in early literacy and mathematics.**  
This priority highlights the need for teaching practices that are supported by research evidence. This includes using structured literacy approaches, providing explicit instruction, with regular monitoring and assessment of student progress to inform teaching decisions.

## Understand-Know-Do in the draft English curriculum

The draft English curriculum for years 0-6 outlines the 'big ideas' that underpin the teaching and learning for phases 1 and 2, as illustrated here.



Figure 1: Understand-Know-Do - the "big ideas" in the draft English curriculum

- **Understand**
  - » Language and literature give us insights into ourselves and others.
  - » The stories of Aotearoa New Zealand are unique taonga tuku iho (treasures that are passed down).
  - » Stories are a source of joy and nourishment.
  - » Communication depends on shared codes and conventions.
  - » Language, literature, and texts embody shared culture and rich human experience.
- **Know**
  - » Features and structures of spoken and written language
  - » Text purposes and audiences Ideas within, across, and beyond texts.
- **Do**
  - » Oral language: Vocabulary and grammar for learning, Presenting information, Interpersonal communication, Communication for learning.
  - » Reading: Word recognition, Comprehension, Critical literacy
  - » Writing: Transcription skills, Composition, Writing processes.

These ideas are woven throughout the curriculum and are explored through the three strands of **oral language**, **reading**, and **writing**. Teaching sequences set out in the curriculum are designed to bring together these three strands. As students develop their oral language abilities, they learn about language structure, vocabulary, and comprehension, which directly benefits their reading and writing.

#### **Positive relationships with oral language, reading, and writing**

As students are developing positive relationships with oral language, reading and writing, they enjoy words and word play, participate in conversations, share books, stories, and poems, invite their families to share stories, encourage one another to share favourite texts, visit libraries, suggest topics for writing, respect each other's ideas and inner resources, and develop confidence in expressing their opinions as readers and authors.

*Statement from the draft English curriculum p.11*

In New Zealand schools where instruction is in English (in contrast to Māori language immersion schools), literacy in English is fundamental for students to effectively engage with all subjects. Fluency, confidence, and competence in English provide a strong foundation for all learning. However, developing students' literacy skills happens not just within the English curriculum, but needs to be embedded into all subject areas. As curriculum changes are introduced for other learning areas, we expect to see the Understand-Know-Do model become part of each one, along with more specific guidance about instruction. Work on the refreshed curriculum is planned to be complete by late 2025 and in use from 2027.

Developing a positive relationship with language and literature comes through strongly in the draft English curriculum. It encourages fostering a love of reading from an early age, viewing stories as a source of enjoyment and a way to gain insights into ourselves and others. The curriculum positions literacy as a means of expanding horizons and fostering a deeper understanding of the world — different cultures, perspectives, and worldviews. Students will be introduced to a diverse range of texts, including those from Aotearoa New Zealand, Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa (the Pacific), and the wider world, to broaden their perspectives and knowledge base.

The curriculum describes the development of effective communication skills as key to success in learning, social relationships, and collaboration. Students will develop the oral language skills needed to become confident communicators in a range of different contexts.

The draft curriculum also includes more guidance than before about how students will learn to understand the codes and conventions of the English language. It mandates explicit teaching in these areas, especially in the first phase of learning, with schools required to use structured literacy approaches from the beginning of 2025.

## **Structured literacy approaches**

While it is becoming compulsory for schools to use structured literacy approaches in the early phases of learning, there is not a prescribed programme that schools must use – the choice of how to implement structured literacy remains with each school board of trustees.

### ***Better Start Literacy Approach***

The Better Start Literacy Approach (the BSLA) is a structured literacy programme, developed by the Child Well-being Research Institute at the University of Canterbury, for New Zealand primary school settings (Better Start Literacy Approach, n.d.). It began as one of the projects funded by the National Science Challenge 2016-2024, which ‘aimed to find practical, evidence-based solutions to make a measurable and impactful difference in the lives of our tamariki and rangatahi’ (children and young people).

The government has recently announced further funding for resources schools can use to support implementation of the BSLA and other structured literacy approaches (Nicol-Williams, 2024). This is additional to the funding for professional development which schools can apply for ahead of the mandated structured literacy rollout.

## **School libraries supporting the curriculum**

The draft English curriculum does not explicitly address the role of the school library in supporting literacy development. However, we can see opportunities for school library staff, and the library’s resources, to support the curriculum in a variety of ways.

### ***Reading for pleasure***

The curriculum stresses the importance of creating a positive and enriching relationship with literacy and literature. We know that reading for pleasure has a profound impact on student success – not just academic achievement but in other important ways too, such as improving problem solving abilities, building general knowledge, nurturing empathy, and enhancing wellbeing (National Library of New Zealand Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa, n.d.-b).

Library staff can be allies for teachers in fostering a love of reading by providing students with opportunities to engage with stories as a source of joy and nourishment, to develop their identities as readers, and to see themselves as members of reading communities.

### ***Access to library collections and librarians' expertise***

The curriculum emphasises the importance of students having access to a wide range of texts in different modes (e.g., written, spoken, visual). It also requires explicitly teaching students about different text structures and features and providing opportunities for students to engage with texts.

School library staff develop collections and curate resources that can support these requirements. They have extensive knowledge of books and authors, enabling them to recommend engaging reading material for students at various reading levels – catering for those who struggle to engage with reading through to readers who require more challenging content. Librarians can help students who struggle to find books they want to read, or feel they can read, to choose books that match their interests or reading level. Reader-friendly library spaces and library borrowing policies can also encourage students to read in a welcoming and inclusive environment, and at their own pace.

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Collaboration between library staff and teachers as they are planning can help ensure that students get the support they need to develop their literacy skills. Librarians can curate and share resources to complement the specific reading and research needs of each learning area and every phase of learning. They might draw together resources from a range of modes and text types such as sophisticated picture books, narrative nonfiction, journal or news articles, novels, video, and interactive e-resources.

It's crucial for library staff to have plenty of opportunity to work closely with students to maximize their impact on literacy development and reading for enjoyment. Library staff can also facilitate connections with parents and whānau (family), other libraries and organisations who have a role to play in students' literacy development and reading for enjoyment. The school library team can arrange author visits to the school, class visits to the public library,

book talks in the school library or classroom, and use social media to generate excitement around reading.

## National Library support for reading and literacy development

### *Schools lending service*

The National Library of New Zealand's lending service provides books that schools can borrow to support students' reading and literacy needs across all subject areas and phases of learning. Schools can ask for selections of books specifically to support reading engagement or ask for a reading engagement 'top up' on their regular loan requests each term. Books are also curated

and tagged to make it easy for librarians and teachers to find and request books to suit particular needs, such as titles that are great to [read aloud](#), or [high interest-low vocabulary](#) books.

The schools lending collection also includes books in more than 20 world languages, and titles in accessible formats such as dyslexia-friendly, large-print, and audio-enabled books.

To support the BSLA, our collection includes a selection of picture books – most of which are by New Zealand authors and illustrators – that are carefully chosen to complement the sequence of learning and provide high-quality authentic texts with rich vocabulary, usually set in a local context. You can see the current selection by viewing the [BSLA list in the National Library's catalogue](#).

**Collaboration between library staff and teachers as they are planning can help ensure that students get the support they need to develop their literacy skills.**

### *Teaching and learning resources supporting reading and literacy development*

The National Library Services to Schools teaching and learning resources include advice, guides, frameworks and tools that draw on research and our years of experience working with schools to support the development of school reading cultures and school libraries (National Library of New Zealand Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa, n.d.-c).

- [Reading community framework](#)
- [Teachers creating readers framework](#)
- [Cards and chatterbox to discover your reading identity](#)
- [School and ECE reading culture review tools](#)

# We are all in this together — He waka eke noa

In Aotearoa New Zealand, we use the Māori whakataukī (saying) 'He waka eke noa' to represent the concept of moving forward together — essentially it means 'we are all in the same boat'. Across Australia and New Zealand, teachers and library staff are facing the same challenges with introducing new ways of teaching literacy, reading and writing. I've found the resources and professional learning for educators provided by Australian government education departments and other organisations there to be tremendously useful. Likewise, I hope you will find something useful in the resources created for New Zealand educators, as we head into these new waters together.

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