



10-2006

## Literacy Assessment New Zealand Style

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### Repository Citation

Guskey, Thomas R.; Smith, Jeffrey K.; Smith, Lisa F.; Crooks, Terry; and Flockton, Lester, "Literacy Assessment New Zealand Style" (2006). *Educational, School, and Counseling Psychology Faculty Publications*. 12.

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Notes/Citation Information

Published in *Educational Leadership*, v. 64, issue 2, p. 74-79.

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# Literacy Assessment

*It's mostly performance based. It assesses students in teams as well as individually. What's more, students like it.*

**Thomas R. Guskey, Jeffrey K. Smith, Lisa F. Smith, Terry Crooks, and Lester Flockton**

Imagine students striving to do well on literacy assessments because the tasks are interesting and engaging, not because of the consequences that might follow poor performance. Consider the advantages of having data that issue from authentic literacy tasks, rather than from items that require students to simply fill in the blanks or read a passage and answer a few related questions. Picture a literacy assessment program driven by teachers' need for formative information about student learning instead of by high-stakes accountability demands.

U.S. educators, struggling under the accountability requirements of No Child Left Behind, might consider such an assessment program the stuff of education fantasies. But for New Zealand educators, it is an integral part of a comprehensive assessment program designed to help teachers enhance students' literacy skills. New Zealand assesses the learning progress of elementary and middle-level students through the National Educational Monitoring Project, which offers an innovative approach to under-



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LESTER FLOCKTON

standing student achievement in language arts.

## **Education in New Zealand: A Quick Overview**

New Zealand has roughly 4 million inhabitants, with a student population of approximately three quarters of a million. For most children, school begins on the day that they turn 5, regardless of whether that takes place in March or November. On that day, the child joins an existing Year 1 class in the school of the parents' choice. The vast majority of New Zealand children attend the school nearest their home.

Schooling typically ends after Year 12

or Year 13, depending on the student's postsecondary aspirations. Students leaving after Year 12 usually enter the workforce, whereas those leaving after Year 13 typically go on to higher education. New Zealand schools have no equivalent for a U.S. high school diploma or graduation certificate. High school students earn "qualifications" and even scholarships for university study through a system of assessments controlled by the New Zealand Qualifications

Authority. All New Zealand universities have open admission policies and admit any student who has earned the necessary qualifications. The country has no private universities.

## **The National Educational Monitoring Project**

Teachers in New Zealand schools have a variety of assessment resources available to them, ranging from standardized tests and national exemplars of student work to the reports and samples of assessment tasks offered by the National Educational Monitoring Project (NEMP). NEMP is a national formative evaluation effort that

# New Zealand Style



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provides New Zealand educators with an accurate picture of students' education progress at Year 4 and Year 8, which are roughly comparable to grades 3 and 7 in the United States.

Each year, the project tests a random sample of 1,440 Year 4 students and 1,440 Year 8 students (Crooks & Flockton, 2003; Flockton & Crooks, 2003a, 2003b). The sampling proceeds in two stages. First, participating schools are randomly selected on a stratified basis, with the region of the country, the district within the region, and the school size as the basis for stratification. Second, 12 students are

randomly selected from each school (12 from Year 4 and 12 from Year 8), unless fewer than 12 students are enrolled in either of the two grades. In that event, the school is paired with a neighboring small school to get a group of 12. Although school and student participation in NEMP is voluntary, participation rates consistently exceed 95 percent.

The selected 1,440 students at each of the two grade levels are randomly assigned to one of three groups. Each group of 480 students receives a separate set of tasks for the subject area tested, thereby increasing the range and

number of tasks that the assessment can include. The 2004 Reading and Speaking assessment included 52 tasks, the 2002 Listening and Viewing assessment included 37 tasks, and the 2002 Writing assessment included 36 tasks. Because students are divided into three groups, each student is involved in approximately one-third of the tasks in each topic area.

Unlike the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) or various statewide assessment programs in the United States, the NEMP assesses nearly all areas of the New Zealand curriculum on a four-year, rotating

cycle. Since its inception in 1995, NEMP has assessed the following:

- In 2003, 1999, and 1995: science, visual arts, and information skills (working with graphs, tables, maps, charts, and diagrams).

- In 2004, 2000, and 1996: language (reading and speaking), aspects of technology, and music.

- In 2005, 2001, and 1997: mathematics, social studies, and information skills (library research).

- In 2006, 2002, and 1998: language (writing, listening, viewing) and health/physical education.

The NEMP approach begins with a one-page assessment framework for each assessed area that describes the specific skills, knowledge, understandings, and attitudes of enduring importance that the project will assess. For example, the central organizing theme of the 2004 Reading Framework was

constructing meaning from a range of texts for a variety of purposes: reading for enjoyment, reading to follow instructions, reading to search for information, reading to assimilate knowledge, and reading to analyze critically.

The framework lists 15 characteristics of reading—such as “reading is both a social and a personal activity” and “reading in one language can enrich and support reading in another language”—as well as 16 skills and processes that the assessment involves—such as “making use of semantic, syntactic, and visual cues in text” and “making self-corrections.” Three motivation items are also listed that focus on enthusiasm, voluntary engagement, and commitment. Each year, national panels of content area experts, including practicing teachers and curriculum specialists, review and revise that year’s frameworks.

The assessment framework provides the basis for developing the assessment



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## New Zealand educators see literacy as comprising skills in reading, speaking, writing, listening, viewing, and presenting.

tasks, which involve four different presentation approaches:

- *One-to-one interviews*, in which students work individually with the teacher and student responses are recorded on videotape.

- *Stations*, where four students work independently, rotating among a set of tasks, some of which are computer based.

- *Teams*, in which groups of four students work collaboratively on tasks supervised by the teacher, with their interactions videotaped.

- *Independent*, in which students work individually, completing paper-and-pencil tasks, creating works of art, or performing physical tasks, with their performance videotaped.

Tasks are chosen on the basis of four criteria: (1) they measure an important

aspect of the assessment framework; (2) they are relevant to the student’s world; (3) they are engaging to students; and (4) they generate enough useful information to merit the time spent on the task.

New Zealand educators receive the results for each task scored separately, with a complete description of the task provided. Reports include the total score for each task but do not provide an overall score for the assessed area, which would encourage a simplistic reading of the results rather than the more in-depth reading required to go through task results individually.

A novel aspect of the NEMP approach is that Year 4 and Year 8 students complete the same tasks. This enables teachers to examine the nature and extent of the growth that occurs

during this time period. Also, roughly 55 percent of the tasks are released with the results, but about 45 percent are “held back,” meaning that full details are not presented on these tasks so that they can be administered four years later, on the next cycle of assessment in that content area. Once these “held-back” tasks have been administered a second time, both sets of results are released to provide a look at change over time. Results are reported only at the national level and are disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. No individual student or school scores are provided.

### Assessing Students in Literacy

New Zealand educators see literacy as comprising skills in reading, speaking, writing, listening, viewing, and presenting. Reading and speaking are assessed in one year of the four-year cycle, whereas listening, viewing, and writing are assessed in a separate year. Presenting is currently not assessed due to time constraints.

### Reading and Speaking

New Zealand’s Maori heritage and the country’s concern for the environment figure prominently in NEMP tasks. One of the independent tasks from the 2004 Reading and Speaking assessment measures students’ ability to properly pronounce a number of Maori words. Many of these words appear in everyday speech and in place-names throughout New Zealand, such as the word *ruapehu*, which means volcano and is also the name of one of the largest active volcanoes in New Zealand.

Results from the 2004 assessment showed that Year 8 students did 25 percent better on the pronunciation task than Year 4 students did. Furthermore, Year 8 students performed better on this task than Year 8 students had

## The Zippo Task from the 2002 National Educational Monitoring Project

**Trend Task:** ZIPPOS

**Approach:** Independent

Year: 4 & 8

**Focus:** Recalling information, drawing appropriate conclusions, representing information visually

**Resources:** Audio recording on laptop computer

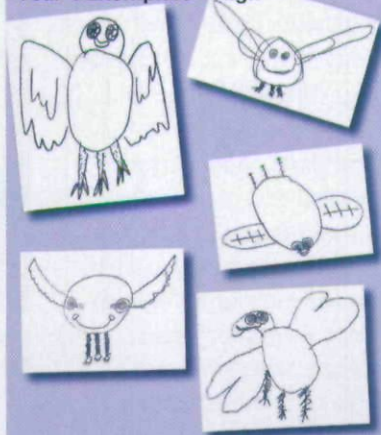
**Audio script:** In this activity, you are going to draw a Zippo. Zippos live in caves and never come into the light. Nobody has ever seen a Zippo so we don’t know exactly what they look like. You are going to hear some information about Zippos. Use this information to draw what you think a Zippo would look like. You can start drawing as the information is given to you. The information will be given twice. You can check your drawing when the information is given the second time.

Facts about Zippos:

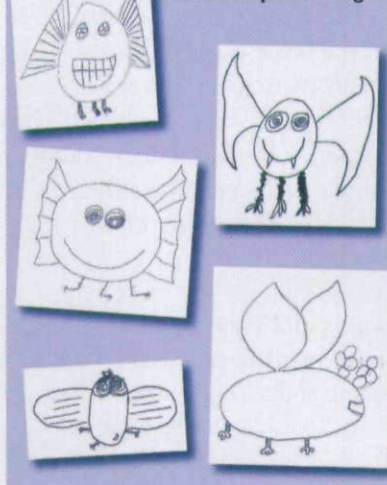
- Zippos are round in shape. This helps them to roll from place to place.
- They have 2 large round eyes that help them to see in the dark caves. Each eye is made up of 4 circles.
- Zippos use their large wings to fly about in the cave, where they feed on spiders and insects.
- Zippos are friendly. They have big, happy smiles.
- Zippos have 3 short hairy legs and claws on their feet.

Now listen to the information again.

Year 4 Exemplars—High



Year 8 Exemplars—High



Source: From the *NEMP 2002 Writing Report*, by T. Crooks and L. Flockton, 2002, Educational Assessment Research Unit, New Zealand. Adapted with permission.

done four years earlier. This information shows teachers that although substantial work remains, older students are making clear progress on Maori pronunciation.

A speaking task used in the 2000 assessment measures how well students

perform in a group. Teams of four students are given the poem “Night Noises,” which describes some of the noises that animals make at night. Students develop a lively oral presentation of the poem. The test administrator observes and scores the students’

work during the 10 minutes of preparation time as well as during the performance; the rubric includes both performance and collaboration measures.

The ensuing report on this task evaluates students on a number of issues: Did all students participate? How expressively did students present the poem? How fluently? Did different students present different parts of the performance? Did they imitate the animal sounds in the background? The report shows that Year 4 students outperformed their Year 8 counterparts in expression, whereas Year 8 students were more fluent in their presentation and more likely to have different students present different parts of the poem. Year 4 students improved somewhat in this task compared with four years earlier. Teachers can see from these results how well students do in general working together on a task and how their performance compares with national standards.

### **Listening and Viewing**

One independent task used in the 2002 Listening and Viewing assessment asks students to listen and respond to material read aloud, which includes literary texts as well as practical messages, like weather reports, phone messages, and instructions. The computer-based Zippo task (see p. 77) requires students to listen to a soundtrack that provides information that will help them draw a "Zippo." The resulting drawings, regardless of level of artistry, reflect students' abilities to listen to and follow instructions, which call for the Zippo to have three legs as well as two eyes



**Students work with manipulatives in numerous NEMP assessment tasks, and tasks are often videotaped.**

made up of four circles. Both Year 4 and Year 8 students managed well on this task, but Year 8 students did notably better on the finer details.

The Zippo task holds great potential for formative assessment. First, teachers can try this in their own classrooms and compare their results with national norms. Second, this task provides a great example of how to assess—and have students self-assess—their ability to follow directions in an enjoyable and nonthreatening fashion.

### **Writing**

Writing is a particularly difficult area to assess within the time limits of conventional assessment. The NEMP approach presents students with a variety of writing prompts and tasks, including one multiple-day task that takes students three separate writing sessions to complete. In addition to both expressive and functional writing, students are assessed on such conventions as spelling and grammar and on their editing ability.

One task in the 2002 Writing assessment calls for students to choose one picture from seven shown to them and write a story about it within 15 minutes. Students are told not to worry about spelling because the focus is on writing and using their imaginations. Results *do* include scores for spelling performance, however—not for individual students, but for the group. They reflect the growth from Year 4 to Year 8 and show teachers the degree to which students are willing to use less familiar words even though they may be unsure of the correct spellings. This task gives teachers clear ideas on how to structure writing assignments, offers exemplars to guide scoring and structure feedback to students, and provides direct evidence of improvements in language use and writing skills.

### **Subject Area Surveys**

The NEMP assessments include two additional components. First, students are asked whether they enjoyed doing the assessment tasks. Assessment developers use this information both in considering the validity of a task and in developing future tasks. Results to date show that a large majority of students have given the tasks positive reviews. In addition, students complete a brief survey that asks about their in-school and out-of-school activities, how much they like a given subject area, and how they, their teachers, and their parents perceive their performance in that subject area.

With more than 10 years of data on these affective dimensions, the NEMP team has developed a strong knowledge base about the sorts of tasks that both appeal to students and provide teachers



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with good formative information. The tasks in NEMP also serve as exemplars to teachers of how they can effectively assess students in more engaging ways.

### Assessments for Learning

In Maori, the native language of New Zealand, the root word *ako* connotes both teaching and learning. To the native Maori people, teaching and learning are inseparable. Even independent learning implies some form of self-teaching. By focusing primarily on formative assessments, the NEMP reflects that same view. Results are used for learning. They help New Zealand educators determine how well they are doing and what improvements they need to make on a national scale.

Because it offers neither individual student data nor school-level data, the National Educational Monitoring Project would not serve accountability purposes very well. But it was not created for that purpose. Instead, developers set out to design a large-scale assessment program that would offer New Zealand educators detailed diagnostic information that teachers could use to guide instruction and improve the learning of all students.

Ministry of Education officials use NEMP results to inform national curriculum reforms. Because of the professional development aspects of NEMP, nearly all schools volunteer to participate each year. Teachers look forward to receiving the results, and they use the program's materials in their teaching. But perhaps most important, the NEMP assessments help New

Zealand educators realize the value of high-quality formative assessment data drawn from authentic literacy tasks.

For additional information on New Zealand's National Educational Monitoring Project, visit <http://nemp.otago.ac.nz/>.

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