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## Waikato Journal of Education Te Hautaka Mātauranga o Waikato

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# Waikato Journal of Education

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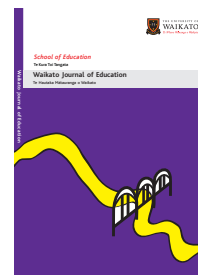
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## Family literacy and unit standards: Can they work together?

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### Abstract

*Straddling conventional education system boundaries between adult learners and children, and between employment-related and social benefits, family literacy programmes are not well recognised or supported in New Zealand's policy and funding environment. In this article, I reflect on my personal experience of redesigning the Whānau Ara Mua intergenerational family literacy programme to deliver standardised qualifications and use unit standards for assessment. A lack of unit standards supporting important family learning areas, and standards that are too prescriptive in content, scope, level or assessment conditions to fit well with family literacy and learning, resulted in learning content becoming less relevant to learners and their families. This is of particular concern as Māori concepts of literacy place a whānau approach, whānau literacy and whānau wellbeing at the heart of literacy work. My investigation led to the conclusion that development of whānau-focused unit standards would both support family literacy programmes and facilitate broader take-up of family literacy elements within adult literacy work. This would give substance to government support for Māori literacy aspirations, while also supporting wider policy objectives around reaching priority tertiary learners and improving education outcomes for children.*

### Keywords

Family literacy; unit standards; literacy; intergenerational; Māori; Pasifika

### Introduction

The Whānau Ara Mua [Families Moving Forward] programme delivers family-focused literacy education to parents and caregivers, most of whom are Pasifika and Māori women from low income Auckland communities. The one-year, full-time course currently delivers a purpose-built Level 2 Certificate in Family Learning and Child Development; however, following the New Zealand Qualification Authority's Targeted Review of Qualifications, the programme is being redesigned to deliver new Foundation Skills qualifications. After assisting with tutoring on Whānau Ara Mua for some months, I took part in this redesign, and explored suitable qualifications and the possibility of using unit standards for assessment. This paper is a reflective discussion of the challenges I encountered in trying to identify suitable unit standards for assessment of the programme's family-focused learning outcomes. Finding that current unit standards would constrain the programme's ability to offer relevant and authentic learning content, I argue for the development of more family-friendly unit standards, in order to support family literacy as an important component of adult literacy education in New Zealand.



Family literacy is important in literacy education and policy for three reasons: family learning and wellbeing is a strong motivation for adult participation in literacy education, family is a highly relevant context for authentic and useful literacy learning, and the home environment is a strong influence on children's literacy and education outcomes (Hannon, 2003; Wasik & Van Horn, 2012). Following the progress of one family literacy programme as it transitions to new qualifications and to unit standards sheds light on the ways in which current policy settings enable and impede family-focused literacy education, and on possible ways forward for family literacy policy and programme design. This is particularly relevant given the central focus on whānau literacy in the recently completed *Haea te pū ata: A kaupapa Māori framework for Māori adult literacy and numeracy* (Tertiary Education Commission, 2016).

After introducing the Whānau Ara Mua programme, I discuss relevant theory and policy. I locate family literacy within a social practices perspective on literacy, but note that New Zealand government policy on adult literacy tends to see literacy from a skills-focused, work-oriented perspective, and to treat adult and child literacy acquisition separately. This is contrasted with Māori perspectives that see whānau wellbeing as central to adult literacy. I discuss different approaches to and models of family literacy education, and what research tells us about its effectiveness. Both international and New Zealand studies emphasise respect for learners' existing capabilities and literacies, and the importance of relevant and authentic learning. An outline of qualifications policy and a discussion on the pros and cons of unit standards provides context for the subsequent reflective discussion on the effects of the new qualifications. In particular, I discuss how unit standards constrained the extent to which the redesigned Whānau Ara Mua programme was able to provide relevant, family-focused learning and literacy education to its target learners. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for strengthening support for family literacy. Throughout the paper, I will use the term 'literacy' in a broad sense, to refer to both literacy and numeracy.

## The Whānau Ara Mua programme

Whānau Ara Mua is the successor programme to the Manukau Family Literacy Programmes. Owned by Community Education Trust Auckland (COMET Auckland), it has been delivered by the Solomon Group, a Māori private training establishment (PTE) since 2013, with a current annual cohort of 220 adult learners. In 2014, 65 percent of learners were of Māori and/or Pasifika ethnicities, 60 percent held no formal qualifications, and 80 percent were receiving Sole Parent Support (Community Education Trust Auckland, n.d.). Programme leaders take an inclusive view of family relationships, and participants include parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and those in whāngai [adoptive] relationships.

Whānau Ara Mua follows the 'intergenerational' model of family literacy, aiming to improve the literacy, learning and wellbeing of both adults and children, though only adults participate in the programme directly (see Wasik, Dobbins, & Herrmann, 2001). Programme elements include adult literacy and foundation education, family-focused education, including family wellbeing and strategies for assisting children's learning and literacy development, and structured 'parent and child time together' (PACTT) in the child's school or early childhood education centre.

Values underpinning the programme include whanaungatanga [a sense of family connection] and taonga tuku iho [heritage], and the curriculum welcomes cultural diversity, while making particular effort to provide a culturally responsive learning environment for Māori and Pasifika learners. The curriculum has a strong focus on personal and whānau wellbeing, including health and emotional awareness, self-driven learning, self-confidence and social connection. It comprises four modules entitled Personal and Family Relationships, Family Health and Wellbeing, Children's Learning and Development, and Future Directions. Literacy and numeracy are taught throughout, both as stand-alone subjects and embedded into other learning content. The programme affirms diverse cultural and literacy practices, promotes closer home-school connections and two-way communication, and incorporates a degree of critical literacy. PACTT consists of short, structured interactions where the adult learner observes or participates in learning sessions at the child's school or early childhood education centre, providing important opportunities to apply learning in an authentic context and increase home-school collaboration. Throughout the curriculum, learners are encouraged to analyse, reflect on and, where appropriate, initiate changes to their own family practices in order to improve

family wellbeing. Tutors are encouraged to adapt the curriculum and pedagogy to learners' interests and needs, and to incorporate authentic issues, activities and materials into the classroom (Community Education Trust Auckland, 2013), and do their best to accommodate learners' individual circumstances and issues that may arise in their lives during the year.

## Adult literacy in the New Zealand policy context

In contrast with 'cognitive' or 'skills' perspectives that focus on the psychological skills associated with literacy, a 'social practices' perspective on literacy broadens our gaze to the social contexts and cultural practices within which acts of reading and writing take place (Street, 1993). A key concept is that of 'literacy practices' or "general cultural ways of utilising written language" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 8), involving values, attitudes, social relationships and social rules. A social practices perspective tends to celebrate diversity rather than privileging any particular type of literacy and, viewing literacy as "inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society" (Street, 1993, p. 7), to encourage a critical approach. The home is often a central context in people's literacy lives, and social practice theorists see home literacy practices as rich and important, though less visible and less supported than those literacies associated with socially powerful institutions such as schools (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

New Zealand's *Tertiary Education Strategy 2014–2019* positions improving adult literacy as one of six strategic priorities (Ministry of Education & Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment, 2014). Literacy policy documents recognise the importance of context in literacy learning. As well, they recognise that literacy affects not only people's economic participation and productivity but also their broader wellbeing, alongside the educational outcomes and wellbeing of children and whānau members (Tertiary Education Commission, 2015). However, skills-focused, work-oriented views of literacy have taken precedence over broader, more holistic views (Furness, 2012). Adult literacy infrastructure, including a set of 'Learning Progressions' and a Literacy and Numeracy for Adults Assessment Tool, are both based on the premise that literacy consists of quantifiable skills.

Policy locates adult literacy education firmly within the realm of tertiary education (Furness, 2012), mitigating against the integrated approach to adult and child literacy education preferred by family literacy practitioners (Benseman & Sutton, 2012). Family literacy education received specific mention in the 2001 *Adult Literacy Strategy* (Ministry of Education, 2001), but by 2010 had all but disappeared from policy statements, reappearing only in the 2015 *Literacy and Numeracy Implementation Strategy* in relation to Māori learners (Tertiary Education Commission, 2015).

## Literacy and Māori

Statistics indicate that literacy is an issue for over 60% of Māori adults, making Māori achievement a priority in adult literacy and broader education strategies (Ministry of Education & Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment, 2014; Tertiary Education Commission, 2015). For Māori, literacy is inextricably connected to its social, historical and political context (Māori Adult Literacy Working Party, 2001), and should contribute not only to cultural and political knowledge and to full participation in society but also, importantly, to whānau wellbeing (Te Wāhanga: New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2015, p. 2).

However, recognition of Māori views in adult literacy policy has been limited (Furness, 2012). In 2014, the Tertiary Education Commission commissioned development of a national strategy for Māori adult literacy and numeracy, later changed to a framework (Hutchings, 2015). *Haea te pū ata: A kaupapa Māori framework for Māori adult literacy and numeracy* was finalised in 2015. It identifies whānau literacy and numeracy as "a central motivator and outcome of Māori participation and engagement in literacy and numeracy learning," and as one of three key goals:

(Q)uality in Māori adult literacy and numeracy provision will be characterised by a focus on whānau wellbeing. Whānau wellbeing will be a central aim of teaching and learning, enabling learners to transfer their learning to whānau contexts and contribute to and strengthen their whānau wellbeing. (Tertiary Education Commission, 2016, p. 10)

*Haea te pū ata* has not been published, however, and although the *Literacy and Numeracy Implementation Strategy 2015–2019* (Tertiary Education Commission, 2015) notes that its recommendations will be considered and implemented as resources allow, it is not yet clear just how this will affect policy.

## Family literacy

Family literacy programmes have been defined as “programmes to teach literacy that acknowledge and make use of learners’ family relationships and engagement in family literacy practices” (Hannon, 2003, p. 100). Programmes can vary widely, focusing on children’s or adult’s literacy, or both; on the home environment, the school, or on partnership between these (Hannon, 2003). Auerbach (1995) distinguishes three broad approaches: she is critical of the ‘intervention prevention’ approach, which “defines the problem as flawed home literacy practices and the solution as changing patterns of family interaction” (p. 651), preferring the ‘multiple literacies’ approach, where learners’ own cultural practices are investigated and affirmed as resources, and the ‘social change’ approach, which aims to promote “critical understanding of the social context and action to change oppressive conditions” (p. 655).

Whānau Ara Mua is based on the widely used ‘Kenan’ or ‘intergenerational’ model of family literacy education, which combines adult education, literacy education for children, parenting education, and regular parent and child interaction time (Wasik et al., 2001). The model has been criticised for frequently taking an ‘intervention prevention’ approach, promoting a narrow, often culturally specific range of literacy practices, and devaluing families’ own literacy practices in order to promote those of schools (Cairney, 2002; Reyes & Torres, 2007). This ‘deficit’ view is seen to suggest that families (rather than poverty, racism or other structural inequities) are ultimately the cause of children’s literacy difficulties, thereby justifying intervention to change behaviours and values (Auerbach, 1995). These are grave criticisms and must be considered seriously by the designers and implementers of family literacy programmes, including Whānau Ara Mua, which includes elements of both ‘intervention prevention’ and ‘multiple literacies’ approaches. The challenge for family literacy programmes is to provide learners with “access to some different or additional literacy practices but through collaboration and negotiation rather than imposition” (Hannon, 2003, p. 105).

Recent meta-studies and meta-analyses of the effectiveness of family literacy programmes have found generally positive results for benefits to children’s literacy (Brooks, Pahl, Pollard, & Rees, 2008; Sénéchal & Young, 2008; van Steensel, McElvany, Kurvers, & Herppich, 2011). Carpintieri, Fairfax-Cholmeley, Litster, and Vorhaus (2011) found that family literacy programmes are more effective than most types of educational interventions in improving literacy outcomes for children. Evidence of literacy benefits for adult participants is weaker, though there is evidence that adults benefit in other ways:

(P)arents learn to support their children’s learning; they place greater value on education and learning and gain a deeper understanding of school systems; they become more interested in developing their own literacy skills; they form social and supportive networks, which are maintained as their children move through the school; and the programmes give parents opportunities for progression to further education and training. (Swain, Brooks, & Bosley, 2014, p. 77)

Parents may also enjoy literacy activities with their children more (Timmons & Pelletier, 2014).

There is little research comparing the effectiveness of different practices within family literacy programmes, but two studies indicate that equipping parents to use specific literacy skills with their children is more effective in improving children’s literacy than encouraging reading more generally (Carpintieri et al., 2011; Sénéchal & Young, 2008). Purcell-Gates et al. (2009) found that employing ‘authentic’ literacy events and practices from learners’ home environments—“real-life texts used for real-life purposes” (p. 4)—led to significant growth in levels of literacy for both adults and children, as compared to the norm. Carpintieri et al. (2011) found above average impact on children’s literacy for programmes that also provided training in parenting skills, and improved parents’ capacity to provide socio-emotional support to their children. Research on adult literacy education more broadly suggests that programmes should be relevant to learners’ lives and motivations, and build on existing



knowledge and skills (Tusting & Barton, 2003). An important aspect of this is respect for and inclusion of learners' first languages and cultures (Brooks et al., 2008). Anderson, Anderson, and Gear (2015) point out that social-contextual responsiveness entails not only culturally appropriate content and pedagogy, but also responsiveness to community priorities and preferences. Responsiveness, relevance, authenticity, respect, affirmation of existing literacies, and the inclusion of specific techniques to build literacy skills thus emerge as important elements of family literacy programmes.

## Family literacy in New Zealand

Family literacy takes on a particular significance in New Zealand, where Māori views of adult literacy centre on whānau literacy and wellbeing. Similar concerns motivate many Pasifika learners (Fletcher, Parkhill, Fa'afai, Taleni, & O'Regan, 2009). While family and whānau literacy programmes<sup>i</sup> are not seen as the only route to improved whānau literacy outcomes, they have a role to play (Furness, Yates, & Isaacs, 2015). Studies have called for “expansion of the curriculum in adult literacy and numeracy programmes (including workplace programmes) to include components on supporting children’s learning” alongside expansion of specific whānau literacy programmes (Potter, Taupo, Hutchings, McDowall, & Isaacs, 2011, p. 51).

Studies of family literacy in New Zealand include Furness (2012), who examined four programmes, and highlights connections between underlying values, beliefs and ideologies and wellbeing outcomes. Fundamental values included treating learners as capable people; beliefs about literacy included the usefulness of English-language, text-based literacy and technical literacy skills, while understanding this as only part of what literacy is and how it is learned and used (Furness, 2012). Another study found that effective whānau-led literacy programmes are tailored to meet learners’ complex needs, and place a high value on building positive relationships with learners (Literacy Aotearoa, 2013).

Family and whānau literacy programmes do not however fit easily into New Zealand’s literacy policy framework, where adult and child literacy are overseen by different government agencies. Examples of programmes include those run by Literacy Aotearoa, the Manukau Family Literacy Programmes and Whānau Ara Mua, and a number of initiatives developing out of early childhood education. Most work that is referred to as ‘family literacy’ is funded wholly or in part through the Tertiary Education Commission’s adult literacy funding streams, as is Whānau Ara Mua.

## Qualifications policy

Amid concerns about the clarity and relevance of qualifications, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority began in 2008 a Targeted Review of Qualifications below degree level, aiming to reduce the number of qualifications by 60 percent and make them more responsive to the needs of industry and learners (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, n.d.; Strathdee, 2013). As a result, ‘local’ qualifications such as the Certificate in Family Learning and Child Development that Whānau Ara Mua delivers are being gradually discontinued, and programmes of study transitioned to a smaller number of standardised New Zealand qualifications.

The New Zealand Certificate in Foundation Skills (Level 1) and the New Zealand Certificate in Foundation Skills (Level 2), listed on the New Zealand Qualifications Framework in December 2015, are likely to be widely utilised for adult literacy education. The strategic purpose of the Level 1 certificate is “to assist people engaging or re-engaging with learning to prepare them for further learning and employment” (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2015, p. 1), and both certificates emphasise the development of core capabilities such as literacy and numeracy. Effective participation and contribution in whānau and the wider community are acknowledged as important employment

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<sup>i</sup> Some sector leaders have called for the term ‘Whānau Literacy Programme’ to be used only where the programme includes a focus on literacy in te reo and tikanga Māori (Furness, Yates, & Isaacs, 2015); however, uses of ‘whānau literacy’—where literacy and numeracy learning are deliberately connected with whānau wellbeing, both as a motivation for and an outcome of learning (Hutchings, 2015)—reflect the broader definition of ‘family literacy’ preferred by many theorists (Furness, 2012; Hannon, 2003).

pathways. In developing programmes of studies leading to these new qualifications, providers may choose to use unit standards to assess all, some or none of the learning content.

## Unit standards

The appropriateness of unit standards for foundation education is debated. Many foundation learners prefer unit standards because they are assessed when the learner is ready, can be reassessed if the standard is not met, and provide clear and achievable pathways to qualifications (Barrer, 2007). Zepke (2003, as cited in Barrer, 2007) notes that Māori private training establishments in particular have tended to support unit standards as “transparent, practical, useful and democratic measures of performance” (p. 39). However, unit standards have been criticised for shifting attention away from learners’ needs and toward industry needs, limiting curricula, fragmenting learning, promoting superficial learning, excluding broader competencies such as critical thinking, and assessing only easily measured skills (Barrer, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2007; Walker, 2008). In the adult literacy field, unit standards have been seen by some providers as incompatible with a learner-centred curriculum, or impracticable because of the time needed for those with high literacy needs to reach the required standard (Johnson Cain & Benseman, 2005; Ministry of Education, 2007).

In 2010, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority developed six literacy and numeracy unit standards which require learners to demonstrate a certain ‘level of skill’ linked to ‘steps’ on the Learning Progressions (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2013). Relatively broad definitions of literacy and numeracy and assessment on the basis of ‘naturally occurring evidence’ in ‘real contexts’ provide for authenticity and avoid prescriptiveness, but they remain ‘skills’ rather than ‘practice’ based, and are administratively burdensome.

## Constraints and tensions encountered in redesigning Whānau Ara Mua

This section is a reflective discussion of the issues I encountered in trying to maintain the whānau-focused and responsive approach that is much valued by COMET Auckland, the Solomon Group and Whānau Ara Mua learners, while adapting the curriculum to meet the requirements of standardised qualifications and unit standards. After considering factors which constrained the overall programme design, I go on to discuss issues and constraints relating to the qualifications and to unit standards. Flexibility is a key theme, but the availability and suitability of unit standards for family literacy programmes also emerged as important issues. Resulting risks to the programme of studies include a reduced focus on children’s learning, decreased ability to provide relevant content for learners in different circumstances, and constraints on the inclusion of authentic learning and assessment.

### Choice of qualifications

Important constraints which emerged early in the redesign process were those of programme credit value and choice of qualifications for the new programme of studies. Retaining the full year duration of the programme was seen as important for three reasons. First, learners develop greater self-confidence, stronger support networks and greater independence as learners through class relationships sustained over the course of a year (see Prins, Toso, & Schafft, 2009). Second, knowledge and skills in literacy and in supporting family wellbeing and learning are consolidated through sustained application in the meaningful context of the learner’s family. The third reason was to retain experienced and valued programme tutors from year to year. As most certificate-level qualifications are worth 60 credits (equivalent to one full-time semester) or less, it was clear the programme of studies would need to combine two qualifications to maintain this duration. In line with the programme’s focus on child development, consideration was initially given to combining the Level 2 Foundation Skills and Early Childhood Education qualifications. However, the resulting sum of 100 credits would not generate sufficient funding to sustain a full-year programme. In addition, an early childhood education focus would likely narrow the programme’s appeal to learners and limit pathways for graduates. The option of Level 3 qualifications was quickly discarded as it was important to ensure the programme remained accessible to learners with low literacy; also, the programme accesses funding through a mechanism restricted to Level 1 and 2 study. Given these factors, the

decision was made to base the new programme of studies on the Level 1 and the Level 2 New Zealand Certificate in Foundation Skills. The restricted menu of qualifications with set credit values which has resulted from the Targeted Review of Qualifications therefore constrained, to some degree, the ability to shape the programme of studies to fit programme objectives and learners' needs.

### Qualification conditions

The conditions and graduate profile of the Foundation Skills certificates were a reasonably good fit with the outcomes sought from Whānau Ara Mua. As in any design process, interpreting and achieving the required balance of credits across the graduate profile outcomes was not easy. In particular, finding appropriate ways to sandwich holistic Whānau Ara Mua learning outcomes such as “support children’s learning and development appropriately” (Community Education Trust Auckland, 2013, p. 39) into graduate profile outcomes that distinguish between positive interactions, applying basic knowledge to solve problems and collaborating to achieve an outcome, and ensuring that important learning outcomes were not short-changed by the fixed credit values allocated to each graduate profile outcome involved juggling, contortion and compromise. Nonetheless, there is nothing in the structure or conditions of the qualifications that precludes their use for intergenerational family learning programmes. It seems curious, however, that qualifications which specifically acknowledge whānau participation and contribution as an employment pathway refer in the graduate profile outcomes to personal, work and community contexts and to people, cultures, communities, teams and groups, but do not mention whānau.

### Use of unit standards

It is not mandatory to use unit standards in developing a new programme of studies, and the flexibility of non-standardised assessment would in many ways be more appropriate for the Whānau Ara Mua programme. However, the Solomon Group was concerned that learners would be disadvantaged if unit standards were not used (J. Solomon, personal communication, July 28, 2015). The fact that Whānau Ara Mua, as a ‘local’ qualification using competency-based assessment, has not appeared at all on past learners’ Record of Achievement has been a source of frustration. In the future, the achievement records of graduates of the redesigned programme will show the Level 1 and the Level 2 New Zealand Certificate in Foundation Skills. However, unless unit standards are used, no details of learning content will appear, and the achievement records of learners who complete only part of the programme will show nothing. Moreover, unit standards have greater currency than locally assessed competencies with educational institutions and employers. In the event, however, issues around availability, level and credit value allocations, fragmentation of content, narrowness of assessment conditions, and the administrative burden of compliance meant that unit standards were a far greater constraint on the programme’s ability to remain responsive to the needs of learners and their families than adapting to new qualifications.

### Scarcity of unit standards on supporting children’s literacy development

As the strategic purpose of the Level 1 and 2 Foundation Skills qualifications makes clear, their primary purpose is to form a foundation for further learning and employment. While this is one objective of the Whānau Ara Mua programme, an equally important objective is to improve learners’ ability to support their children’s learning and literacy. However, the scarcity of unit standards focused on children’s literacy development made it particularly difficult to maintain a strong focus on early literacy education, the heart of many family literacy programmes. Currently, only two unit standards below Level 5 incorporate child literacy: a Level 3 early childhood education standard on the value of play, and a Level 4 standard on assisting in reading programmes for young people with reading difficulties. It is hoped that new unit standards under development for a new Level 2 early childhood education certificate, and possibly for a Level 3 Certificate in Education Support and Care will address child literacy development and will be inclusive of family contexts.

## Using industry-designed standards for family-focused learning

Where there are existing unit standards that cover topics of relevance to families, they are frequently designed by industry and not a comfortable fit with the context of the family. Three unit standards that could have been used to assess learning in relation to family nutrition provide a case in point. One from the fitness domain was somewhat too detailed and theoretical. One from the early childhood education domain that included an attractive practical component of preparing and serving a meal was of limited relevance because of its focus on children under five. A ‘core generic’ standard on purchasing household consumables was a little too broad and cursory for the programme’s purposes. In contrast, a unit standard designed for the family context, requiring learners to plan nutritionally balanced meals for a household for a week, would make the task of family literacy providers more straightforward and potentially bring wellbeing benefits to families.

Industry boundaries, reflected in assessment standard ‘domains,’ also constrained the programme’s ability to respond to learners in different circumstances. Standards from the early childhood education domain focus on children under five, and teacher education standards on ‘young people’. Unit standards from both domains were included in an attempt to address the needs of learners with children of diverse ages. However, as all learners must be assessed against all standards, some learning content is likely to be of limited relevance to some learners, and opportunities for authentic learning will be reduced accordingly. Allowing programmes of studies to include electives—so that learners can learn about either *Te Whāriki* or the *New Zealand Curriculum*, for example—would improve relevance to learners.

Industry-focused unit standards can also pose difficulties for family literacy programmes because of narrow assessment requirements. Some early childhood education unit standards, for example, require assessed activities to be carried out in an early childhood education service. While this includes home-based services, it does not include parenting in a child’s own home. More flexible assessment requirements would give more scope for family literacy programmes to respond to learners’ desire to support their children’s learning.

## Recognising integrated learning

‘Parent and child time together’ (PACTT) represented a further challenge. The integrated, sustained and relational nature of PACTT means it is not an activity that lends itself easily to standards and credits. Although the proposed programme of studies proposes one or two unit standards that draw on PACTT, for the most part, this component sits outside of assessed learning and course credit. While it is hoped that tutors will maintain these activities, the additional time pressure brought to bear by a full schedule of unit standards carries a risk that non-assessed elements will receive less attention.

## Conclusion

To what extent, then, does the redesigned Whānau Ara Mua intergenerational family literacy programme remain responsive to the needs of learners and their families? Although it will continue to deliver relevant literacy and family learning to its target learners, there is no doubt that its ability to provide learning focused on children’s literacy development and family wellbeing will be reduced. Important family learning areas are currently unsupported by unit standards, and others are too prescriptive in content, scope, level or assessment conditions to fit well with family literacy and learning.

The lack of unit standards at foundation levels that support children’s literacy development and learning is highly problematic not only for family literacy programmes, but for the many learners who are motivated to learn in order to support their children’s learning. Unit standards focused on supporting the learning and development of children within a whānau context should be developed urgently. In order to cater for families with children of diverse ages and provide a broad perspective on child development, these should ideally be developed outside of the age-stratified education domains. As a minimum, they should be inclusive of the family context.

In addition, it is unfortunate that some existing unit standards in family-relevant areas are not well suited to family contexts. Restrictions in scope and assessment context, and content that is too specific or too broad for family-focused learners mean that family literacy programmes and learners must 'make do' with unit standards that do not sit comfortably with their learning objectives. When revising existing foundation level unit standards, every opportunity should be taken to make them more suitable for whānau contexts.

The requirement that all learners in a programme be assessed against exactly the same unit standards further reduces the ability of literacy programmes to respond to learners in different circumstances. Allowing programmes of studies to include curriculum electives, where these do not affect the credit value or coherence of the programme, would enhance the flexibility and relevance of family literacy programmes.

Many of the issues raised here about unit standards could have been resolved by electing not to use unit standards in the redesign process, or by using them for only part of the programme. Still under consideration, this is an option that would be more palatable if a learner's Record of Achievement showed all learning components achieved regardless of the approach to assessment. The inclusion on the Record of Achievement of learning assessed via non-standard approaches would relieve providers of the need to choose between comprehensiveness in learners' Records of Achievement and assessment that best reflects the programme's learning outcomes.

More broadly, the lack of suitable unit standards signals a deeper issue about the priority given to whānau literacy and learning in policy. The compartmentalised, skills-focused nature of unit standards will not always suit the responsive, holistic learning that many family and whānau literacy programmes aim for. However, from a pragmatic perspective, the availability of suitable unit standards would not only make family literacy programme design easier, it would also create an opportunity to include some family-focused learning in foundation education more widely. This would give substance to government support for Māori literacy aspirations as set out in *Haea te pū ata: a kaupapa Māori framework for Māori adult literacy and numeracy*, while also supporting wider policy objectives around reaching priority tertiary learners and improving education outcomes for children.

The completion of *Haea te pū ata* offers an opportunity for whānau literacy programmes to grow and for whānau literacy to become a more common part of adult literacy education in New Zealand, and policy mechanisms must be ready to support this. Unit standards are far from the only means of supporting whānau literacy outcomes, nor are they all that is needed, but whānau literacy-friendly unit standards would be a practical and welcome step in that direction.

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