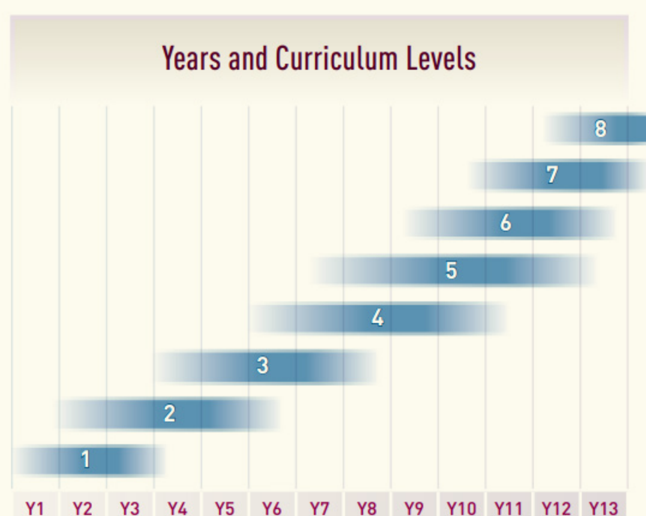
FIGURE 1 **The curriculum-levelling construct: Diagram in *The New Zealand Curriculum* that shows how curriculum levels typically relate to years at school**



The curriculum-levelling construct is accompanied by a small amount of text (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 45).

> This diagram shows how curriculum levels typically relate to years at school. Many students do not, however, fit this pattern. They include those with special learning needs, those who are gifted, and those who come from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Students learning an additional language are also unlikely to follow the suggested progression: level 1 is the entry level for those with no prior knowledge of the language being learned, regardless of their school year.

Research questions

The research was guided by six questions. These were:

1. How was the construct of curriculum levelling developed?
2. What was the theory behind the curriculum-levelling construct—specifically curriculum bands spanning different time periods, overlaid on year levels—and what was intended with the normative shading?
3. How is the curriculum-levelling construct interpreted by experienced leaders in schools through local curriculum design and delivery?
4. How is the curriculum-levelling construct interpreted by classroom teachers making judgements about progress and achievement in relation to levels?
5. How effective is the curriculum-levelling construct in today's curriculum and pedagogical landscape?
6. What is the future potential of curriculum levelling for supporting learning progression, learner progress, and an education system that learns, or is a different construct needed?

Methods in brief

We used the following approaches to collect data:

- a brief literature scan
- interviews with teachers, school leaders, and professional learning and development (PLD) facilitators from around Aotearoa New Zealand (*n*=10)
- focus group sessions (*n*=3) involving teachers and school leaders from nine schools
- interviews with systems-level curriculum experts from both Aotearoa New Zealand (*n* = 4) and Australia (*n*=2).

This report documents the strongest themes that arose during our conversations with participants. Further details about the methods that were employed in this research are provided in the full report.

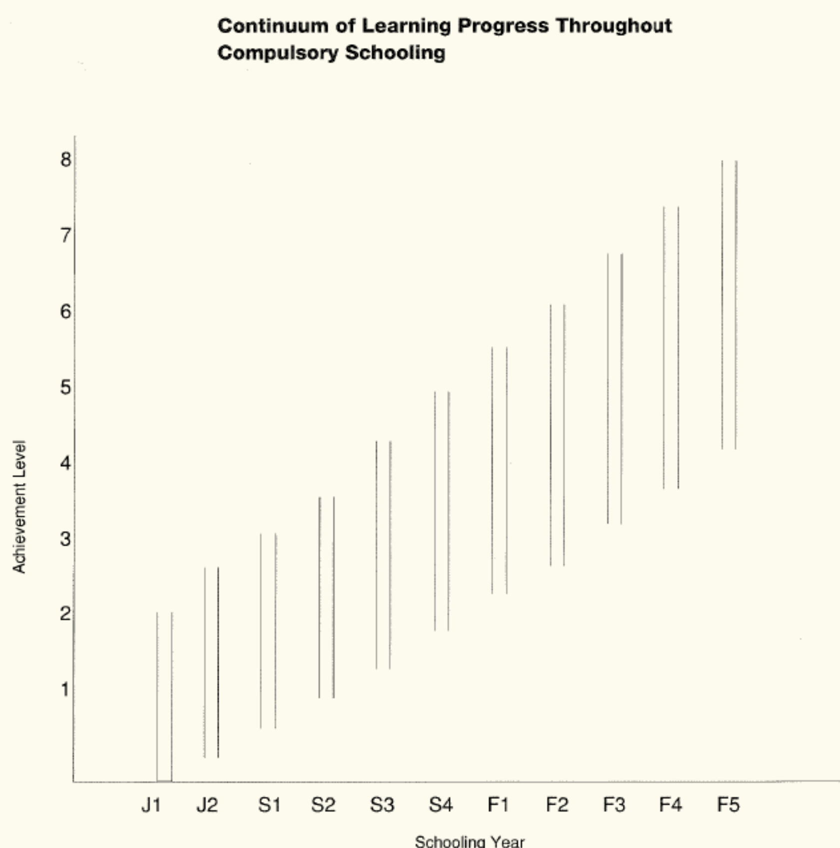
Section 2: The history of the curriculum-levelling construct

The curriculum-levelling construct has been a feature of Aotearoa New Zealand's curriculum documents since the early 1990s (Ministry of Education, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2007, 2008a). The idea of using levels to structure the curriculum was a fundamental aspect of the then Government's education policy (Ministry of Education, 1991a). Two key ideas underpinned the development of Aotearoa New Zealand's curriculum-levelling construct. The first was that everyone in the education system would be better served if there was a standardised way of tracking student progress and achievement across the compulsory years of schooling. The curriculum levels, with their aims and achievement outcomes, were intended to provide a criterion-referenced framework that could be used for that purpose. Founded upon the understanding that students progress at different rates, the second key idea stemmed from a belief that decoupling curriculum aims from year levels would allow a greater range of students to experience a curriculum that was appropriate for them. These ideas were heavily influenced by curriculum developments in England and Wales, most notably the recommendations of the Task Group on Assessment and Testing (Department of Education and Science, & the Welsh Office, 1988).

The new ideas, which were articulated as part of the Achievement Initiative policy (Ministry of Education, 1991a), were accommodated within a curriculum-review process that had been ongoing throughout the 1980s. This work, which incorporated a strong commitment to a child-centred philosophy, and also to both biculturalism and equity, was focused on establishing a framework for a national curriculum that would support schools to develop coherent local curricula (Department of Education, 1988).

In 1991, the first pictorial representation of Aotearoa New Zealand's curriculum-levelling construct (see Figure 2) appeared in a discussion document on the national curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1991c).

FIGURE 2 **The version of the curriculum-levelling construct that is included in *The National Curriculum of New Zealand: A discussion document***



This representation was accompanied by the following explanation:

> The achievement levels are not to be confused with years of learning. In any class there will be some students who are achieving at higher levels than those of most of their peers, while a few others will be performing at lower levels. Students will also be operating at different levels in different subjects, and even in the achievement aims of the same subject in any one year. Thus, there will be no requirement for students to reach a particular level by a particular age. However, teachers will be expected to know what levels of achievement learners are likely to reach at particular stages to assist them in their planning of appropriate activities. (Ministry of Education, 1991c, p. 22)

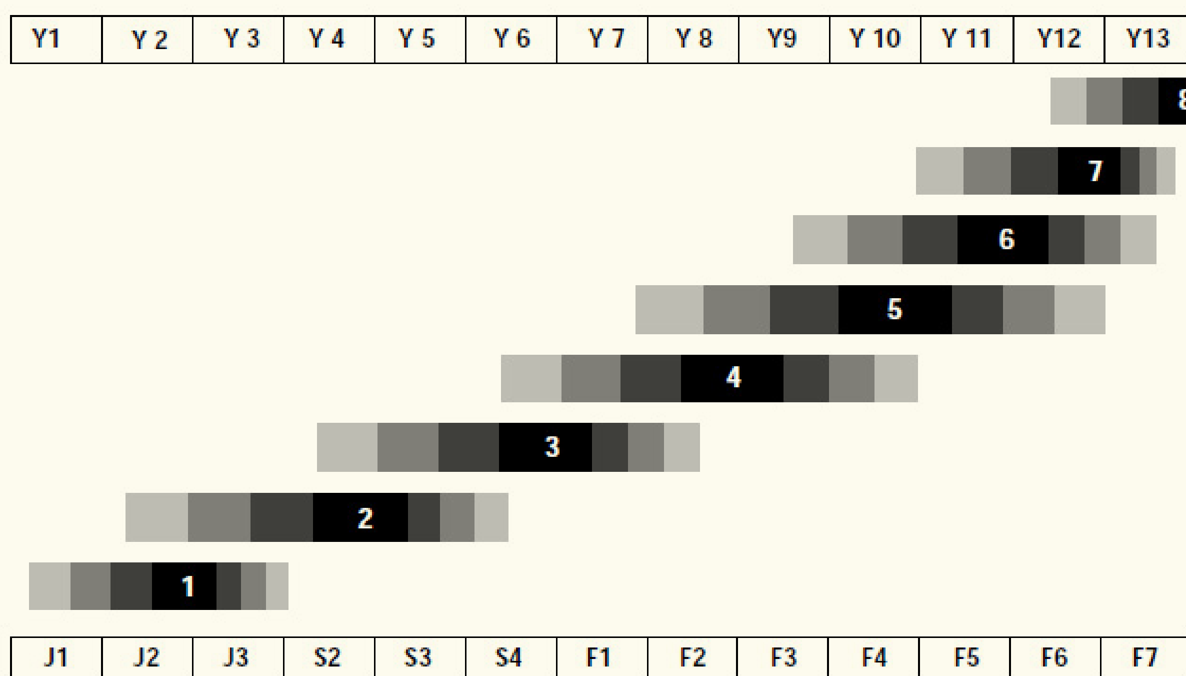
The discussion document noted that the number of levels was yet to be finalised and that the number might vary across subjects (Ministry of Education, 1991c).

By the time a draft mathematics curriculum was published later in 1991, agreement had been reached that there would be eight curriculum levels (Ministry of Education, 1991b). Although the draft mathematics curriculum did not include a pictorial representation of the curriculum-levelling construct, it provided a detailed written description explaining the relationship between year levels and curriculum levels. This description included statements such as:

> Level 1 should be achieved by most children some time during J1[2] or J2. Some children will reach this level of achievement earlier (perhaps even before arriving at school), and some only later.
>
> Level 2 will be achieved by some children in J2 or even earlier, but most will achieve at this level in J3 or S2. A few children will not reach this level of achievement until later. (Ministry of Education, 1991b, p. 13)

In 1992, *Mathematics in the New Zealand Curriculum* was published (Ministry of Education, 1992). Within this document, a pictorial representation of the curriculum-levelling construct replaced the earlier written description. This representation can be seen below in Figure 3 (Ministry of Education, 1992, p. 16).

FIGURE 3 **The representation of the curriculum-levelling construct that is included in *Mathematics in the New Zealand Curriculum***



Interestingly, the shaded sections in the 1992 mathematics curriculum did not necessarily correspond with the written description that had been provided in the 1991 draft statement. In general, the shading in the 1992 curriculum-levelling construct indicated that students would be achieving at a given curriculum level at a slightly later point in their schooling than was specified in the 1991 written description. The pictorial representation of the curriculum-levelling construct that appeared in the 1992 mathematics curriculum does, however, bear a strong resemblance to the curriculum-levelling construct that is depicted in our current curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1992, 2007). Notably, no explanation was provided within the 1992 mathematics curriculum, or indeed in subsequent curriculum documents, about the intended meaning of the shading.

Following the publication of *Mathematics in the New Zealand Curriculum* (1992), versions of the curriculum-levelling construct appeared in successive curriculum documents (Ministry of Education,

2. J1–3 = Y1–3, S2–4 = Y4–6, F1–7 = Y7–13. Refer to Figure 3 for futher clarification.

1993, 1994, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2000). Almost without exception, the construct was presented slightly differently in each of these documents. Some of these differences were as subtle as colour variations. Other, more significant changes, however, included the addition of vertical lines, differences in the positioning of the numerals, and variations in the lengths of the shaded bars associated with some curriculum levels.

After a decade of rapid curriculum change, a period of reflection ensued in the early 2000s. When the curriculum stocktake report was published in 2002, its authors acknowledged the strengths and weaknesses of the levels structure but concluded that levels should be maintained (Ministry of Education, 2002). The stocktake process led first to the development of *The New Zealand Curriculum: Draft for Consultation* (Ministry of Education, 2006), and later to the publication of *NZC,* which contains the current curriculum-levelling construct (Ministry of Education, 2007).

Section 3: Interpretations and uses of the curriculum-levelling construct

After speaking with research participants, our overarching finding was that differing interpretations of the curriculum-levelling construct existed, and that these interpretations shaped the ways in which teachers and school leaders used this construct. This finding suggests that the construct may, at times, hinder teachers' judgement-making and planning processes. We identified four factors that contributed to the existence of differing interpretations and uses of the curriculum-levelling construct.

Contributing factor 1: The National Standards

There was a widespread belief amongst the teachers and PLD facilitators who participated in the study that the National Standards had shaped and, indeed, continued to shape, people's understanding and use of the curriculum-levelling construct. The comments that participants volunteered indicated that the National Standards had impacted upon teachers' understanding and use of the curriculum-levelling construct in three ways.

First, teachers and PLD facilitators told us that, in some primary schools, the curriculum-levelling construct was ignored and the National Standards expectations continued to dominate the way in which progress and achievement was understood. In such schools, many teachers–including the sizeable cohort who began their careers while the National Standards were in effect–may have had limited opportunities to develop an understanding of the current curriculum-levelling construct. One PLD facilitator, who had been involved in the implementation of *NZC*, told us the introduction of the National Standards appeared to divert teachers' attention away from the new curriculum (and the levelling construct that it contained). This PLD facilitator told us that, in spite of the advice they were offering, "most schools just put that [*The New Zealand Curriculum*] away. And . . . the National Standards documents became the default curriculum."

Second, some teachers indicated that even where the National Standards expectations were not dominant, they still shaped how their colleagues interpreted the curriculum-levelling construct. In such cases, a number of teachers talked about how the National Standards had effectively removed the shading from the curriculum-levelling construct. One teacher explained, "I personally think that . . . the National Standards has sort of tainted people's view of using those [curriculum-levelling construct] bands . . . Rather than bands, it became like boxes." Drawing upon the National Standards terminology, another teacher explained this effect by saying people think "you're 'there' if you're in the dark bits [of the curriculum-levelling construct], but you're 'above' and 'below' if you're in the other [shaded] bits".

Finally, one group of teachers suggested that their experience of the National Standards had made it difficult for them to accept the more fluid representation of achievement and progress that they believed the curriculum-levelling construct portrayed. These teachers, who worked in a bilingual Māori and English (henceforth, reorua) setting at a low decile primary school, explained that they used the National Standards to inform their teaching and assessment of literacy and numeracy, and the curriculum-levelling construct to guide their teaching and assessment in other learning areas. For them, the National Standards had highlighted that many of their students were achieving below where they should be. They explained: "when you put National Standards over the top of it [the curriculum-levelling construct] then, it changes where they should be, and it's those fringe kids, and the majority of our kids fit in those areas". Although these teachers preferred the way in which the relationship between curriculum levels and year levels was explained in the curriculum-levelling construct, they felt that their students were not well served by this.

Contributing factor 2: Variable interpretations of the shaded bands

Overall, most teachers understood that the shading within the curriculum-levelling construct was intended to communicate that children learn and make progress at different rates. It was, however, also evident that the shaded bands had led to some differing understandings of the construct. We found that varied interpretations of the shaded bands had impacted upon people's understandings of the construct in two ways.

First, a number of participants believed that the shading led to teachers having varied understandings of expected achievement. For example, two PLD facilitators reported that they had observed teachers using the shading to justify having low expectations. Many other participants, however, emphasised that maintaining a progress-oriented approach meant that teachers could not use the construct to justify having low expectations. One principal stated, "you can't use the shading to justify lower expectations if you are progress orientated". Similarly, a primary school teacher commented, "Teachers today all want kids to shift . . . I don't think that [the curriculum-levelling construct] gives them permission to leave kids in the grey."

Second, some participants indicated that they understood the overlap between the shaded bands to mean that the learning demands associated with the end of a given curriculum level were the same as those associated with the beginning of the next.

Contributing factor 3: The use of sub-levelling language

The use of sub-levelling language also led to differing interpretations and uses of the curriculum-levelling construct. Because each curriculum level spans multiple year levels, many schools have adopted and/or adapted sub-levelling language to enable them to describe student progress and achievement. Our conversations with teachers and PLD facilitators indicated that using the e-asTTle terms *basic*, *proficient*, and *advanced* (BPA) to describe student achievement in relation to a curriculum level was commonplace. We found that these terms were sometimes used in novel and potentially unintended ways. There were, for example, indications that some schools had uncoupled these terms from the e-asTTle assessment tool and that, in some cases, teachers were unaware of the terms' origins. Because the e-asTTle sub-levelling terminology is used across schools to describe achievement in relation to curriculum levels, we concluded that teachers could mistakenly assume that the meanings of the e-asTTle terms were commonly understood.

Contributing factor 4: Not using the curriculum-levelling construct

Finally, there were indications that some teachers did not use the curriculum-levelling construct. Although all of the teachers we spoke to reported that they made at least some use of the construct, their comments indicated that this was not true of all teachers. For example, the principal of an intermediate school commented: “There are at least two schools who contribute to us whose parents are consistently negatively surprised because they haven’t had any reporting about curriculum levels.” Overall, secondary school teachers were more likely than their primary and intermediate school counterparts to talk about circumstances in which the curriculum-levelling construct was not used. In general, secondary school teachers attributed this to the influence of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA).

Section 4: The efficacy of the curriculum-levelling construct

The research participants expressed a range of views about the strengths and weaknesses of the current curriculum-levelling construct. This section presents five issues that participants raised regarding the efficacy of the curriculum-levelling construct.

Issue 1: The curriculum-levelling construct’s openness to interpretation

Many of the educators we spoke to indicated that the curriculum-levelling construct was, as one teacher put it “open to interpretation”. This was seen by many as both a strength and a weakness. When discussing the strengths of the construct, a number of teachers noted that they appreciated that it helped them to keep learning-focused conversations with students and their whānau positive. Likewise, one teacher commented, “young children need to have aspirations and feel good. If we narrowed the bands, and they were sitting outside them, they might think, school isn’t for me.”

In general, those teachers who perceived that the curriculum-levelling construct’s openness to interpretation was a strength also acknowledged that this subjectivity could lead to problems. For example, a primary school teacher who commented positively about how the construct enabled them to reassure anxious parents that their kids were “still within the band” also noted that they could “see how people [teachers] could mess with that a bit”. Here, this teacher appeared to acknowledge the possibility that teachers could—with the best of intentions—use the curriculum-levelling construct to provide parents with a false sense of security about their child’s achievement.

Issue 2: The need for key benchmarks to be more clearly communicated

The belief that a curriculum-levelling construct should communicate key benchmarks was voiced by a number of participants. Implicit in their statements was the sense that the current construct did not do this adequately. For example, one systems-level expert commented, “it [a curriculum-levelling construct] has to be able to tell you when to intervene. It has to have some sense of benchmarks or worry points”. Likewise, another systems-level expert commented, “teachers need to understand when they should get worried and what they should be noticing”. Similarly, a third systems-level expert suggested that such benchmarks might only be required for some learning areas. They explained: “There are some fundamentals that kids need, or they don’t have access to the curriculum. They have got to have the . . . important tools . . . maths, and reading, and writing.” Sharing their view about how this might relate to a future curriculum-levelling construct, this participant explained: “I would only have that construct for what I would call the backbone subjects. Reading, writing, maths . . . I’d want it data driven . . . For the other subjects, I would not have the curriculum constructed like that.”

Issue 3: The need for the identities and learning journeys of Māori and Pacific learners to be reflected

A number of teachers who worked with high proportions of Māori and/or Pacific learners expressed the view that the curriculum-levelling construct did not adequately reflect either the cultural identity or the learning journeys of their students. For example, a teacher who worked in a reorua setting felt that the construct did not take into account the additional demands associated with learning a second language. They commented: "They [our reorua students] come to kura and this is the only place they get the reo, so you would expect that progress would be slower." This teacher, who explained that they used both *NZC* and *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa* (Ministry of Education, 2008a), noted that the curriculum-levelling construct looked virtually identical in both of these documents. When asked to reflect on the efficacy of the construct in relation to their students, they responded "is this [curriculum-levelling] structure here, is it taking into consideration those things we know about our learners in particular? . . . You know quite often we don't think that it does. However, there is no alternative for us."

The idea that the curriculum-levelling construct did not adequately reflect the learning journeys of second language learners was also acknowledged by a teacher who worked in their school's Samoan bilingual unit. This teacher talked about needing a curriculum-levelling construct that better acknowledged the skills, knowledge, and experiences of those Pacific learners who did not speak English as a first language. Reflecting upon a way forward, they commented:

> In terms of the levelling and what that would look like . . . it's coming back to those key competencies and so forth, wanting to measure our children against [these]. It's not trying to box things in more, it's trying to have that broader kind of thinking.

Echoing some of the ideas that were expressed by teachers who worked in bilingual settings, one PLD facilitator talked about the curriculum-levelling construct being a "Eurocentric model".

Issue 4: Concerns about the construct's empirical basis

Some participants were critical that empirical data had not informed the development of the curriculum-levelling construct. Several of these participants possessed insights into the way in which the construct had been developed. Talking about the 1992 mathematics curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1992), one systems-level expert explained: "that came out and we got . . . the *fuzzy-level* diagram. It was always known by the educators that this was slightly nutty . . . it was perfectly clear that we had no empirical evidence for these levels." Likewise, another participant noted:

> People think that there was some kind of deep science behind establishing what was in those levels, there wasn't. It was a bunch of teachers in Wellington who got together . . . and said, these sorts of things look about right for these year levels, these sort of things look about right for [these year levels]. But there was no real psychometrics or anything that went on.

Issue 5: The proliferation of curriculum-linked tools, systems, and resources

Since the development of the original curriculum-levelling construct, various assessment tools (e.g., e-asTTle and the Progress and Consistency learning Tool (PaCT)) have been created and/or revised to assist teachers with describing student progress and achievement. Likewise, a number of assessment systems (e.g., the National Standards and NCEA), and curriculum-linked resources (e.g., *The English Language Learning Progressions, Ministry of Education, 2008b*) have been developed. Some teachers noted that this has resulted in them using a vast, and at times confusing, array of terms to talk about

student progress and achievement. A number of teachers questioned whether this proliferation of tools, terms, and systems might suggest that the current curriculum-levelling construct was no longer fit for purpose.

Section 5: Recent responses to the use of curriculum levels in England and New South Wales

Recent curriculum reviews in England and New South Wales (NSW) have led to differing conclusions about the usefulness of levels for structuring curricula. In England, an expert review prompted the removal of levels on the basis that their use did not support assessment and promoted a fixed-level view of ability (Department of Education, 2011). In contrast, a review in NSW recommended that the current year-level-based syllabi be replaced with syllabi based on curriculum levels to help ensure students' varying needs were met (Masters, 2020). This section examines these two different responses to levels.

Levels in England

A levels-based national curriculum was established in England in the late 1980s (Black, 1994). Since then, a series of curriculum reviews and adjustments have taken place. The most recent of these reviews cited concerns with using levels to judge student progress (Department of Education, 2011). Specifically, the reviewers argued that levels "may actually inhibit the overall performance of our system and undermine learning" (p. 44). According to their report, rather than promoting an inclusive vision that aimed to "secure learning of key curricular elements by all", the use of levels exacerbated social differentiation (p. 44). Likewise, the report noted that levels distorted learning, with "some pupils [becoming] more concerned for 'what level they are' than for the substance of what they know, can do and understand" (p. 44). The report acknowledged that high-performing jurisdictions around the world work to ensure all students "achieve adequate understanding before moving on to the next topic or area" (p. 45) and recommended a "mastery model" based on "high expectations for all" (p. 47). The report's authors argued for an assessment system that focused on the specific elements students have achieved and those they had yet to achieve, rather than on the generalised idea of a level. In 2014, the Department for Education in England announced that the systems of levels would cease to be used to report achievement (Gibb, 2015). While Key Stage assessment would remain, schools would be required to develop their own approaches to monitoring and reporting progress towards the requirements for each Key Stage.

The New South Wales review

In NSW, a recent review of the kindergarten to Year 12 curriculum identified a number of concerns (Masters, 2020). One of these related to the curriculum's time-based structure:

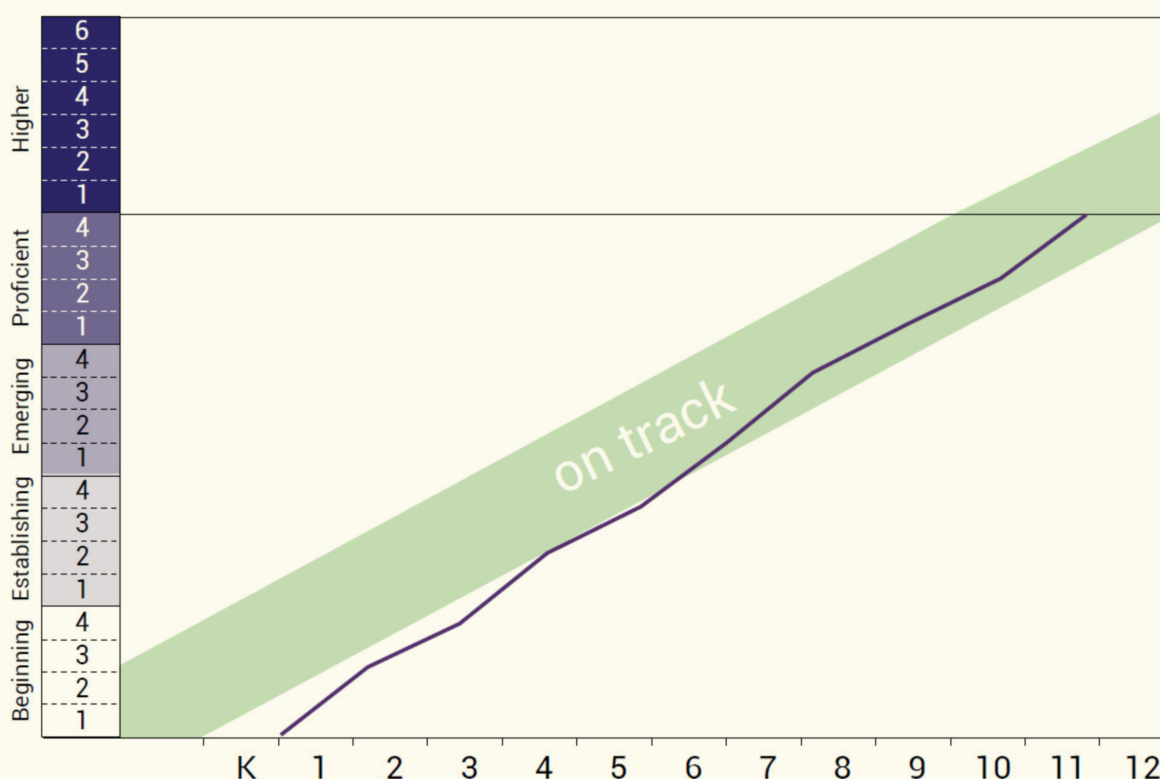
> A consequence of structuring the curriculum to mirror the structure of schooling is that, when students move to the next year of school, they simultaneously move to the next stage of the curriculum, whether they are ready for it or not. This is sometimes referred to as the 'lock-step' nature of schooling . . . This can disadvantage students who lack the prerequisites for the next stage of the curriculum and also students who are ready for learning challenges well beyond that stage. (p. 54)

The review proposed that the new curriculum be based on a sequence of syllabi organised into progressive levels (Masters, 2020). In this arrangement:

- no student should be required to progress to the next syllabus until they had adequately mastered the content of the prior syllabus (as judged by their teacher); and
- a student who had mastered the content of a syllabus (as judged by their teacher) should be able to progress to the next syllabus when ready. (p. 90)

The approach that Masters has suggested for labelling the sequence of syllabi and monitoring long-term progress is shown below in Figure 4 (Masters, 2020, p. 94).

FIGURE 4 **Masters' proposed framework for labelling the sequence of syllabi and monitoring long-term progress**



Within this diagram, the horizontal line in the upper section identifies the syllabus (Proficient 4) "as the minimum standard every student should reach (and ideally surpass) by the time they leave school" (Masters, 2020, p. 93). Masters argued that this approach would provide "a superior basis for monitoring the long-term progress individuals make in a subject" (p. 93). He explained that, "the expectation should be that every student will make excellent progress every year, regardless of their starting point, and achieve at least a minimally acceptable level of proficiency by the time they leave school" (p. 93).

Relevance to Aotearoa New Zealand

Although very different conclusions were reached about the usefulness of curriculum levels in England and NSW, the attention that was paid to curriculum levels in both these jurisdictions highlights their importance. In both cases, attending to how the curriculum was arranged in levels was seen as a way to reset expectations and promote new ways of working. Also noteworthy is that—in both jurisdictions—the responses were argued from an equity standpoint.

Section 6: Research summary and implications

The findings from this research indicate that teachers and school leaders interpret and use the curriculum-levelling construct in varying ways. Four factors appeared to contribute to these varied interpretations and uses of the construct. These were the ongoing influence of the National Standards expectations, differing understandings of the shading within the construct, the adoption and adaption of sub-levelling terminology, and simply not using the construct.

The research also identified five issues that educators believed posed potential threats to the efficacy of the construct. These were its openness to interpretation, the need for clearer benchmarks, a need for better representation of the identities and learning journeys of Māori and Pacific learners, concerns about the empirical basis for the levels, and a perceived lack of coherence stemming from the proliferation of curriculum-linked tools, systems, and resources.

An examination of the use of curriculum levels in two other jurisdictions suggested that strong arguments can be made both for and against the use of a curriculum-levelling construct. This examination also suggested that attending to the concept of curriculum levelling can draw attention to the important ways in which curriculum levelling and pedagogy intersect.

Finally, an exploration of the history of Aotearoa New Zealand's curriculum-levelling construct has revealed inconsistencies in the way the construct has been presented over time. Over the past 30 years, the construct has generally been presented in curriculum documents using pictorial representations, with limited supporting text. The details of these pictorial representations of the construct have varied and readers have been required to infer the intended meaning of these diagrams. The construct was originally developed to support an accountability agenda (Ministry of Education, 1991a) and was introduced at a time in which Aotearoa New Zealand's education sector—guided by a strong commitment to a child-centred philosophy, as well as to biculturalism and equity—had been actively exploring how a national curriculum framework could be used to support schools to develop more coherent and cohesive local curricula (Department of Education, 1988). Arguably, the need to accommodate a new accountability-driven policy within the context of ongoing curriculum reform resulted in the curriculum-levelling construct being presented in a way that lacked clarity.

Taken as a whole, the research has indicated that careful consideration needs to be given to Aotearoa New Zealand's curriculum-levelling construct in any future curriculum-development initiatives. While there is little to suggest that the construct is causing widespread damage or consternation, in its current form the construct does not appear to be supporting teachers and school leaders to develop shared understandings of what students are entitled to. Nor does it appear to be assisting them with identifying how local curriculum should be designed to meet varying needs or to encourage progression. The research does not necessarily imply that it is time to call for the removal of either the curriculum-levelling construct or the levels themselves. As Masters (2020) argued, there are strong rationales for using a curriculum-levelling construct to highlight progression and support the personalisation of curricula. The research does, however, indicate that it is time for a reset.

Levels and the curriculum-levelling construct are fundamental building blocks for *NZC*. Ensuring that they are fit for purpose is therefore very important. A reset would provide an opportunity to clarify their purpose and make adjustments. For instance, it could be that the construct is better suited to some areas of learning than others. It may also need to be supported by more developed systems of progress indicators that have strong theoretical and empirical backing and provide rich exemplification. These kinds of supports would help teachers understand what it means for students to make progress and assist them with making critical decisions regarding students' progress

journeys. At a minimum, further information must accompany the curriculum-levelling construct to clarify its purpose and meaning. In providing that clarity, it is very likely that other aspects of the curriculum and the logic that underpins it will come to the fore.

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