Leo has travelled from New Zealand to visit his father, who has a houseboat in England. Leo and his dad touch briefly on memories of earlier visits to England, when the family was still together and living in New Zealand.

The river has changed since the earlier visit, polluted by a factory upstream. Leo’s desire to see the selkie he saw previously causes him to fall into the dirty river. Leo finds that to save himself, he has to “stop fighting the river”, and students may hypothesise that this realisation could help him deal with the changes in his life.

The author conveys underlying messages about the impact of environmental and personal changes. You may wish to ask the students to read the story independently first, then return to examine the way the author develops the ideas and themes in the text.

“You were looking for the selkie again, weren’t you?” Dad said, breaking the silence. “I reckon she won’t come this year.”

Leo’s dad had told him about selkies. They were a part of Scottish folklore – mythical creatures that looked like seals. They lived in the sea, but they could take off their sealskins and become human and make fishermen fall in love with them. Leo didn’t like the selkie stories. They always ended with broken hearts.

“She could come up,” Leo answered, shrugging his shoulders. He thought back to that previous visit. He had seen the selkie then. She had floated past the barge on the current – head above water, wet and shiny. Big eyes, whiskers, snout like a dog. Lying a little on her back, biting into an eel, tearing at its flesh. Leo had run down the length of the barge to follow her as she drifted along, and then down the bank, keeping up with her until the bank became too steep to run. He wished he could see her again.

“You need to take it easy,” Dad said. “I need a rest. Give me a few minutes while I have a cup of tea and read the paper.”

Leo decided to take a walk along the riverbank.

“OK,” Dad said. “Just don’t go too far, and no leaning over the edge. The water isn’t as safe as it looks.”

Leo took the path that ran past the edge of town and then out into the fields. If you kept on the track long enough, it would take you to where the river met the sea.

Halfway along the path, Leo noticed it – a dark shape floating with the river. The shape was dropping below the surface and bobbing up again. It looked like the head of something. Leo saw a thin track that went off the main path, through the marsh to the river’s edge. He raced along the track and pushed through the reeds to reach the bank, hoping for a better look.

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THE RIVER

[Writing]

SCHOOL JOURNAL, LEVEL 3, APRIL 2013

Text and language challenges

VOCABULARY:
- The vocabulary related to rivers, including nouns (e.g., “edge”, “barge”, “bank”, “reeds”, “surface”, “marsh”, “dinghy”, “pollution”, “current”), verbs (e.g., “flowed”, “rush”, “sledded”), “floating/ed”, “drifted”, “swept”, “churned”), and adjectives (e.g., “swollen”, “lazy”, “silent”, “oily”, “murky”, “steep”).
- The strong action verbs, including “toppled”, “clawed”, “churned”, “spun”, “grasped”, “clung”.
- The use of onomatopoeia, including “gurgle”, “babble”, “whiff”, “gesturing”, “whining”.
- The use of personification, including “It just slid by, lazy”, “gloomy hulk”, “whining”.
- The implied information about the characters’ family and the family and the deeper meanings. Before reading, brainstorm words related to rivers, using the illustrations on pages 20–21 as a prompt. Have students work in pairs or small groups to create word maps about rivers. You could ask them to put words into categories such as things, movement, what it looks like, or categories such as nouns (e.g., “edge”, “barge”, “bank”, “reeds”, “surface”, “marsh”, “dinghy”, “water pollution”, “current”), verbs (e.g., “flowed”, “rush”, “sledded”, “swept”, “churned”), and adjectives (e.g., “swollen”, “lazy”, “silent”, “oily”, “murky”, “steep”). Alternatively, you could leave it open and, as the pairs share their words, put the words into categories in a class word map for rivers. During this discussion, feed in key vocabulary and prompt students to notice the factory in the illustration.

Possible supporting strategies
Before asking students to read the story independently, check for any words, concepts or word usage that may be unfamiliar to some students. The story has a lot of key vocabulary related to rivers, and this vocabulary is essential to understanding both the surface action and the deeper meanings. Before reading, brainstorm words related to rivers, using the illustrations on pages 20–21 as a prompt. Have students work in pairs or small groups to create word maps about rivers. You could ask them to put words into categories such as things, movement, what it looks like, or categories such as nouns (e.g., “edge”, “barge”, “bank”, “reeds”, “surface”, “marsh”, “dinghy”), verbs (e.g., “flowed”, “rush”, “sledded”, “swept”, “churned”), and adjectives (e.g., “swollen”, “lazy”, “silent”, “oily”, “murky”, “steep”). Alternatively, you could leave it open and, as the pairs share their words, put the words into categories in a class word map for rivers. During this discussion, feed in key vocabulary and prompt students to notice the factory in the illustration.

Possible writing purposes
- To enjoy and understand the layers of meaning in a fiction story
- To learn about the impact of pollution through fiction
- To empathise with fictional characters.

Possible supporting strategies
Ask students who have specific knowledge (for example, of river boats or of river pollution) to share this with the group.

After reading, some students may wish to explore the folklore stories of selkies. If students have knowledge of selkies (or similar creatures from other cultures) ask them to share this with the group.

Possible reading purposes
- To enjoy and understand the layers of meaning in a fiction story
- To learn about the impact of pollution through fiction
- To empathise with fictional characters.

Possible supporting strategies
Review the features of a narrative, prompting the students to identify typical features of characters, setting, plot, and a problem to be resolved. Remind the students to keep these in mind as they read. Prompt them to think about other narratives they know.

Refer to charts of features you have co-constructed with the class or create one. This is particularly important with students who have little experience with this type of narrative. Keep in mind that narratives in other languages may or may not have the same features. Encourage students to make connections between the features of narratives in English and narratives in other languages they know. For students who need support with understanding the implied messages about the family, a graphic organiser could help them record and analyse evidence from the story. Create a graphic organiser with sections for the river and the family and for evidence and inference. Choose a section of text and model adding information to the graphic organiser, prompting students to make connections between the river and the family.

Possible curriculum contexts

SOCIAL SCIENCES (Social studies)
Level 3: Understand how people make decisions about access to and use of resources.

ENGLISH (Reading)
Level 3 – Ideas: Show a developing understanding of ideas within, across, and beyond texts.

ENGLISH (Writing)
Level 3 – Ideas: Select, form, and communicate ideas on a range of topics.

TEXT FEATURES AND STRUCTURE:
- A present-day realistic fiction, set in England
- The dual themes of change – environmental and personal
- The insertion of information about selkies
- The shortened sentences, including “Big eyes, whiskers, snout like a dog.”, “Down brushes!”
- The implied information about the characters’ family and feelings
- The changes to the river over time that parallel the main story of change within the family.
The brown water flowed past, not making a sound… It just slid by, lazy and silent… “From the factory up-river,” Dad said, gesturing over at the slick floating past… “The water sure isn’t what it used to be.” … A grey dinghy with Waterways Agency written on the bow headed upstream…

“Remember when we first came here, Leo…?” Dad smiled weakly. “The river isn’t the only thing that’s changed.” …

“I told you, she’s not coming.” He shook his head. “The river’s not the same.”

“Why doesn’t she come back?” Leo asked. Then a pause. “Why can’t things be the same?”

“Let’s get those clothes off,” said Dad, ignoring the question.

Leo wanted to call out for help, but there was no one to call to. He could feel tears building. Instead of crying, he took a deep breath, then he flipped round and stopped fighting the river. He would go with the current – try to get over to the other side of the bank.

The students consider the information in the text and the themes they have uncovered. They make connections between the text, the themes, and their own knowledge about coping with life to infer that in saving himself from the river, Leo learnt that he could survive in the river, and a slick floating past. Then Dad comments that the water isn’t what it used to be. I’m making connections between the text and what I’ve seen and read about chemical pollution from factories near a stream in my area. When I connect these clues and my own experience, I can infer that the pollution has changed the river and the author wants me to understand the father’s concern.

The students make connections between the text and what they know about environmental changes to infer that pollution from the factory has had a serious impact on the river. They make further connections between the story and what they know about river pollution in New Zealand to hypothesise that this will have affected plants and animals that live in or near the river. The students integrate the clues and inferences they have made to identify the themes and evaluate how well the author has developed them.

The students skim the story, locating passages that give information about the river itself. They ask questions of the text and search for answers.

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Students skim the story, locating passages that give information about the relationship between Leo and his dad. They ask questions of the text and search for answers. The students integrate the information that is explicit and implicit in the text with their own feelings about change. They hypothesise that neither Leo nor Dad are happy about the changes in their lives, but that change can’t be reversed.

Social Sciences

Instructional focus – Reading

TEACHER SUPPORT MATERIAL FOR "THE RIVER", SCHOOL JOURNAL, LEVEL 3, APRIL 2013

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Assessment Resource Banks
Leo pushed his head under the rope railing and leaned over the edge of the barge. The tide was in, and the river was swollen, reaching up the bank through the reeds.

He had seen the seal then. She had floated past the barge on the current – head above water, wet and shiny. Big eyes, whiskers, snout like a dog. Lying a little on her back, biting into an eel, tearing at its flesh.

Then he slipped. It wasn’t a sudden fall into the water. It happened little by little. First his right foot got sucked down into the mud, and as he was trying to pull it out, his other foot got stuck. And then he just toppled in.

Now a surge of panic took over Leo’s body. He kicked out hard with his legs and clawed with his arms. The water churned, and he could hear his hands slapping the surface. He splashed harder, but he was no closer to the bank.

Now he was in the middle of the river and picking up speed.

“Why doesn’t she come back?” Leo asked. Then a pause. “Why can’t things be the same?” said Dad, ignoring the question.