

TEACHER EDUCATION EXPERT PANEL DISCUSSION PAPER

Primary English Teaching Association Australia (PETAA) Submission

PETAA is a national not-for-profit association representing primary teachers. The association provides research-based, practical publications and professional learning to support teachers to implement national English curriculum in the multitude of diverse settings in which they work. It is also engaged in advocacy on behalf of the profession and provides expert advice to curriculum and policy development. Its organisational reach of approx. 90,000 includes classroom teachers, system-based consultants, teacher educators and expert literacy researchers.

PETAA publications are used as compulsory textbooks and recommended readings in ITE in Australian universities. For example, PETAA's most popular publications include Beverly Derewianka's "A New Grammar Companion for Primary Teachers" (3 editions, > 45,000 copies), and Lorraine McDonald's "A New Literature Companion for Primary Teachers (3 editions, >7000 copies). The recently released open-access Literacy Resources Portal for Early Career Teachers is widely accessed by preservice teachers across Australia and elsewhere.

We write both as key members of PETAA and as teacher educators with considerable experience across a number of Initial Teacher Education programs and as such, are in a unique position to provide insights into the work of teacher education and the challenges facing providers. We have also engaged extensively in collaboration with new and experienced teachers in classroom-based research projects focused on improving students' literacy outcomes across primary and secondary settings. Hence, we are particularly well-versed in what is required of teachers to deliver effective literacy programs, and to implement English curriculum in its entirety.

We begin our submission with some observations about the context for Initial Teacher Education (ITE). It is important to recognise the limitations of current ITE delivery models. Teacher education is a popular choice for many university students, but it is not always accorded high status within institutions. ITE currently operates in a severely constrained budgetary environment so that programs are delivered by fewer experienced permanent academics, a heavily casualised workforce and with increasingly limited resources. Coupled with the move to online delivery modes that has prevailed in the post-COVID period, it is difficult to deliver the kinds of programs that support preservice teachers to (a) engage in exploration of their content areas with discipline experts, (b) undertake sustained examination of the craft of teaching, and (c) develop the personal reflexivity necessary to developing secure professional identities. In the absence of adequate support from their university experiences and employers, both novice and experienced teachers have turned elsewhere, particularly to professional associations such as PETAA.

We note that the discussion paper seeks responses to four reform areas. Here, we restrict our

response to Reform Area 1: Strengthen ITE programs to deliver effective, classroom ready graduates and evidence-based teaching. We now make several more specific points in response to matters raised in the discussion paper under Reform Area 1.

The nature of evidence The discussion paper takes a narrow view of what constitutes evidence. Meta-analyses such as that undertaken by AERO are problematic because of the general nature of the ideas that emerge – ideas that often lack specificity necessary for application to the reality of classrooms. It is also important to distinguish between the experimental, quantitative bias of such meta-analyses as opposed to qualitative research studies in naturalistic classroom settings. As Halliday (2007, p. 184) observed:

... what children do linguistically under experimental conditions is very little guide to what they are doing naturally, and it is necessary to back up the vast amount of experimental . . . studies of children’s language with . . . intensive observations.

A second problem of the over-reliance on meta-analyses is that the research literature in a complex area such as literacy is incomplete, and thus any such analyses are always partial and provisional. For example, while there is a significant body of quantitative research into certain aspects of early reading from a cognitive perspective, the picture with respect to oral language and writing development (including multimodal and digital literacies) is relatively diffuse. In short, the Discussion Paper does not provide a comprehensive picture of what literacy development looks like, including: the nature of the relationships among language modes and other modalities for meaning making, changes across the years of schooling, across different curriculum disciplines or for students from diverse linguistic and cultural communities (Weekes, 2022).

A further problem in the field of literacy arises because some skills are more readily assessed and therefore quantifiable. For example, it is generally understood that reading skills such as knowledge of the alphabetic principle or letter-sound correspondence are constrained (Paris, 2005; Paris & Luo, 2010) or limited in scope, usually acquired to ceiling level rapidly, and therefore readily measured. However, unconstrained reading skills which take longer to develop such as building vocabulary and the comprehension of more complex texts develop over a lifetime and are less readily measurable as they are more concerned with meaning-making – which is less amenable to quantitative measurement.

Because there is much research to support the importance of constrained skills to early reading, aspects of reading such as phonics are often overemphasised at the expense of other skills. Thomas (2022) and Wyse and Bradbury (2021) argue that the full complement of research findings has been overlooked in the branding and marketing of particular approaches to reading instruction (See also, Cox, 2023; Cox et al., 2019; Feez & Cox, 2017; Parkin, 2020). Care should be taken to ensure that ITE programs retain a robust conception of literacy and are not confined to the teaching of constrained skills, nor to reading (important as these aspects are).

Indeed, it is such unconstrained skills associated with subject specific literacies that has generated much recent literacy research (Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010; Matruglio, 2016; Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012). The demands for such literacy skills escalate as students move into upper primary and secondary settings and encounter the distinctive ways in which meanings are made in curriculum disciplines. As Castles et al. (2018) argue: “Specific attention should be given to reading and writing instruction as literacy is fundamental to success in all subjects and at all stages”.

Recommendation #1: That any proposed framework for ITE curriculum draw on the full range of evidence available, adopting the view of literacy as per the Australian curriculum (2023): “literacy involves students listening to, reading, viewing, speaking, writing and creating oral, print, visual and digital texts, and using and modifying language for different purposes in a range of contexts”.

Recommendation #2: That the changing nature of literacy demands be recognised, in particular, the complexity of language, image and technologies, and the increased specialisation of these to distinct subject areas across the years of schooling.

An appropriate model of learning We note that the Gradual Release of Responsibility model is foregrounded in the discussion paper with the suggestion that this model is applicable to single lessons. It is important to remember that more nuanced understandings of scaffolding processes have developed since Pearson's work in the 1970s and 1980s (for example, Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; McVee et al. 2019). Such understandings have led to models of scaffolding as longer stretches of instructional time in which teachers carefully select and sequence content and learning activities in ways that support learning that develops cumulatively over time. These sequences are initiated through teacher-directed explicit teaching of the target knowledge and skill (including literacy skills), followed by opportunities for guided practice leading to students developing the knowledge and skill to the extent that enables them to operate independently (Derewianka & Jones, 2023). Much of this work - known varyingly as 'scaffolded approaches to literacy', 'genre-based or Sydney school pedagogy' - was initially undertaken in Australia (Martin, 2009; Rothery, 1996) but has now spread internationally (Brisk, 2018; Schleppegrell, 2004), often in response to the needs of disadvantaged students such as those from minority backgrounds. Such text-based approaches recognise the centrality of language in learning, another core component of initial teacher education, and one that underpins the Australian Curriculum: English, but is absent in the discussion paper. These approaches are now used in different curricula and disciplinary settings in primary, secondary and tertiary contexts and have contributed to a number of successful teacher professional learning programs (Dare & Polias, 2022; Rose & Martin, 2012). Further evidence of these approaches' utility is evident in seminal and award-winning PETAA publications used in Australian ITE courses and in professional learning courses offered by PETAA (e.g., Derewianka 2020, Parkin & Harper, 2018, 2019; Humphrey & Vale, 2020; Harper & Feez, 2020).

Importantly, these approaches have been developed on the basis of deep knowledge of the language and literacy demands of the school learning areas – knowledge that has been developed collaboratively by classroom teachers and educational linguists over four decades in Australia, and more recently with international collaborators (see for example, the review in Schleppegrell & Christie, 2018). This knowledge has enabled the concurrent development of teaching and learning principles and a repertoire of teaching strategies to meet the needs of students across diverse educational settings, as illustrated in the PETAA publications listed above, as well as in Christie & Macken-Horarik, (2011); Derewianka & Jones (2023), Djonov, Torr, & Stenglin (2018), and Humphrey (2016).

Recommendation #3: That any proposed framework for ITE curriculum recognise the centrality of language in learning and acknowledge decades of classroom-based research, as well as recent developments, in principled, scaffolded and cumulative approaches to curriculum and pedagogy as appropriate to meeting the needs of all students, including those from EALD backgrounds.

The multidisciplinary nature of education The discussion paper emphasises brain science, particularly cognitive load theory. We recognise that the latter is an accessible theory but caution against any attempt to reduce education to brain activity alone. Shanahan (2020) argues that too often the findings of neuroscience and the cognitive sciences are used to make broad policy and pedagogic claims.

Education is informed by multiple disciplines including social psychology, linguistics, sociology, cultural and literary studies (Bernstein, 2000; Maton et al., 2016) – all of which are necessary to developing crucial teacher competencies such as content and curricula knowledge, pedagogic skills, understanding of learners, technological skills, interpersonal and communication skills, and a

commitment to continued professional growth and reflection (Shulman, 1986, 1987; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

Recommendation #4: That any proposal for core ITE curriculum recognise education as a multidisciplinary endeavour and ensure that preservice teachers encounter comprehensive programs necessary to develop the knowledge and skills for effective classroom teaching in different school communities.

The nature of teaching This latter point brings us to the matter of how teaching is represented in the discussion paper which undersells the complexity of the work and threatens to deskill practitioners. Specifically, it ignores the knowledge and skill, particularly in relation to language and literacy development, built up over decades by Australian teachers – knowledge and skill initiated in ITE programs, and subsequently, wherever possible, refined in classrooms and through in-service professional development such as that provided by PETAA.

There is a danger that teaching is reduced to a set of piecemeal, cherry-picked strategies that focus on short-term, superficial outcomes at the expense of learning that will support and sustain student success throughout the years of schooling and beyond. For this reason, we argue that teaching requires deep knowledge of content, pedagogy and context. Such knowledge underpins the design of teaching programs that support engaged, developmentally cumulative, culturally valued and meaningful learning over time – the type of learning that enhances educational opportunity for all students from all backgrounds.

In summary, teaching that is responsive to its setting is a complex task. The professional knowledge and achievement of teachers, and teacher educators, accumulated over decades, alongside the complexity of their work, deserves to be recognised in any recommendations for strengthening ITE programs.

Any proposal to renew ITE must also recognise that graduate teachers require time to develop deep content knowledge and pedagogic expertise. ITE programs simply do not provide sufficient time for preservice teachers to develop substantial content or pedagogic knowledge. As recognised in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL 2017), new teachers exit universities as apprentices who need support to develop their professional knowledge and skills further. They do so when immersed in schools and communities.

Recommendation #5: That any proposed core curriculum for ITE acknowledge the complex nature of teaching, and that expertise in content and pedagogy develops over time through classroom experience and sustained engagement in quality professional learning in dialogue with other teachers and experts in the field over time.

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