



## Preparing Australian teachers to teach Literacy

By Eileen Honan, University of Queensland

Universities are just beginning to welcome our students for the beginning of the academic year. For teacher educators this means beginning or continuing the processes of teaching Australia's pre-service teachers. This year once again there are more directives about the need for all pre-service teachers and indeed all teachers to know how to teach literacy.

Yet there remains a great deal of misinformation or ill-informed commentary about how we prepare teachers to teach reading and writing.

In all inquiries and reports into the teaching of reading in Australia and elsewhere in the last 15 years there has been overwhelming advice that a comprehensive approach to the teaching of reading should be undertaken. [Australia's 'National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy: Teaching Reading'](#) (DEST, 2005) recommended:

that teachers provide systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency. **Equally, that teachers provide an integrated approach to reading that supports the development of oral language, vocabulary, grammar, reading fluency, comprehension and the literacies of new technologies.**

While the evidence indicates that some teaching strategies are more effective than others, **no one approach of itself can address the complex nature of reading difficulties. An integrated approach requires that teachers have a thorough understanding of a range of effective strategies, as well as knowing when and why to apply them.**

Our teaching of pre-service literacy education is based on this approach. Of course we teach pre-service teachers how to teach students:

- phonological awareness through the reading and writing of meaningful text
- to engage with a variety of texts including those found in written, spoken, visual and digital forms
- to speak, write and design different kinds of texts for different learning and real world purposes
- to understand the grammatical structures of written, spoken, visual and digital language
- to infer and interpret alternative meanings in texts.

In addition, we encourage our pre-service teachers to engage in quality children's literature as a precursor to ensuring they can share this passion with their students. There is much evidence that wide reading of a range of literary texts is one of many important literacy activities for students' learning.

The old tired argument about 'whole language versus phonics' is outdated and just plain wrong. This argument is framed as a 'them versus us' battle, with some commentators claiming that [\*whole-language teaching approaches are considered modern, progressive and child-centred. Phonics, conversely, is framed as old-fashioned, reactionary and teacher-centred.\*](#)

Instead of engaging in these tired arguments, we spend our time teaching our pre-service teachers about what is required to teach a range of students using a range of strategies that will work in today's complex and demanding world. We teach our pre-service teachers about critical literacy, the use of new technologies in literacy classrooms, the importance of grammar and literature, the importance of teachers doing classroom based research, multiple literacies and multimodality.

Our pre-service teachers must be able to cope with a diverse range of abilities and experiences. Imagine this classroom of six year olds:

- Some are skilled in using touch pad technologies and have their own iPads
- Some have never read a traditional fairy tale, but can recount who is winning on 'The Block' or 'MKR'
- Some have been read to every night since they were in the womb, have their own bedroom libraries, and bring new books to school regularly to share
- Some are newly arrived in Australia, having experienced great trauma before arriving. English is not a language they or their families speak, read or write and literacy competencies in their own languages extends to oracy only.

It is our job to provide our pre-service teachers with the skills, knowledge and understanding to develop lessons that help all these children learn to read. This is not simple, and cannot be achieved through a 'magic bullet' approach.

Some people think that a one-size-fits-all quick fix exists. Many of these people base their arguments on the importance of "synthetic phonics". These programs tend to take a generalised view where one approach can be used for all students in all schools. The issues related to catering for a wide range of student abilities in one class are often glossed over by those who have never worked as trained teachers. We try to provide teachers with the ability to respond to the wide range of abilities in classrooms, rather than unwittingly grab the next program off the shelf that promises to be a quick solution.

Sometimes there is confusion between "synthetic phonics" and the explicit teaching of phonics or phonics instruction. For a considered overview of phonics instruction in Australian schools refer to ALEA Hot Topic [\*"Phonics its place in the literacy story"\*](#).

While we teach our pre-service teachers the elements of 'systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction', we refuse to endorse, promote or market commercial programs. Unfortunately many advocates of 'synthetic phonics' are also advocates of particular programs that are sold to schools, teachers, and parents.

For example, [\*Dr Norman Swan often reports on problems with current approaches to literacy education in his health report forum on the ABC.\*](#) Yet he does not acknowledge that he also endorses programs such as [\*Phonica\*](#)

[In a recent Conversation piece, Alison Clarke advocated using synthetic phonics.](#) Readers may not be aware that she develops and sells materials to teachers and parents to support this approach [spelfabet.com.au](http://spelfabet.com.au)

While preservice teacher education programs encourage teachers to develop strategies for explicit instruction, we do not believe that commercial programs (such as [Multilit](#) or [Synthetic Phonics Program](#) or those promoted here [wiringbrains.com](http://wiringbrains.com)) are the quick fix answer for all students as suggested.

Above all, we strive to provide our preservice teachers with strategies based on “findings from rigorous, evidence-based research that are shown to be effective in enhancing the literacy development of all children” (DEST, 2005)

We do this not only because we ourselves are passionately committed to high quality research, but because government accreditation processes demand it of us. We are governed by two formal accreditation processes. The first is that provided by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). [The most recent higher education standards framework](#) says that content needs to be based on:

- a. current knowledge and scholarship in relevant academic disciplines
- b. study of the underlying theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the academic disciplines or fields of education or research represented in the course, and
- c. emerging concepts that are informed by recent scholarship, current research findings and, where applicable, advances in practice.

Put simply, if we as teacher educators attempted to push our own ideological barrow, or sell our own ideas packaged in a commercial program through our courses, those courses would not be accredited.

The second process is the accreditation of initial teacher education programs through AITSL (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership). AITSL’s mission statement insists on evidence based practice. *Efforts to improve teaching and school leadership are most effective when they are based on strong evidence.* (AITSL, 2011)

The preamble to the standards says that:

*These Standards and Procedures reflect high expectations of initial teacher education. The stakeholders are united in their belief that the teaching profession and the Australian community deserve nothing less. There is an expectation that those entering teaching will be a diverse group of highly literate and numerate individuals with a professional platform from which to develop as high quality teachers.*

As stakeholders in initial teacher education preparing literacy teachers, we are committed to these high expectations, and we believe that we already engage with “diverse groups of highly literate individuals”. We are committed to preparing this diverse group to deliver high quality intellectually rigorous literacy instruction that reflects the literacy demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## References

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. (2011). [Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education Programs in Australia](#). Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership

Department of Education Science and Training. (2005). [Teaching Reading: Report of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy](#). Canberra, ACT.

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