ALEA Research Project 2015–2016

Surveying the field: Primary school teachers’ conceptions of the literacy capabilities of recently graduated primary school teachers

(To be published in “Practical Literacy: the early and primary years” June 2016)

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Introduction

In 2015, ALEA National Council provided funds to support the implementation of a research project which was undertaken by a group of teacher educators and researchers from a range of universities across three Australian states. Stage one of the project, which is reported on here, examined primary school teachers’ perceptions of the personal and professional literacy capabilities of recently graduated primary school teachers. This stage of the project also examined primary school teachers’ perceptions of the impact of initial teacher education on the personal and professional literacy capabilities of recently graduated primary school teachers. The project team, led by Associate Professor Beryl Exley (Queensland University of Technology), included Chief Investigators Dr Eileen Honan (The University of Queensland), Associate Professor Lisa Kervin (University of Wollongong), Associate Professor Alyson Simpson (University of Sydney) and Dr Muriel Wells (Deakin University), with Dr Sandy Muspratt as the Statistical Analyst and Lesley Friend as the Research Assistant with primary responsibility for the publication of the online survey.

The project was motivated by the public debate about the literacy standards expected of recently graduated primary school teachers. This debate has been driven by the introduction of the National Program Standards published by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (hereafter AITSL) as the ‘Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education Programs in Australia: Standards and Procedures’ (AITSL, 2011). Program Standard 3.1 states that those applying to enter initial teacher education programs should demonstrate personal literacy and numeracy skills that are ‘broadly equivalent to those in the top 30 per cent of the population’ (AITSL, 2011, p. 13). Entrants into initial teacher education who do not meet Standard 3.1, must, according to Standard 3.2, ‘achieve the required standard before graduation’ (AITSL, 2011, p. 13). These standards have brought about renewed interest and professional debate across a range of forums. One such report, written by Cherednichenko and McCandless on behalf of the Australian Council of Deans of Education (hereafter ACDE), commented specifically on National Program Standards 3.1 and 3.2, noting ‘the link between literacy, verbal ability and subsequent performance of teachers, while generally assumed, is very difficult to establish’ (ACDE, 2012, p. 14). A survey developed by Cherednichenko and McCandless was circulated to all Australian Higher Education Providers (hereafter HEPs) offering initial teacher education programs. Data collected from the 39 participating HEPs indicated a total of 16 disparate practices were instituted in varying degrees across the programs on offer which allowed preservice teachers to demonstrate their attainment of the literacy skills implied in these standards (ACDE, 2012, p. 12). Despite the ACDE report (2012) findings, the a joint media statement released by Garrett and Bowen (2013, para. 11) identified one part of a four part plan as ‘a new literacy and numeracy test, building on the National Plan for School Improvement, that each teaching student will have to pass before they can graduate’. As documented
in the Office of Learning and Teaching (hereafter OLT) National Teaching Fellowship Report authored by Lloyd (2013), confusion arose as various pronouncements declared the literacy and numeracy test for teachers would either be part of (i) entry requirements, (ii) coursework requirements, (iii) graduation requirements or (iv) preregistration requirements. At the time of commencing this research project, this point of confusion remained unresolved.

Notably absent in these debates were the voices and opinions of those working in the field, in particular the voices of (i) recently graduated primary school teachers and (ii) experienced primary school teachers who individually and together have amassed significant insider knowledge through directly mentoring, supervising and/or working alongside graduate primary school teachers for years, if not decades. Drawing on Kleinhenz and Ingvarson’s (2004) earlier research work into teacher evaluation, teacher quality and facilitating improvement in teachers’ work, the silencing of these ‘core’ voices and the privileging of the ‘administrative superstructure’ brings an inherent danger of ‘superficiality and disconnectedness that characterize many ‘bureaucratically’ conceived and executed evaluation schemes’ (p. 32). It is on this basis that ALEA, a recognised leader in the field of English Curriculum and Literacy Teaching and Learning, committed to supporting this research study that drew on the deep well of knowledge of graduate and experienced primary school teachers.

**Survey Construction**

For this first phase of the study, a survey for experienced primary school teachers was constructed, using items developed from a comprehensive review of nearly 100 pieces of literature, including national research into Australian teacher education (for example, AITSL, 2013), Australian research into professional standards in English language and literacy teaching (for example, ALEA, 2006), Australian recommendations into initial teacher education (for example, Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014), international research into teacher education (for example, Ingvarson, et al., 2014), published research articles in journals of repute (for example, Cochran-Smith, et al., 2012), parliamentary speeches (for example, Pyne, 2012), chapters in edited collections about English language arts methods courses (for example, Brass & Webb, 2015) and the preparation of literacy teacher educators (for example, Kosnik, et al., 2013) as well as grabs from mainstream print and online Australian media sources (for example, Ferrari, 2013). From this scoping and scanning exercise, we theorised that four interrelated dimensions contributed to the capabilities of graduate teachers’ personal and professional literacies (see Honan, 2015):

- Dimension 1—Graduate teachers’ personal literacy capabilities
- Dimension 2—Graduate teachers’ content knowledge of English and literacy
- Dimension 3—Graduate teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge
- Dimension 4—The impact of initial teacher education.

The research team then identified key statements contained within the reviewed literature to inform the construction of survey items, nine for Dimension 1—‘Graduate teachers’ personal literacy capabilities’, 15 for Dimension 2—Graduate teachers’ content knowledge of English and literacy’, 12 for Dimension 3—‘Graduate teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge’, and 11 for Dimension 4—‘The impact of initial teacher education’. Most of the questions asked teachers to respond on a six-point Likert scale. Each of the end points of the scales were anchored with verbal descriptors, in this case ‘Strongly Disagree’ and ‘Strongly Agree’, but there were no descriptors attached to the other points. We take the first three points on the scale as an indication of ‘disagreement’, and the latter three points as an indication of ‘agreement’.

ALEA distributed the initial call for survey participants through emails to individual and institutional ALEA members, reminders via ALEA Today and local council and State Director emails, and flyers
and announcements at ALEA Local Council Professional Learning events. ALEA members were also asked to share the survey with non-ALEA members who identified as current or previously employed primary school teachers. Survey responses were collected from a total of 557 participants, although it should be noted that not all participants completed all survey items. In this article, we provide some initial findings from the descriptive analysis of the survey data. More complex and in-depth analyses of the data are being carried out and will be reported on in future publications.

**Descriptive Analysis of Survey Data**

The majority (94%) of those who responded to the survey were female. Most of the respondents were experienced teachers, with nearly half (46%) with more than 20 years of teaching experience, and almost another quarter (24%) with 11 to 20 years of teaching experience. Recent graduates were also represented in the sample with approximately one-sixth (14%) of respondents within their first three years of teaching. A majority (88.8%) of respondents reported that they have worked with graduate teachers or were a graduate teacher in the last three years.

At the outset, an overwhelming majority (94%) of respondents indicated that they agreed that a ‘graduate teacher’s personal literacies should be equivalent to those of the top 30 percent of the population’. This finding indicates widespread support of the mantra underpinning the National Program Standards published as the ‘Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education Programs in Australia: Standards and Procedures’ (AITSL, 2011). However, smaller percentages agreed with items concerned with the assessment of graduate teachers’ literacy capabilities. Slightly more than two-thirds (68%) of respondents indicated agreement with the survey item that ‘graduate teachers’ literacies capabilities could be assessed using a portfolio of work samples’. Slightly more than one half (55%) of respondents agreed that ‘graduate teachers’ literacies capabilities could be assessed using an on-line test’.

In survey items that focused on graduate teachers’ teaching practices, slightly more than one half of the respondents (57%) agreed with the summative statement ‘overall graduate teachers are effective literacy teachers’. Almost two-thirds (64%) of respondents agreed that ‘generally, graduate teachers know how to provide an integrated approach to reading that supports the development of oral language, vocabulary, grammar, reading fluency and comprehension’. However, this margin of confidence fades when the survey items turned to ‘know how’ questions about instructional strategies and assessment. Just over half (54%) of the respondents also agreed that ‘generally, graduate teachers have an in-depth knowledge of a range of instructional strategies that can be used to meet student literacy needs’. Nearly half (48%) of the respondents agreed that ‘generally, graduate teachers know how to interpret the results of standardised assessment tools that measure student achievement in English’. Nearly half (47%) of respondents agreed that ‘generally, graduate teachers know how to design their own assessment tools to measure student achievement in English’. Given the centrality of methods of instruction and assessment to a primary school teacher’s content knowledge of English and literacy and to redressing equity issues in institutionalised schooling, the findings reported by this particular group of respondents warrant further investigation.

The margin of confidence in relation to the overall effectiveness of graduate primary school teachers and their know how of an integrated approach sharply declined when the survey items turned to statements about complex reading difficulties and teaching English as Additional Language students. More specifically, less than a third (29%) of respondents agreed that ‘generally, graduate teachers know how to address the complex nature of reading difficulties’. Again, less than a third (29%) of respondents agreed that ‘generally, graduate teachers know how to teach students who speak different and recognised varieties or dialects of Australian-English’. These findings from this sample
of respondents suggest two points, one related to inconsistencies of graduate teachers’ performances, and the second related to a strong doubt about some aspects of graduate teachers’ work in the classroom. Distilling these items from the more general items noted above is instructive for those who seek to advance teacher education outcomes (including those on this research team), those accrediting teacher education courses and those planning mentoring programs for the professional development of graduate teachers.

We are not making generalised claims about teachers’ perceptions of the literacy capabilities of recently graduated primary school teachers from our initial survey of primary school teachers’ perceptions. Nevertheless, our findings as they relate to this particular sample of respondents give cause for consideration on a number of fronts. The research team will continue to analyse the data collected during stage one, further isolating demographic splits, and considering our findings in relation to the findings of other research studies. The second stage of the research project will use the findings from stage one to construct a new survey for first year and final year Four Year Bachelor of Education Primary preservice teachers. In this latter stage, we are interested in comparing the perceptions of first year and fourth year preservice teachers. Findings for this work will be shared in a later edition of ‘Practical Literacy: the early and primary years’ and circulated to ALEA individual and institutional members via ALEA Today email notifications and on the ALEA website.

References


**Biographies:**

**Beryl Exley** is an Associate Professor within the Faculty of Education at the Queensland University of Technology. She served as ALEA Queensland State Director for eight years and since 2013 has been appointed as the ALEA Publications Director. Her most recent academic publications are available on http://eprints.qut.edu.au/view/person/Exley_Beryl.html. Email: b.exley@qut.edu.au.

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