Introduction
In 2015–2016, ALEA National Council funded a research project on graduate and preservice teachers’ literacy capabilities. The impetus for the project was the public and professional debate about the literacy standards expected of recently graduated primary school teachers, including the introduction of the National Program Standards 3.1 and 3.2 by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2011).

- Program Standard 3.1: Providers describe and publish the rationale for their approach to program entry, the selection mechanisms used, threshold entry scores applied and any exemptions used.
- Program Standard 3.2: Providers apply selection criteria for all entrants, which incorporate both academic and non-academic components that are consistent with engagement with a rigorous higher education program, the requirements of the particular program and subsequent success in professional teaching practice.

Review of Stage 1 of the Project

A descriptive account of Stage 1 of the project, ‘Surveying the field: Primary school teachers’ conceptions of the literacy capabilities of recently graduated primary school teachers’ was published as Exley, Honan, Kervin, Simpson, Wells and Muspratt (2016) and is available on https://www.alea.edu.au/documents/item/1413 (see QR code above). In summary, 557 recently graduated or experienced primary school teachers participated in the online survey. They provided commentary on their perspectives of graduate teachers’:

- personal literacy capabilities,
- content knowledge for teaching literacy,
- pedagogical content knowledge for teaching literacy,
- their perspectives of the impact of modes of delivery in initial teacher education,
- stages for assessing a graduate teacher’s literacy capabilities, and
- the qualifications and experiences of teacher educators.

Just over half the respondents (57%) agreed with the 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’. Another finding of the Stage 1 survey was that less than a third (29%) of respondents agreed that ‘generally, graduate teachers know how to address the complex nature of reading difficulties’ and that ‘generally, graduate teachers know how to teach students who speak different and recognised varieties or dialects of Australian-English’. These findings point to the respondents’ observations of varying consistencies in the knowledges and skills of graduate primary school teachers.

Responding to the Descriptive Findings of Stage 1 of the Project

After the research team released the descriptive findings of the Stage 1 survey, Beryl was contacted by a journalist from a State-based newspaper, who wanted to run an article highlighting the deficit knowledge base of graduate primary school teachers. Following Snyder’s (2008) documentation of media misinformation and public attack, and Alhamdan, et al.’s (2014) more recent analysis of Australian media representations of teachers, we don’t make light of the urgent need to talk back to this interpretation of data. First, we give public recognition to the complex roles required of an effective teacher of literacy. Second, following Darling-Hammond (2006), we view professional learning as something other than a static knowledge base, and something that is not complete at the end of the credentialled initial teacher education program. Ongoing professional learning is central to what it means to be a twenty-first-century teacher.

A more instructive reading of the data is the ongoing need for highly effective professional development for recent graduate teachers. Our framing of this discussion recognises that teachers’
professional learning is in a state of flux as student populations continue to diversify, changes in the means of communication create new literacy practices (Kervin & Mantei, 2016), more intelligent systems of data collection and analysis give rise to enhanced understandings about students’ learning needs (Faogali & Honan, 2015) and instructional methods continue to evolve (Nicholas, McKenzie & Wells, 2017; Simpson, 2016). Research has long pointed to the value of a collaborative school-wide approach to teachers’ professional learning that is intensive, ongoing, situated in practice (van Leent & Exley, 2013), connected to other school initiatives, framed by productive working relationships with teacher colleagues and supported by the education system (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009).

Stage 2 of the Project

Stage 2 of the project was similar to Stage 1, but this time focused on the first year and final year undergraduate preservice primary school teachers’ perceptions and experiences of:
• their personal literacy capabilities – 11 survey items;
• their content knowledge for English curriculum and literacy teaching – 15 survey items;
• their pedagogical content knowledge for English curriculum and literacy teaching – 10 survey items; and
• the impact of the initial teacher education program on their literacy capabilities – 9 survey items.

Most of the questions asked participants 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’. We take the first three points on the scale as an indication of ‘disagreement’, and the latter three points as an indication of ‘agreement’.

The project Senior Research Assistant distributed the initial call for preservice survey participants through emails to the Dean or the Head of School for 37 higher education providers that offer accredited undergraduate courses in initial teacher education for primary preservice teachers. Nineteen higher education providers returned a positive response and a total of 274 survey responses were recorded. The survey was hosted by Key Survey and we did not collect data about a preservice teacher’s home institution. We did, however, collect data about which state the participants were from: Queensland (41.2%); Victoria (22.3%); New South Wales (21.9%); Tasmania (8.8%); Western Australia (2.2%); South Australia (2.2%); Australian Capital Territory (0.7%) and Northern Territory (0.4%).

The participants also identified their location as being capital city (52.6 %), regional city (42.3 %) or a rural centre (5.1 %). We report findings collected from 156 participants who identify as being in the first year of their four-year undergraduate initial teacher education program and 118 participants who identify as being in the final year of their four-year undergraduate initial teacher education program.

Descriptive analysis of survey data

Dimension 1: ‘Preservice teachers’ personal literacy capabilities’

The majority of first year (95%) and final year (98%) preservice teachers perceived that their personal literacies were equivalent to those in the top 30 percent of the population. A little over three-quarters of the first year (77%) and final year (78%) preservice teachers indicated agreement that preservice teachers should have to pass a personal literacy assessment before being awarded teacher registration. In terms of how this assessment could be undertaken, preservice teachers indicated agreement that an online test would be best, compared to a portfolio of work samples. First year preservice teachers recorded an 84% preference for online testing compared to 69% and final year preservice teachers recorded an 81% preference compared to 57%.

Taken together, these responses indicate widespread support from the survey participants for the preservice teacher online literacy test.

One set of responses that warrants further investigation is that less than three-quarters of the first year (70%) and final year (69%) preservice teachers indicated agreement that an assessment of personal literacies includes capabilities for print and digital texts. Given the ubiquity of digital texts in the lives of children (Honan, 2012), their circulation across modes and media in the twenty-first century (Kervin, 2016), and the centrality of these new literacies to the Australian Curriculum: English (Mills & Exley, 2014), these responses were less than unexpected.

Dimension 2: ‘Preservice teachers’ content knowledge of English and literacy’

More than three-quarters of the final year preservice participants indicated agreement with statements about their in-depth knowledge of the grammatical structures of English language (88%), State curriculum documents (88%), critical approaches to the teaching of English (85%), phonics (including phonemic awareness and phonological knowledge) (85%), children’s literature (84%), connections between oral language and reading and writing (83%), how to interpret the results of standardised assessment tools that measure student achievement in English (77%) and the literacies required to
engage with digital texts (77%). These results stand in contrast to earlier reports that highlight concerns about the knowledge bases of Australian preservice teachers’ content knowledge for teaching grammar (Harper & Rennie, 2009) and metalinguistics (Fielding-Barnsley & Purdie, 2005).

This margin of confidence fades when attention turns to assessment and knowledge of developmental stages of literacy and language learning. Just over a half of the final year preservice participants indicated agreement with statements about their in-depth knowledge of a range of assessment approaches for measuring student achievement in English (56%) and the developmental stages of literacy and language learning (56%).

**Dimension 3: ‘Preservice teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge’**

In terms of Dimension 3—‘Preservice teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge’, more than three-quarters of the Final Year preservice participants indicated agreement with statements about their pedagogical content knowledge to provide students with opportunities to be creative in literacy lessons (84%), provide an integrated approach to reading that supports the development of oral language, vocabulary, grammar, reading, fluency and comprehension (83%), provide systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction (83%), a range of instructional strategies that can be used to meet student literacy needs (79%) and to teach students who speak different and recognised varieties or dialects of Australian English (77%). In contrast, this margin of confidence fades when attention turns to implementing explicit and direct teaching strategies (66%), integrating the teaching of literacy across curriculum areas (63%) and addressing the complex nature of reading difficulties (60%).

These findings from this sample of respondents raise two points of discussion. The first point relates to inconsistencies between the responses of final year preservice teachers (Stage 2 survey) and responses of graduate and experienced teachers (Stage 1 survey) who provided perceptions of the knowledges and skills of recently graduated primary school teachers. The survey responses provided by the final year preservice teachers suggest an idealism about their capacity to address the complex nature of reading difficulties (60%) compared to the survey responses of graduate and experienced teachers who provided commentary on the experience of early career teachers (29%) for the same item.

We are not making generalised claims about the knowledges and skills of preservice primary teachers; our data set does not allow us to do so. Nevertheless, our findings as they relate to this particular sample of respondents give cause for consideration to:

- the crowded curriculum in initial teacher education; and
- the transition arrangements of new teachers, in particular the ongoing professional learning needs of early career teachers and the interrelated role of employing authorities, teacher mentors, teaching peers and teacher educators.

As Crosswell and Beutel (2013, p. 145) note, for many early career teachers in Australia, the transition from initial teacher education to a full-time classroom role can ‘best be described as merely the closing of one door as graduates leave their university teacher preparation programs and the opening of another door when graduates take up positions as beginning teachers’. We don’t think this situation is desirable if one considers being a highly knowledgeable and skilled teacher of literacy as a long life learning pursuit.

**References**

AISTL. (2011). Accreditation of initial teacher education programs in Australia: Standards and procedures. Canberra: AISTL.


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