

# Submission to Literacy Advisory Panel Community Consultation

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The University of Tasmania and the School of Education are committed to improving educational attainment in Tasmania. Our strategic direction is focussed on this commitment. This is especially pertinent to the Literacy Advisory Panel's inquiries as graduates of our Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses form a large component of the Tasmanian teaching workforce.

In what follows, I address a number of aspects relevant to the Panel's inquiries:

1. Quality of ITE entrants
2. Literacy/English components of our ITE courses
3. Literacy and Policy
4. Finding a Way Forward

## 1. Quality of ITE entrants

1. The current ATAR requirement for entry into the UG Bachelor of Education (Primary) is 65 and evidence of a completed UG degree for the MTeach, in line with the majority of mainland universities. The University of Tasmania offers a range of pathways that form an alternative to ATAR entry:
  - a. RPL (recognized prior learning). This includes the awarding of credit (advanced standing) for students who are transferring between courses and/or institutions. It is of particular interest in relation to industry or TAFE experience for students entering the Bachelor of Education (Adult and Applied Learning) which prepares educators for the VET and TAFE sector.
  - b. Associate Degree into the BEd (Primary) via completion of the associate degree
  - c. Schools Recommend Program
2. As educators, our focus is less on the raw materials and more on the quality of graduates:
  - a. Incoming students sit an entry literacy/numeracy test
  - b. Incoming students complete NACAT – non-academic skills screening also required
  - c. Federal mandate that all students successfully complete LANTITE prior to graduation
  - d. Within the School of Education, we judge quality by their demonstration of meeting the APST, the ILOs of the courses, successful completion of placement experience at each level and finally, successful completion of the GTPA. This is an extremely comprehensive portfolio collected and implemented during the final placement that demonstrates each student's ability to collect and analyze relevant student data across a range of key areas and tailor effective learning in response.

## 2. Literacy/English components of UTAS ITE courses

1. As an accredited ITE course we must ensure that our graduates meet all the standards and that these achievements meet the requirements of state level registration authorities. In Tasmania, this authority is the Teacher Registration Board (TRB). Courses are constantly in a process of review and accreditation. In terms of our expertise around early literacy and early reading, we are committed to a *balanced approach to literacy learning* that includes strong skills around synthetic phonics, but has a broader focus on oral language, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension – what are called ‘the big 5’. Our focus is equipping graduates with sound theoretical knowledge and a set of effective approaches. As Melanie Ralph, a teacher, argues here - <https://melanieralph.com/2022/01/18/direct-instruction-alone-is-not-enough-why-teachers-need-more-than-one-tool-in-their-toolkit/>, “teachers need more than one tool in their toolkit”. A single, decontextualized approach is not appropriate for dynamic and ever-changing classrooms and learners.
2. There are discrete literacy units across the MTeach and BEd (PUC has prepared a thorough description of the program) that teach curriculum content as well as skills of evaluation of students and reading programs.
3. A commitment to ensuring that ‘all teachers as teachers of literacy’ is woven across the secondary MTeach program so that secondary graduates have the skills to identify and support literacy issues.
4. We also invite speech pathologists and other experts to engage with ITES around how to support students with learning difficulties - (Inclusive Practices in Educational Settings).
5. We employ practicing classroom teachers to tutor in our Literacy/English units providing current classroom contexts and issues
6. ITE is a partnership between the university and participating placement schools and supervising classroom teachers. It is important therefore that university and school sector provide consistent and parallel advice and support to student teachers. To achieve this, stronger mentor training, clear guidance and quality professional development are required.
7. For ITES who may be struggling with their own literacy skills, we offer a range of supports within the programs and of course, we encourage a lot of talk (oral language is key), opportunities to read and engage with a range of texts, remedial support for learning difficulties.

#### Going forward:

- a. We will continue to work with the education sector in Tasmania to ensure our graduates meet the particular needs of Tasmania - which is why we are shifting our research and curriculum development focus and building new courses
- b. We have employed a new early years professor and a new early years lecturer - both come with expertise in early literacy
- c. We are working to develop the Associate Degree to offer an early literacy/reading pathway
- d. We are building a new proficiency model where ITES can select to do additional units on an area they wish to specialise in - one of them will be early reading and early literacy
- e. We are fully committed to working with the DoE to develop and deliver appropriate advanced study and professional development

### 3. Literacy and policy

Reading and literacy debates often reflect other, deeper issues. In Australia we have a highly differentiated, market-driven education economy. Disregarding all International research and evidence to the contrary, a series of Australian federal and state governments have held to the belief that a competitive educational marketplace will lead to excellence. Government funding for non-government schools has increased by more than 6 times in the last decade; private school fees have trebled since 2000. Parents in disadvantaged areas, with lower incomes and less historic engagement with education, are

forced by circumstance to send their children to government schools characterised by a concentration of disadvantaged students, often accompanied by other intersecting factors such as remoteness or being hard to staff. Sitting alongside the increasing gap between affluent and not in Australia, an educational gap is ever wider. It impacts NAPLAN, PISA and the everyday educational experiences of the children in our schools including literacy teaching and achievement.

This inequity has been identified by both the [OECD](#) (2018) and [UNICEF](#) (2018) as a key weakness in Australian schooling.

#### Policy focus on phonics

Learning to be literate, including learning to read is a highly complex cognitive, physical and culturally mediated process. It is made more complex when we acknowledge that issues such as social, language and linguistic difference are taken into account. Australia appears to be on the brink of following the UK into its highly politicized policy mandates around discrete and context-free phonics teaching. In the Australian context, much of this is being driven by lobby groups and individuals outside the field of education. *Educational* researchers into literacy do not, in the main, support the use of decontextualised interventions, but unfortunately policy development doesn't differentiate between research fields and links to educational research and practice. When educators and educational researchers say that reading is a complex issue, politicians often turn to those who offer quick fixes.

A crucial, but not often noted, aspect of this move to bring research and programs from other disciplines into classrooms is the ethical dilemma. How do we ethically move research from one field to another? There is currently no agreed ethical framework around the ways in which different fields doing research using different epistemological and methodological approaches, e.g. cognitive psychologists doing research on reading, can be transferred between disciplines. One consequence for education is the flourishing of reading and decoding programs developed in fields outside education with the assumption that they can be unproblematically used with all children in all classrooms. There is, however, very little research that evidences that higher level decoding skills translate into successful reading or that interventions to focus on decoding skills work in actual, deeply complex classroom contexts, or that they can be scaled appropriately. The intersection of a lack of research-transfer ethical frameworks and the priorities of the political cycle makes this problematic. It allows single issue knowledge brokers and private consultants, no matter how well-meaning, are selling commercial schemes into the school system filling a gap that they are creating – a gap that is then magnified in policy platforms for political advantage.

#### **4. Finding a way forward**

1. Moving quasi-experimental and experimental designs out of controlled environments and into complex classroom contexts

Here, I draw on the work of Sue Ellis and Gemma Moss (2013). Writing in the UK against a backdrop of mandated phonics instruction, they press for a research agenda that acknowledges the differing experiences and knowledge of teachers and students, what effective phonics teaching in real classrooms looks like, what the optimum balance of different approaches to reading instruction looks like in diverse classrooms.

They also call for a stronger ethical framework to guide the transfer of research from one field to another:

To get from an experimental stage to a solution that works in practice, the original MRC model (MRC (Medical Research Council), 2000, 2008) detailed five phases of investigation: (1) a theoretical phase; (2) a modelling phase; (3) a development, exploratory or adaptive trial(s)

phase; (4) an RCT; and (5) a long-term evaluation phase focusing on the effectiveness of the intervention in real-life settings, including understanding the processes involved, how they can be optimized and assessing and improving their cost- or time-effectiveness where possible. This model was later modified (MRC, 2008) to make the cycle to research less linear, provide better support for the development, implementation and evaluation phases, make it less dependent on clinical models and more applicable to highly complex contexts where several programmes may interact. In the modified framework it is very clear that researchers are expected to distinguish between impacts they have established in their research and what can properly be extrapolated as evidence of the practical effectiveness of their research in everyday interaction. They are asked to consider very carefully: whether the intervention works in everyday practice in which case it is important to understand the whole range of effects, how they vary among recipients of the intervention, between sites, over time, etc, and the causes of that variation. (MRC, 2008, p. 7). This provides an unambiguous steer for researchers and research-users to weigh the nature and breadth of the evidence they have in front of them alongside the knowledge generated through implementation, so they may better judge how it might be useful, to whom, and in what circumstances (p. 253-354).

They call for a model that requires that researchers to evidence the efficacy of outcomes identified in experimental models created in controlled spaces in highly complex and dynamic sites. This, in turn, requires active collaboration and conversation between researchers from other fields and educational researchers and classroom practitioners. We all need to talk more.

## 2. Workforce Management

In terms of teacher quality and educational disadvantage, Australia has particularly poor management of its teaching workforce. The 2018 OECD report *Effective Teacher Policies* makes a strong link between the management of workforce and school outcomes. While a number of countries have created workforce management strategies that deliberately locate their most experienced and highest performing teachers in the most disadvantaged schools Australia continues to send our most experienced and highest performing teachers to our most advantaged schools. The positive impact of this type of workforce planning has been demonstrated elsewhere, it continues to be ignored in Australia. This holds true for working with children and adults to become literate.

## 3. Embracing digital

To be literate in 2022 is not what it was in 1922 or even 1982. To be literate is to have the skills and knowledge to be able to create and consume important texts. In our current timeline, digital texts are culturally significant. To be able to apply for employment via online portals, to access news, to socialize with friends and family located elsewhere requires skills with digital texts and technologies. This is as key a form of literacy as writing on a paper form. Each requires the ability to read various forms of text and to produce texts that go out into the world and do work on your behalf. As Tasmania considers what a community-wide approach to literacy would look like, it must – in my view – embrace all meaningful forms of text and ensure that all citizens have the access and capacity to use the entire repertoire in order to do things that matter in their particular world.

## 4. The importance of Early Years Education

Australia has tended to treat early years as day care for working mothers. It is expensive, vacancies are scarce, the workforce is paid poorly. If Tasmania wishes to shift the dial on literacy across the community it must leverage the power of high-quality early learning, ensure that the workforce is well-trained and well-paid. It must also make it accessible to all, particularly those who come from generations of

educational disadvantage. The research on the social and economic benefits of early learning is clear. If there is one piece to focus on from this review, it is the need for access and quality in early learning for all Tasmanian families.

## References

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