
Graduate teachers are short-changed on evidence-based reading instruction

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A recent review of literacy units in initial teacher education degrees adds to the evidence from inquiries, reviews and surveys that many graduate teachers are not adequately prepared to teach reading.

Children begin school with a wide range of literacy skills. Some have a solid grasp of the fundamental knowledge and skills required for reading – good phonemic awareness, an understanding of the alphabetic principle, and strong oral language. Others have rarely held a book, do not know any letters, and have a limited vocabulary. Many children come from non-English speaking homes. A small but important proportion of children have a cognitive difference such as dyslexia that will make learning to read very difficult.

Primary school teachers need to know how to cater for all of these children to ensure they learn to read. Teaching children to read is the most important educational responsibility of primary schools. It is essential that reading instruction and intervention are based on the most rigorous evidence of how children acquire the ability to read, and the most effective methods to teach them.

Fortunately, a great deal is known about effective instruction for beginning readers. Studies of reading over the past several decades have identified and repeatedly confirmed that reading development occurs most successfully when instruction includes ‘five big ideas’ – phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension – taught explicitly and systematically.

It is also widely acknowledged among scientific reading researchers that the conceptual model called the ‘[Simple View of Reading](#)’ is the most accurate predictive model of reading development known to date. The Simple View of Reading states that at the broadest conceptual level reading comprehension is the product of two factors: word identification and language comprehension. These two factors are described in the model using simple terms, but each represents a cluster of complex knowledge and skills. If a child is struggling with either of the two factors, they will have poor reading comprehension. Determining which is the major cause of the difficulty (sometimes it is both) can help determine the type of intervention required. The Simple View of Reading has been [investigated](#) and [validated](#) in dozens of studies involving thousands of children in multiple countries.

It is reasonable therefore to expect that all initial teacher education (ITE) degrees for primary teaching include these core elements of the research literature on reading instruction in their curricula. [A recent review](#) of compulsory literacy units in undergraduate ITE courses around Australia suggests that this is not the case.

The review looked at the published content outlines of 116 literacy units in 66 ITE degrees in 38 universities. It found that:

- Only five (4%) of the 116 literacy units reviewed had a specific focus on early reading instruction or early literacy; that is, how to teach beginning

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readers in the first few years of school. In a further 30 (26%) of the unit outlines, early reading or early literacy was mentioned in some form but was included with other literacy content.

- In 81 (70%) of the 116 literacy units reviewed, none of the five essential elements of effective evidence-based reading instruction were mentioned in the unit outlines. All five essential elements were referred to in only 6% of literacy unit outlines.
- None of the unit outlines contained references to the Simple View of Reading. The specific model or theory mentioned most frequently in the unit outlines was the Four Resources / Four Roles of a Reader model which was referred to eight times. The sociocultural model or view of reading was referred to nine times.
- Thirteen (15%) of the lecturers and unit coordinators that could be identified had specific expertise in early reading instruction or literacy, most with a particular interest in early literacy development among Indigenous and other children from non-English speaking backgrounds. Forty-seven (55%) had research interests and expertise in other aspects of literacy, most often digital and multi-modal literacies.

Twenty-five (30%) of the literacy lecturers or unit coordinators had research interests and expertise in areas other than literacy, such as maths or music.

In addition, the report reviewed the content of the six most commonly prescribed textbooks for ITE literacy courses. It found that none contained sufficiently accurate and detailed content that would allow graduate teachers to use effective, evidence-based instruction, and many contained information that was inadequate and/or misleading. All either implicitly or explicitly endorsed the ‘three cueing’ strategy for word reading, which has no evidence basis.

The authors of [one textbook](#) caution teachers against encouraging children to read unfamiliar words by ‘sounding out’. Instead they recommend that children should “[u]se onset and reading ahead to gather more information”. According to the authors, “[i]t is not uncommon for children to say, ‘I read ahead and thought it was pony but when I took another look, I noticed it started with “s” – it must be stallion’” (p. 232).

The ITE report adds to the evidence supporting the need for urgent and dramatic improvement in initial teacher education. The report lists 12 inquiries, studies, or reviews of the quality of preparation for teaching reading and/or literacy in initial teacher education courses in Australia that

have been undertaken since 2005, involving universities in all states and territories. All found that preparation to teach reading was inadequate and all made various recommendations for improvement, most often that literacy teaching units should place greater emphasis on evidence-based reading instruction. The report also outlines the numerous studies showing that many graduate teachers do not have a sufficient level of proficiency with respect to their own literacy or their knowledge of how to develop reading literacy in children.

Initial teacher education students, and the children they eventually go on to teach, are being short-changed. [NAPLAN statistics](#) estimate that more than 50,000 students started their secondary education last year with weak literacy skills. Too many teachers are being sent into classrooms without the benefit of the highly valuable knowledge about language and effective teaching of reading that would reduce this number of struggling readers. It is the responsibility of teacher educators in universities to provide the knowledge and skills that enable primary school teachers to fulfil their responsibilities in the classroom for, as suggested by [Hikida et al.](#) (p. 191), “what preservice teachers do during their literacy preparation is what they believe the teaching of reading to be”.

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