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# Writing matters: reversing a legacy of policy failure in Australian education

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Analysis Paper 23



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# Introduction

Australians are aware that literacy education has parallels with economist Thomas Sowell's summation that "Much of the social history of the Western world, over the past three decades, has been a history of replacing what worked with what sounded good."<sup>1</sup> Rather than just three decades, however, Australia has seen at least 60 years of the adoption, variable implementation and occasional jettisoning of a parade of methodologies including *learning styles*, *multiple intelligences*, *critical literacy*, *constructivism*, *whole language*, *process writing*, *genre theory* and *text types*, *balanced literacy* and *learning progressions*.

Much of this "bricolage of pedagogies, approaches and resources"<sup>2</sup> has been introduced without obvious due diligence in relation to teacher expertise or objective consideration of applicability — and effectiveness — in the Australian context. Many of the local proponents remain influential. In part, this is due to this country's early reliance on — and later fascination with — literacy practices developed elsewhere, especially the United Kingdom and the United States.

A major consequence has been the near abandonment of consistent, explicit instruction about how the English language works as a system, juxtaposed with an ideological preoccupation with the socio-cultural 'experience' of students in the classroom.

Generational decline in student achievement and teacher expertise in *writing* — the poor cousin of *reading* in Australian educational research — reflects the policy shifts.

The links between these two key elements of English literacy are under increasing scrutiny. While some have declared the 'reading wars' to be over, there is no universal acceptance of the phonics reading method in Australian classrooms or university teacher education programs.<sup>3</sup> The corollary, discussed in recent British research, is that the "limited knowledge about the nature of writing systems among many practitioners means that they are not equipped to understand why phonics works for alphabetic systems."<sup>4</sup>

Australians are aware of the decline in students' knowledge and skills as measured by the National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). Analysis of 10 years of NAPLAN literacy data by the NSW Centre for Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) indicates that high school students "struggle with writing more than with reading and numeracy."<sup>5</sup>

Emphasising "the significance of writing ability to overall educational outcomes", the CESE report revealed that one in every six Year 9 students in New South Wales fails to achieve "the minimum standard required to succeed in their final years of school."<sup>6</sup>

Students who lack sound writing skills are disadvantaged in almost every academic endeavour,

unable to achieve maximum benefit from the wider school curriculum and likely to be disadvantaged in post-school life and work. As with mathematics, young learners need to master fundamental knowledge and skills to the point of automatic recall and application in any context. In the case of English, this means achieving confidence and competence in grammar, spelling and punctuation to free the writer to concentrate on the ideas and information to be communicated in any writing task.

Beyond the practical gains, an individual's capacity to write is important because it is an enduring manifestation of thought processes and freedom of expression.

The University of Tasmania's Dr Damon Thomas says declining student performance "affects the quality of democracy because it's about the ability of people to question something, make interpretations, [and] argue for what they need or what they want."<sup>7</sup> He concludes that,

A lot of effort has been put into reading and numeracy but writing has received a lot less attention. The Australian Curriculum is underpinned by tradition from other countries. We need Australian research into the teaching of writing.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, the Grattan Institute's Dr Peter Goss says that,

Writing is not talked about as much as reading and numeracy. It's very hard to get any visibility into how writing is taught in classrooms. What we have here are some alarm bells ringing but no visibility through the smoke to understand what's causing the problem.<sup>9</sup>

The 'problem' attracts ongoing philosophical and practical commentary.

Canadian school principal and award-winning author Steven Laffoley has long blamed generational decline on Whole Language methodologies, claiming these "blindly trusted a student's individual intuition and ... encouraged students to write willy-nilly, unfettered by rules of grammar or qualitative evaluation."<sup>10</sup>

Decades of work with regional and remote communities enable Noel Pearson to speak from firsthand experience. The Indigenous Australian lawyer, land rights activist and Director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership argues that "rather than letting teachers teach, states and territories are delivering social constructivist pedagogies that leave students behind."<sup>11</sup>

According to Professor Ken Gannicott, economist and former head of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Wollongong, schooling "has become hopelessly ideological, captured by those hostile

to a content-based curriculum and to any form of externalised standardised testing.”<sup>12</sup> Some academics dismiss the concerns.

Referring to “the alleged neglect of grammar, spelling and punctuation”, among other issues associated with progressive methodologies, University of Western Sydney academics Wayne Sawyer and Susanne Gannon have asserted that “media-powered moral panics have exacerbated and begun to reframe literacy pedagogy and public policy in Australia.”<sup>13</sup> The debate has stimulated calls to go ‘back to basics’, a theme that characterised the reviews of both the New South Wales Curriculum (2020) and the Australian Curriculum (2021).<sup>14</sup> Blogging for the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) in 2020, Dr Naomi Barnes contended that:

In 2010, the phrase ‘back to basics’ was used to signal a return to the ‘golden age’ of grammar. The phrase worked to signal both nostalgia and reassurance about basic reading and writing in the emerging era of social media. The hearkening back to days where children were remembered to be obedient and do their homework tapped into alluring, if false, white Australian cultural memories of the 1950s.<sup>15</sup>

Dr Barnes, lecturer in education at Queensland University of Technology, cites lead writer of the Australian Curriculum: English, prominent Australian academic Professor Peter Freebody, in a claim that “literacy levels in Australia had improved since grammar was removed.”<sup>16</sup>

A different perspective is offered by Charles Sturt University’s Russell Daylight and John O’Carroll, who say “the basic terms of grammar that were lost to the generations between 1970 and the present are valuable, provided they are not taught abstractly or in absurd detail.”<sup>17</sup> Five years of work with hundreds of aspiring teachers convinced them that:

Since primary school, students have been starved of information about a subject which they secretly suspect is very important. When that information is thematised in terms of their own writing, and their own struggles, they pay even closer attention.<sup>18</sup>

Dr Peter Knapp, former Director of Educational Assessment Australia at the University of New South Wales, has found that “in the education faculties of universities there appears to be a range of not necessarily complementary philosophies on how to teach writing. In some cases there is no advice on teaching specific writing skills at all.”<sup>19</sup>

In a 2015 book published by the Australian Literacy Educators Association (ALEA), British researcher Teresa Cremin provided evidence that pre-service teachers regarded writing as “difficult and potentially exposing; they were anxious about the teaching of writing, and made negative judgements about their own writing.”<sup>20</sup> Cremin’s surveys of current teachers revealed that those who acknowledged low self-esteem as writers lacked confidence when writing and sharing their work.<sup>21</sup>

There is a view that traditional approaches to literacy education simply “maintain hegemony by producing educated subjects, good citizens, logocentric rationality and disciplined bodies.”<sup>22</sup> Instead, say Australian Catholic University literacy specialists Kathy Mills and Len Unsworth, it is necessary to “incorporate students’ predilections while extending the range of multimodal literacy practices that are already familiar to youth.”<sup>23</sup> Formulating literacy education policy on the basis of ‘students’ predilections’ is arguably less likely to inspire a close, voluntary focus on English grammar as part of the thoughtful production of well-researched written work. Already, the low cognitive demands and instant gratification of daily ‘multimodal literacy practices’ make expectations of long-form writing seem obsolete.

Policy instability and pedagogical conflicts are evident in Australian literacy education, and they do not serve Australian students or the nation well.

Without the significant resources available to governments and universities, but in the spirit of the official Education Goals for Young Australians, this paper explores “how things have become the way they are.”<sup>24</sup> It focuses on one question: **Why can’t our students write?**

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## National literacy concerns

Australian students’ declining achievement in NAPLAN, as well as in international test regimes such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), is of concern to parents, employer groups and tertiary institutions who question the preparedness of many school leavers for adult life

and the workforce. This concern features in a lengthy stream of reports and inquiries.

A report produced by the New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA) — *Teaching Writing* — reminds stakeholders of Australia’s reliance on NAPLAN data.<sup>25</sup> Administered to Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 each year, the test regime remains Australia’s

sole national instrument for monitoring students' development of English language skills, including writing. There was no testing in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The validity of the 2019 NAPLAN results remains contested, largely because of questions about comparability between the work of students taking the tests online and those using pen and paper.

### NAPLAN Writing

In 2018, less than 80% of Year 9 students achieved at or above the national minimum standard in writing. As Figure 1 reveals, 2019 achievement by Year 7 and 9 students in writing had fallen below the 2011 national average. In 2019, there was a slight movement upwards in the percentage of Year 9 students achieving at or above the national minimum standard.

The results "paint a dismal picture of student progress with writing", according to Dr Damon Thomas.<sup>26</sup> He cautions that "a nearly 10-year pattern of decline in NAPLAN writing should be warning enough. We need to pay attention to this."<sup>27</sup>

A further concern is the gap between male and female writing scores, which widens with every tested year level and is equivalent to two years of learning by Year 9. The pattern for girls' writing scores is illustrated in Figure 2. Despite a decline starting in 2014, scores for Years 7 and 9 climbed in 2018-2019.

The design and utility of the NAPLAN tests, the extent to which a limited number of test items can reflect the curriculum, and the national minimum standards approved by state and territory authorities, are all matters of ongoing debate.

With its fixation on 'text types', the NAPLAN writing task has become the curriculum by proxy for many Australian schools. The stand-alone test requires students to respond to a stimulus or 'prompt' to

produce, for example, a 'narrative' or 'persuasive' text.<sup>28</sup> One criticism is that this restrictive approach demands "one-shot-perfect productions",<sup>29</sup> with teachers focused on tightly defined criteria and minimal opportunity for students to demonstrate their linguistic dexterity.

The 'text type' approach to teaching writing may be regarded as the product of tensions between a comparatively laissez-faire Whole Language methodology and demands for a return to more predictable, template-oriented writing. The NAPLAN writing test is also controversial because of its separation from discrete tests of language conventions (spelling, grammar) and reading comprehension, the latter two consisting mainly of multiple-choice items.

In 2018, former Massachusetts Institute of Technology Professor Les Perelman, an American educator engaged by the NSW Teachers Federation to evaluate the NAPLAN writing task, described it as "by far the most absurd and the least valid of any test" he had encountered.<sup>30</sup>

With great diplomacy, the NESA report says "it is possible that the quality of student writing is underappreciated and not properly captured by current assessment regimes."<sup>31</sup> The report concludes that it is "highly probable that much student writing is not all that it could be. What is clear from this review is that we could be doing more to embed quality teaching of writing in our schools."<sup>32</sup>

Responsibility for the design and annual publication of the NAPLAN tests lies with the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). That organisation claims that "Since 2016, NAPLAN testing has been aligned to the Australian Curriculum: English."<sup>33</sup>

There are obvious implications for this alignment in the 2021 Review of the Australian Curriculum.<sup>34</sup>

Fig. 1 NAPLAN writing achievement — national average (2011-2019)

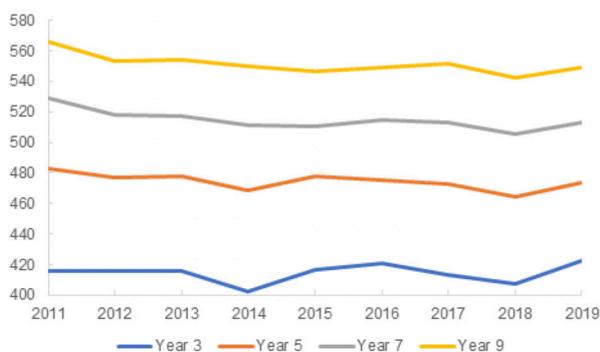
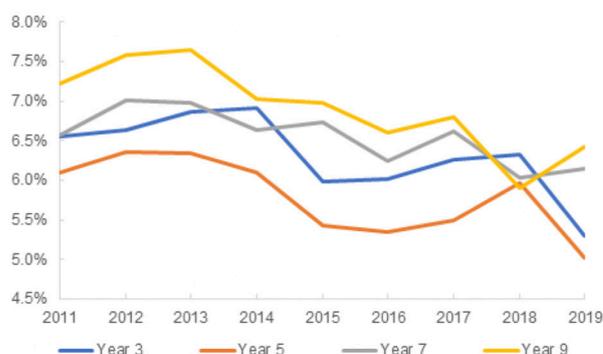


Fig. 2 Girls' writing achievement premium (2011-2019)



## Documenting policy failure

The Australian Productivity Commission recently reminded policy makers of the national implications of falling academic achievement, recommending in a 2020 report that “There should be a coordinated national strategy ... to reduce the large number of Australians with low language, literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills.”<sup>35</sup> With an eye to the future, special education and reading specialist Dr Robyn Wheldall asked in 2019: “How can a country remain prosperous and deliver on productivity if one in two of its adult citizens cannot read and write at an acceptable level?”<sup>36</sup>

The 2018 *Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*, led by businessman David Gonski, revealed that concerns about unsatisfactory literacy achievement are “borne out in Australia, where total government funding for schools has doubled since 1988, yet Australian students’ performance in national and international assessments has declined in real and relative terms.”<sup>37</sup> An earlier Gonski-led project, the 2011 *Review of Funding for Schooling*, emphasised the need for Australian schooling “to lift the performance of students at all levels of achievement, particularly the lowest performers [and to] improve its international standing by arresting the decline that has been witnessed over the past decade.”<sup>38</sup>

An Australian National University study published in 2009 by economists Andrew Leigh and Chris Ryan found that the current generation of Australian students performed less well in key skill areas than their predecessors in the 1960s.<sup>39</sup>

Asserting that “over the past three to four decades, neither literacy or numeracy has improved, and may even have declined slightly”, the ANU researchers concluded that even with a significant increase in per-student funding from the mid-1960s through to the early 2000s, Australian school productivity declined by 73 per cent.<sup>40</sup>

In 2005, the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy found that “a significant minority of children in Australian schools continue to face difficulties in acquiring acceptable levels of literacy and numeracy.”<sup>41</sup>

Less than a decade earlier, a former Australian Minister for Schools, Vocational Education and Training, had already commissioned a National Plan to improve levels of literacy. In 1997, Dr David Kemp based that decision in part on an ACER report which found that “while some students are achieving high literacy standards, a disturbingly high number of Australian school children are failing to meet a minimally acceptable standard in literacy.”<sup>42</sup>

Just five years before that, an Institute of Public Affairs report titled *Educating Australians* found that “employers complain that high school graduates

lack higher order thinking skills, flexibility, discipline, numeracy, and the ability to communicate satisfactorily in speech and writing.”<sup>43</sup> That 1992 report was published by the IPA’s Education Policy Unit, which was led by Dame Leonie Kramer, the first female professor of English in Australia, Chairman of the ABC and Chancellor of the University of Sydney. The report pointed to “anti-intellectual political reformers” whose work “in the name of greater equity, freedom and relevance” changed the curriculum in “ways which have promoted a levelling down instead of the increased opportunity sought.”<sup>44</sup>

Perceptions of the effectiveness of Australian literacy education policies and practices vary.

Dr Jan Turbill, a prominent Australian proponent of constructivist approaches, has written that:

For much of this period, at least until the mid-1990s, there seemed to be relative calm in the field of literacy teaching (one might argue that such ‘calm’ is synonymous with ‘little political interference’) and we felt excited about what we and the children were learning and achieving.<sup>45</sup>

Within a decade, however, the excitement felt by these academics did attract ‘political interference’, due to concerns about the wide variation in literacy education programs and teacher preparedness.

In 2005, the Australian government commissioned a group of Edith Cowan University academics to research the issues. A study involving six universities and 1500 beginning and experienced teachers resulted in the report *Prepared to teach: an investigation into the preparation of teachers to teach literacy and numeracy*. The ECU report mentioned similar concerns in the United States and the United Kingdom and pointed to the “weakness in the empirical base of teacher education research”, especially in relation to teachers’ literacy knowledge and skills.<sup>46</sup>

Key findings were that improvements in student outcomes would depend on recruiting teachers with demonstrated competence in English language upon entry to initial teacher education (ITE) programs and requiring all such programs — for both primary and secondary teachers — to deliver compulsory units on language and literacy.

Contemporaneously, concerns were expressed in Canada. Award-winning author and Head of Halifax Grammar School, Steven Laffoley, lamented in 2004:

Even if we had the will to change our course suddenly, we would be left to confront the dark, awful truth that this generation of teachers is the product of New English. Frankly, many teachers are without the fundamental grammatical knowledge necessary to teach our children.<sup>47</sup>

There was a glaring disparity between concerns about student achievement and teacher capacity and professional organisations' claims of high standards and achievement.

On the basis of the results in early PISA tests (2000 and 2003), Australian academics such as Susanne Gannon and Wayne Sawyer suggested that "Australian teachers of English and literacy ought to be lauded as among the world's very best."<sup>48</sup> Similarly, a former president of the Australian Association of Teachers of English (AATE) wrote in 2006:

Testing indicates that Australian schools are producing a nation of highly literate citizens, with results that have not been bettered at any time in history.

Australian English teachers have collectively embraced the highest standards of professional accountability, are highly accomplished, and achieve outstanding results.<sup>49</sup>

At the time — not long before the introduction of Australia's national curriculum in 2011 — the AATE attributed the alleged successes to the fact that "the national Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia articulate current best principles and practice for English Literacy teaching."<sup>50</sup>

By 2016, concerns about teachers' expertise had led to the implementation of a test known as the Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education Students (LANTITE).<sup>51</sup> Meeting these standards is a condition of graduation from teacher education programs; the strategy is designed "to ensure teachers are well equipped to meet the demands of teaching and assist higher education providers, teacher employers and the general public to have increased confidence in the skills of graduating teachers."<sup>52</sup> Placing the LANTITE hurdle at the end of teacher training programs implies that universities carry at least some responsibility for the English literacy knowledge and skills of their graduates. The opposite approach applies in high-performing Singapore, where applicants are screened in this area *before* admission to teacher education programs.<sup>53</sup>

In 2018, the AATE objected that "Funding for the support for the more explicit teaching of English skills and concepts is not available. Generic 'literacy learning' support is available and this falls short of the explicit targeted support that teachers need to focus on their students' English learning."<sup>54</sup>

Given the AATE's claim in 2006 that "Teachers of English and Literacy in Australia are rightly proud of their demonstrated expertise,"<sup>55</sup> a request for

additional funding might be interpreted as a tacit admission that many actually lacked competence and confidence in the 'explicit teaching of English skills and concepts', and that their university studies were not preparing them adequately for the classroom.

By April 2021, unresolved concerns about graduates possessing "the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions to be successful teachers in any Australian school" caused the federal government to announce the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review.<sup>56</sup>

Taxpayers might well ask why the Terms of Reference of the 2021 Review seem to echo the themes of the 2005 Edith Cowan University report, particularly in relation to literacy:

*Part A - Attracting and selecting high-quality candidates into the teaching profession*

*Part B - Preparing ITE students to be effective teachers.*<sup>57</sup>

Taxpayers might also ask about the long-term impact of the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG). Established in 2014, the TEMAG had already bemoaned inadequate local research and pointed to the critical importance of addressing "the overall quality and capabilities of teachers being prepared for Australia's classrooms."<sup>58</sup>

Public interest in the 2021 Review of the Australian Curriculum may draw further attention to academic expectations and professional expertise.

ACARA claims that the current Australian Curriculum: English "is well-regarded with comparable content and standards to first language curricula in other countries."<sup>59</sup> The organisation has also stated that preparation for the 2021 Review considered "the latest research and international developments" and "involved teachers and curriculum experts from all states and territories, the government and non-government sectors, national teacher and principal professional associations, parent groups and subject matter experts."<sup>60</sup> However, as is true for the other seven learning areas, no overarching intellectual framework has been developed to guide those responsible for revising the Australian Curriculum: English. Nor was the preparatory work made available to explain the basis for identifying "some key areas where the English curriculum could be improved."<sup>61</sup> This means no public analysis of past policy success and failure — including consideration of current teaching methodologies — to assist stakeholders in their feedback on the proposed revisions.

## The research deficit

According to the AATE, “educators need to be discerning practitioners as they draw on research that is contemporary, valid and rigorously conducted to inform their practice.”<sup>62</sup>

However, as this paper argues, it is difficult to identify evidence of national success to support the AATE’s claims of “best principles and practice” or of that organisation’s interest in any relationship between those and the well-documented decline in teacher capacity and student performance.

Decades of policy instability — particularly in English literacy — can be attributed to a dearth of rigorous Australia-based research material specifically designed to justify, inform and evaluate educational change.

Nearly 50 years ago, this weakness was identified in the federal government’s Education Research and Development Committee’s 1975-1976 Report.<sup>63</sup> The ERDC concluded that: “Perhaps never before in Australia’s history has there been so much concern about education. Some of these concerns represent clashes of values and ideologies.”<sup>64</sup>

In the 1970s, the hope was “to foster a new approach to education which incorporates an R and D [research and development] model.”<sup>65</sup> Reflecting an official commitment to “improving the quality of educational research in Australia”, the ERDC emphasised that “innovations will not be discouraged but be thoroughly evaluated before being widely promoted; policies will be guided by information.”<sup>66</sup>

By the early 2000s, former federal Education Minister Julia Gillard was promoting a national curriculum that would “harness collective expertise and effort” and deliver “economies of scale and a substantial reduction in the duplication of time, effort and resources.”<sup>67</sup>

By the third decade of the 21st century, taxpayers were questioning the return on \$60 billion per annum in recurrent funding to schooling, including the contribution to four organisations known as the ‘national education architecture’, each of which is tasked with aspects of curriculum, professional learning, digital strategies and services and education research.

These are:

- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA, established in 2008);
- Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL, 2010);
- Education Services Australia (ESA, 2010); and
- As of 2021, the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO).

ACARA is the self-described “authoritative source of advice on, and delivery of, national curriculum, assessment and reporting for all Australian education ministers.”<sup>68</sup> AITSL summarises its role as “Developing expertise and empowering teachers and school leaders to create better education outcomes for Australian children.”<sup>69</sup> ESA’s strategic objective is to “use our unique combination of education and technology expertise to create and deliver solutions that can be used to improve student outcomes and enhance performance across all education sectors.”<sup>70</sup>

Taxpayers might query why the combined resources of ACARA, AITSL and ESA have apparently failed to do what is now being asked of fledgling organisation AERO; that is, to “generate high-quality evidence, make high-quality evidence accessible and enhance the use of evidence in Australian education.”<sup>71</sup>

Dr Michele Bruniges, Director-General of the federal Department of Education, Skills and Employment, says it will “provide practical support to teachers by translating research and evidence into effective strategies they can use in the classroom.”<sup>72</sup>

At least one academic is optimistic. Professor Ken Gannicott believes AERO “will be the perfect vehicle for keeping the work grounded in the practicalities of ‘what works’, rather than getting lost chasing the wilder ideas so fashionable in education.”<sup>73</sup>

Another eight jurisdictional authorities (state and territory education departments) also allocate taxpayer funds to ‘research’.

Additionally, as discussed in a later section, numerous professional bodies claim responsibility for policy development, professional learning and resources for teachers, and other aspects of literacy education.

Lastly, it is worth considering the role of a high-profile Australian organisation, which describes itself as “one of the world’s leading educational research centres.” Founded in 1930, and now boasting over 400 staff (including many located overseas), the mission of the not-for-profit Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) is “to create and promote research-based knowledge, products and services that can be used to improve learning across the lifespan.”<sup>74</sup>

Yet the ACER, whose CEO led the 2020 Review of the New South Wales Curriculum, did not establish a critical nexus between the relevant research and high levels of student literacy.

Without detailed reference to the experience of high-performing systems in Europe and Asia, whose success in developing children’s literacy presupposes the long-term study of multiple languages, lead author Professor Geoff Masters made a key policy recommendation to “require every student to

commence learning a second language during their primary years, making use of technology where possible."<sup>75</sup>

Professor Masters proposed that priority be "given to languages of the region, including Mandarin and Indonesian."<sup>76</sup> The report's failure to make the case on the basis of incontrovertible international evidence may account, at least in part, for the NSW government's rejection of the recommendation.

Taxpayers could reasonably have expected that decades of federal and state/territory reviews of education — generally led by and drawing on the expertise of the profession and assorted education bodies — would deliver detailed explanations of the origins of problems alongside proposals to improve teaching and learning.

For example, a forensic investigation into the decline in teacher expertise and student achievement in English literacy would almost certainly have identified the unsubstantiated implementation and questionable benefits of 'inquiry-based' learning, a derivative of the constructivist approach.

Such work might have mitigated ongoing concerns raised by stakeholders (including during the 2021 Review of the Australian Curriculum) regarding the value placed on explicit teaching.

### Searching in the wrong direction

Education policy shifts since the middle of last century show Australian educators repeatedly looking to other English-speaking countries for inspiration. It is perplexing that this occurred even when those systems — the United Kingdom and the United States, in particular — were themselves experiencing significant academic challenges, especially in English literacy.

With regard to language acquisition, Australian policy instability is in stark contrast to the evidence-based approach of high-performing European and Asian counterparts.

Singapore and Finland are two examples of education systems whose philosophical and curricular commitment to plurilingual education rests on an appreciation of the benefits for overall academic progress and intercultural awareness.

Operating from a set of first principles that prioritise the rigorous study of both mother tongue and additional languages, these systems remain consistently respectful of longstanding evidence of 'what works'.

They are now well placed to consider enhancements to literacy (and other) education for students in the 21st century. With confidence in the robustness of their academic curriculum and the capacity of their teacher

workforce to support students' language and literacy development, they can pivot more readily to address myriad educational challenges.

Even if Australian dependence on other English-speaking countries can be attributed to socio-cultural and linguistic familiarity, it is difficult to understand local researchers' apparent disinterest in the approaches to literacy education in the high-performing school systems.

Local efforts to steer English literacy policy in well-researched directions have had little success. An example is the lack of action following the publication of Australia's National Policy on Languages in 1987.

Responding to an Australian Government request for "an overall, coherent and integrated policy ... [to meet] the needs and demands of the society and of particular component groups,"<sup>77</sup> Professor Joe Lo Bianco cited the Senate Standing Committee's report of October, 1984:

Language policies should be developed and co-ordinated at the national level on the basis of four guiding principles, namely: competence in English; maintenance and development of languages other than English; provision of services in languages other than English; opportunities for learning second languages.<sup>78</sup>

Professor Lo Bianco became the inaugural chief executive of Australia's National Languages and Literacy Institute in 1990. He argued:

There is persuasive evidence from research that individuals, particularly children, who attain a high level of bilingualism, i.e. a high level of proficiency in two languages, often gain non-linguistic as well as linguistic benefits in their intellectual functioning. Specifically these advantages relate to higher levels of verbal intelligence, a greater capacity to think divergently and manifested forms of greater mental flexibility.<sup>79</sup>

Taxpayers might have expected this report to inspire a meeting of the minds between educators and academics in the two key curriculum areas of English and Languages.

On the contrary, its influence was so minor that by 2015, academics from three universities drew attention to the specific problem.<sup>80</sup> Contending that Australia is "facing a slow decline in most educational standards, and few are aware just how bad the situation is getting," *Six Ways Australia's Education System is Failing our Kids* compares the monolingual character of schooling in this country with the finding that "most other industrialised countries have been strengthening their students' knowledge of other cultures and languages."<sup>81</sup>

There are indications that young Australians — particularly those undertaking tertiary programs — who study other languages report greater competence and confidence in English.<sup>82</sup>

Other evidence includes the NAPLAN writing test, where Australian students from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE) demonstrate a significant and increasing premium over their monolingual peers (as seen in Figure 3).

### Loose trends

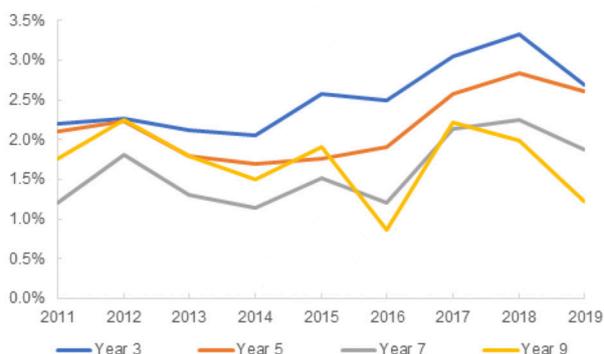
The Australian Constitution’s silence on school education has long been understood to devolve responsibility to states and territories. This includes registering and monitoring schools, training and accrediting teachers and credentialling students, especially at Year 12.

The eight jurisdictions remain strongly assertive of their freedom to “implement the Australian Curriculum in ways that value teachers’ professional knowledge, reflect local contexts and take into account individual students’ family, cultural and community backgrounds.”<sup>83</sup>

The net effect is significant variation in education policy and practice across Australia. As with many other aspects of school education (and teacher training), this variation helps explain the failure to implement an evidence-based, nationally agreed approach to the teaching of writing.

Without clear direction, transparently based on objective, comprehensive research relevant to the Australian school context, intellectual and pedagogical

**Fig. 3 NAPLAN writing achievement premium among LBOTE students (2011-2019)**



gaps and divisions have formed. These include the so-called ‘literacy wars’ — most closely linked to the teaching of reading and writing — which have underpinned the adoption of fads and trends, many from overseas.<sup>84</sup> The Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) has concluded that much of the generational decline in literacy could be attributed to such “loose trends.”<sup>85</sup> Succumbing to the demands of interest groups, governments have invested ever increasing amounts of money into education without evidence of resulting improvements in quality.<sup>86</sup> This is counter-intuitive, says Noel Pearson, because “the evidence has been well known about what works for children’s reading and numeracy and learning generally ... it is just that there has been a concerted effort to impede the known and very effective means by which children could learn in Australian schools.”<sup>87</sup>

## Who is responsible?

Notwithstanding any overtly ideological directive pursued by a minister or within a particular portfolio, government decisions can only be as good as the advice politicians receive from staffers, subject matter specialists, bureaucrats and lobby groups.

It follows that the primary source of advice in relation to English literacy education will be university academics and the specialist professional organisations claiming leadership in the field. Academics exert significant influence and autonomy in methodologies adopted by schools and teacher training programs. In general, they are appointed to teaching and leadership roles on the basis of their research interests and pedagogical expertise.

In the context of the 2021 Review of the Australian Curriculum, it is interesting to consider the influences brought to bear on such work. In the view of Drs Alex

Bacalja and Lauren Bliss (University of Melbourne’s Graduate School of Education):

Curriculum is always organised to preserve vested interests and maintain the status quo. Any attempt to change this curriculum, and therefore disrupt the status quo, is met with fierce resistance by those who perceive that such change will undermine the values, relative power and privileges of the dominant groups involved.<sup>88</sup>

The implication is that conservative political forces control decisions about what and how children will learn. In relation to English literacy, this prompts questions about how the profound pedagogical shifts of the past 60 years have occurred, particularly in terms of diminishing explicit instruction in English language (see Appendix 1).

Statements from the professional organisations offer little clarity.

According to the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA), "Literacies are inextricably linked with the particular cultures, histories and experiences of individuals and groups."<sup>89</sup> The ALEA's official Declaration makes no specific reference to English as the national language or to mastery of Standard Australian English as an overarching goal of the Australian Curriculum.<sup>90</sup>

Similarly, the Australian Association for the Teaching of English says "the student's self-esteem and competence as a language user are nurtured by providing learning experiences which are inclusive of the race, gender, cultural and social backgrounds of all students."<sup>91</sup>

Under a list of General Principles, the AATE states that within the school curriculum, "English is the subject which carries the major (though not exclusive) responsibility for fostering students' language and literacy development."<sup>92</sup>

The AATE's Position Statement lobbies for greater funding for teacher professional development, insisting that "Quality English teaching in Australian schools is a shared community responsibility."<sup>93</sup> The "charter for teachers of English" makes few and vague references to actual language acquisition, an example being that "[Students] have access to explicitly stated information about writing and reading processes and language structures."<sup>94</sup>

According to the English Teachers Association of NSW, "Teaching is no longer about the transmission of knowledge, rather it is about developing in students deep understanding, critical questioning and the application of knowledge."<sup>95</sup>

In the context of the 2021 Review of the Australian Curriculum, such statements help to explain unresolved concerns about teacher capacity, student achievement and academic expectations and practices across the country.

On the basis that knowledge cannot be applied if it is not first acquired, it is important to ask who carries ultimate responsibility for ensuring that knowledge is transmitted and that students do in fact develop 'deep understanding'?

In a response to the 2019 NSW Curriculum Review, the ETA held that:

... it is in English that the explicit teaching of language takes place: how language shapes meaning and the relationships between composers of texts and responders to them ... [The] study of English, most notably the study of literature, plays an important role in shaping our individual and national identities. It is **story** [emphasis added] that connects us to others and other cultures ... students study texts that are

relevant to them as well as texts that will stretch their knowledge, understanding and skills.<sup>96</sup>

If 'story' is the vehicle for successful learning — and if the 'skills' include sophisticated written expression — it is axiomatic that the telling can only be entrusted to those with the requisite expertise. In relation to the education of young learners, the professional organisations have traditionally led decision-making about how students will learn and teachers will teach.

With regard to 'story', Dr Alex Bacalja asserts that "a Critical Literacy lens in education considers all texts to be equally worthy of study insofar as they are all elements of culture that warrant students' critical attention."<sup>97</sup> He maintains that "Selected texts ... must be negotiated between teachers and students, and in that negotiation the views and values of individuals impact upon the way the texts are received."<sup>98</sup>

The Primary English Teachers' Association Australia takes the position that the definition of 'literate' is constantly changing, largely because schools and teachers are now charged with preparing students for 'uncertain futures'. As a recent PETAA project explained, "In a writing context, this translates to students producing texts that matter to them and texts that have significance for the ever-changing world they live in."<sup>99</sup>

Such approaches are a direct reflection of the globalist 21st century learning agenda promoted by organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Australian education policy is increasingly influenced by a vision of a world threatened by *volatility, uncertainty, complexity* and *ambiguity (VUCA)*. Strategies such as the OECD's Future of Education and Skills Project 2030 aim "to help education systems determine the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values students need to thrive in and shape their future."<sup>100</sup>

However, the VUCA worldview can neither explain nor address the findings of the 2018 NESA report, cited earlier in this paper. The data collected for *Teaching Writing* revealed "significant gaps in the knowledge, preparation, skills and confidence of teachers to teach writing across primary and secondary years."<sup>101</sup>

One finding deserves particular attention: "With few exceptions, teachers report that their initial teacher education and professional development left them minimally prepared in all aspects of teaching writing."<sup>102</sup>

The NESA report was optimistic in concluding that while many teachers and university academics "continue to be influenced by more progressive, child-centred theoretical perspectives ... much has been learned about teaching writing over the past 40 years." While the report indicated concern about the shortage of comprehensive, local research, there was evidence of movement "beyond the bifurcated

theoretical landscape that in the past saw advocates of rival approaches talk past each other.”<sup>103</sup>

Edith Cowan University researchers Brian Moon, Barbara Harris and Ann-Maree Hays expressed less optimism in *Can Secondary Teaching Graduates Support Literacy in the Classroom?*

Much of the research and policy development has supposed that outcomes will automatically improve once teachers have been given access to appropriate routines and resources, and encouraged in their use. That ignores the question of whether teachers are *capable* of effective support, whatever their level of commitment.<sup>104</sup>

For students in Foundation to Year 10, the successful implementation of the Australian Curriculum: English depends on teachers having sophisticated knowledge of the English language and how to teach it. With regard to writing instruction in Australian classrooms, this includes mastery of a functional approach to grammar.<sup>105</sup>

### Teacher capacity

Literacy expert Dr Peter Knapp says: “The unpleasant truth is that all students (regardless of background) learn to write most effectively through explicit and systematic teaching.”<sup>106</sup>

In a five-year study, Russell Daylight and John O’Carroll investigated the literacy knowledge and skills of first year undergraduates. Aiming to help the aspiring teachers achieve “a general uplift in literacy”, they designed new courses to improve “the ability to read and interpret complex texts, and to write grammatically and fluently.”<sup>107</sup> Daylight and O’Carroll found that while “analysis of students’ reading skills indicated that many struggle with basic vocabulary and grammar, the same is true of their writing.”<sup>108</sup> It was evident, they concluded, that the students’ “level of literacy at the commencement of their studies — what we might call ‘matriculating literacy’— is sometimes not adequate for the demands of their higher education courses.”<sup>109</sup>

Based on a study of over 200 teaching students in their graduating year at an Australian university, Dr Brian Moon concluded that the capacity of secondary school teachers to support school-based literacy practices and teach discipline-specific literacy skills is highly dependent on their “personal literacy competence.” The number of graduates who fell short

of expectations was quite significant and, in some cases, “the prospect of successful remediation so late in their academic career appeared poor.”<sup>110</sup>

However, young learners depend on their teachers to use and model and teach the English language in all areas of the curriculum. In typically cumbersome style, the Australian Curriculum states that:

Success in any learning area depends on being able to use significant identifiable and distinctive literacy that is important for learning and representative of the content of that learning area.<sup>111</sup>

Surprisingly, that statement is buried in one of the seven General Capabilities — that of Literacy — rather than embedded as a universal goal across the Australian Curriculum. It has little presence and is not strongly reinforced across the eight learning areas. If teachers are to meet that expectation (established in decades of research in Australia and the United States) then secondary teachers, in particular, must develop high levels of competence and confidence in the English language elements relevant to their discipline.

The Australian Catholic University’s Professor Claire Wyatt-Smith insists that writing instruction is the responsibility of all teachers across the curriculum: “Students need to learn grammar, structure, terminology and what good-quality writing looks like even in things like science and economics. This is not just about essays. It’s any written expression.”<sup>112</sup> Both Wyatt-Smith and Christine Jackson, working at the Australian Catholic University’s Learning Sciences Institute, believe students’ progress in writing is at risk because Australian schools “drop the focus too early.”<sup>113</sup> Secondary teachers have generally resisted taking responsibility for teaching writing in their subject areas, believing it to be the work of specialist English teachers and of primary teachers, and expecting students to have developed sound writing skills before they enter high school.

In 2019, a University of Tasmania study emphasised the importance of all teachers having the capacity to support their students’ English literacy. The report submitted to the government — *Literacy Teaching in Tasmania: Teaching Practice and Teacher Learning* — concluded that “Emerging evidence strongly suggests that the key to improving literacy in high school is to prioritise ‘disciplinary literacy’ over generic approaches to literacy.”<sup>114</sup>

# A chronology of theories and trends influencing writing instruction in Australia

## Nation-building (1901)

Australia is a federation of six states and two territories, founded as a sovereign nation in 1901. Although the concept of universal education was in place in all Australian colonies by the late 19th century, many children attended school infrequently and only until the early teenage years, if that long. There were distinct differences in school attendance and academic achievement between urban, rural, regional and remote students, a phenomenon that persists in contemporary Australia.

Instruction in the English language was rigidly organised, broadly in line with British pedagogy of the early 1900s. Becoming literate involved reading from a small collection of prescribed texts, including the Bible. Young learners studied classic English literature to gain an appreciation of their linguistic and literary heritage.

In Western Australia, for example, the curriculum emphasised English classics and schools used a standard 'reader' (The School Paper) which "pursued dual projects of constructing a specific Australian identity while defining a British imperial identity from which it is informed."<sup>115</sup>

The concept of Standard Australian English (formalised in the Australian Curriculum) was yet to come, although there was growing interest in Australian slang and local writers.

Repetition and rote learning were standard in classrooms throughout the nation, with the alphabet and words copied many times in order to perfect handwriting and spelling. Grammar instruction was a very formal process; mastering the rules of English involved parsing exercises in which students broke down complex sentence structures into their syntactic components, broadening their vocabulary at the same time.

An archaeological study of the role of writing slates and pencils in colonial Victoria found that "pupils would normally spend six to eight years in primary school, without ever having the opportunity to compose an original expression."<sup>116</sup>

Concerns about the nature and quality of English language instruction were raised in the early post-Federation years — particularly in relation to teacher quality and what students would learn.

In 1904, the NSW Parliament's Trade and Commerce Committee argued that "Great emphasis should be laid on writing, spelling, composition and reading ..."

It is strongly recommended that every subject in the curriculum should be regarded as an

opportunity for teaching English, there being reason to believe that pupils are inclined to regard writing, spelling and clear expression of secondary importance in subjects other than English, and that at present there is insufficient check on this tendency.<sup>117</sup>

During the early decades of the 20th century, an individual's degree of 'Englishness' — as demonstrated by accent and word choices — was closely associated with social class. Recognition of the importance of a literate population was influenced by an unofficial acceptance that "English in Australia was a complex negotiation of 'Nation' and 'Empire', language and culture, literacy and identity."<sup>118</sup>

The expectation that every teacher would become 'a teacher of English' was a feature of teacher training programs in several of the young nation's Teachers' Colleges.<sup>119</sup> In the 21st century, as explained earlier, this remains a controversial expectation.

By the middle of the century, Australian education was enjoying a degree of calm and order, with governments concentrating on expanding the provision of schooling in response to post-war population growth resulting from immigration and higher birth rates.

The decades through to the 1950s saw a relatively conformist approach. English lessons emphasised "reading, recitation, spelling, dictation, writing compositions or essays, punctuation, synthesis, analysis, parsing, derivation and handwriting in a copy book."<sup>120</sup> Teachers drilled parts of speech and spelling, with students practising in commercially produced workbooks or worksheets.

Spelling and dictation had priority over composition. Topics were generally narrow and assigned by the teacher: reporting on a school excursion, weekend activities or a favourite holiday.<sup>121</sup> Students were rarely afforded opportunities to write fiction and imaginative pieces.

## Revolution (1960s)

International challenges to traditional education methods and institutions were a feature of the 1960s, with rebellion against elitism and 'high culture' expressed through university riots in Europe, the United States and other countries. Anti-war and anti-establishment protestors saw politicians and bureaucrats, in particular, as targets. This period is also known for neo-colonial literature, increasing interest in a 'green revolution', and the rise of computer technology.

Theorists such as Paulo Freire<sup>122</sup> rejected the 'banking model of education', a metaphor portraying students as empty vessels into which educators poured knowledge. Influenced by Karl Marx, Georg Hegel, John Dewey, Erich Fromm and others, Freire's new 'critical pedagogy' intended to liberate students from an authoritarian approach to learning by empowering them to use language to understand their personal reality and become politically active in their fight against the 'oppressor'. Originally published in Portuguese in 1968, Freire's book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* appeared in an English version in 1970 and became highly influential in teacher education programs in the United States.

Concurrently, the rigorous teaching of phonics began to wane as 'liberated' teachers hailed new methodologies about student-centred learning and language acquisition inspired by literacy theorists such as Ken Goodman<sup>123</sup> and cognitive psycholinguist Frank Smith,<sup>124</sup> both based in North America.

Goodman's theory of Whole Language conceived that language is acquired most effectively when it is holistic and not fragmented into skills. American and Australian proponents convinced many teachers that phonics lessons were boring and could not engage 'passive' students. Whole Language also appealed because of its purported focus on reading 'quality' children's literature as the main path to learning to write. It rejected the systematic teaching of spelling, punctuation and grammar. Some 1960s educators proposed that "English grammar could be learned osmotically and spontaneously in the classroom through creatively working with texts."<sup>125</sup> Smith's influence was felt throughout the English-speaking world. Born in England, he worked in Australia before studying at Harvard University and developing his theories in South Africa and Canada. His book, *Understanding Reading*, published in 1971, allegedly "prompted the Cognitive Revolution in reading and shook the pedagogy to its core."<sup>126</sup>

Smith theorised that children learn to read whole words *naturally* as they search for meaning: "the 'decoding' that the skilled reader performs is not to transform visual symbols into sound, which is the widely held conventional view of what reading is about, but to transform from visual presentation of language into meaning."<sup>127</sup>

Revered by the Whole Language movement, he chose not to be linked to any faction or organisation. His influence is enshrined in a message commemorating his death in 2020: 'Frank changed the way we thought and taught literacy in Australia.'<sup>128</sup>

As the literacy wars escalated overseas, English teaching in Australian primary schools continued to emphasise discrete skills including grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling (usually a specified list of words, including dictation) composition and handwriting. Grammar was a stand-alone subject,

separated from the act of writing. In high schools, a weekly and equal allocation of time was assigned to composition, literature, spelling lists and dictation, grammar and punctuation.

## Transformation (1970s)

The social and technological changes of the 1970s encouraged progressive ideas and experimentation in Australian education.<sup>129</sup> Although Whole Language was specifically designed for the North American school context, academics in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom steadily implemented what many perceived to be a 'liberating' pedagogy. One assessment is that the Whole Language versus phonics debate in reading "was a proxy for, or maybe a leading edge of, a broader set of ways in which 1970s educators were trying not to be 1950s educators."<sup>130</sup> The practical consequences of adopting Whole Language approaches were evident within two decades: formal grammar instruction was dropped from most school curricula and teacher education programs. This trend was informed by several large-scale research projects of the 1960s, which found teaching grammar had little impact on reading and writing.<sup>131</sup> However, there is no evidence to suggest that the original researchers considered the possibility that it was the method of teaching grammar, rather than grammar itself, that alienated students.

Some of Australia's strongest advocates of Whole Language have claimed that traditional research methods could not measure its effectiveness.

For example, University of Wollongong academics Jan Turbill and Brian Cambourne argued that the 'naturalistic' setting of the classroom makes scientific testing for reliability and validity inappropriate. They maintained that teachers should be able to develop other ways of justifying the use of Whole Language in helping children to learn to read and write.<sup>132</sup>

Australian academics who favoured Whole Language introduced teachers to 'constructivist' learning theories.

Originating in the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky<sup>133</sup>, constructivism holds that successful learning is the result of social interaction — 'facilitated' by a teacher — enabling students to "actively construct or make their own knowledge" and demonstrating that "reality is determined by the experiences of the learner."<sup>134</sup> Vygotsky provided no rigorous evidence of the effectiveness of prioritising social interaction for learning in school settings. No local research was done to determine its suitability for Australian schools.

Consistent with this theory, literacy skills develop through 'authentic' literacy events that are relevant and meaningful for the learner. A 'real writer' should not be expected to follow a prescribed series of steps in the traditional linear manner of plan-write-

revise. Instead, students learn via a recursive process wherein the important objective is to get the ideas — the gist — on the page. Attention to accuracy in language (e.g. grammar, punctuation and spelling) and style happens in the final stages of editing, revising and publishing. Spelling lists are not prescribed; rather, students select words related to their writing.

### Experimentation (1980s)

In 1980, a meeting of world experts — Ken Goodman (USA), James Britton (UK), James Moffatt (USA) and Garth Boomer (Australia) — inspired primary teachers at the Third International Federation for the Teaching of English hosted by the University of Sydney.

American academic Donald Graves was a huge drawcard, sharing his research on 'writing as a process' that evolved from the Writing Process Laboratory in New Hampshire. Early childhood teachers were most enthusiastic, perhaps because process writing seemed to serve a "natural human need for self-expression."<sup>135</sup>

Despite encouraging the adoption of a methodology without assessing teachers' confidence and competence in the mechanics of the English language, Graves' visit is said to have marked "the beginning of a revolution in the teaching of writing in Australian primary schools."<sup>136</sup>

Some academics, such as Professor of Linguistics James Martin were sceptical about the lack of emphasis on the rules and conventions of English, as well as the limited range of writing tasks. This scepticism was validated by analysis of hundreds of scripts written by primary students in the late 1970s. Researchers observed that 'process writing,' which focussed on self-expression and creativity, steered students towards writing narrative texts such as 'personal recounts and observation/comment texts.'<sup>137</sup>

Concurrently, British linguist Michael Halliday's functional model of language portrayed language as a 'meaning-making' system through which individuals interpret their world. Advocates of genre methodology posited that a shift to functional grammar would "better support students to learn language, to learn through language and to learn about language."<sup>138</sup> Halliday's model became a dominant influence in the development of the Australian Curriculum: English and the basis for genre approaches to writing.<sup>139</sup>

As teachers became interested in 'process writing' and 'genre' approaches, Australian academics turned to 'critical literacy', the methodology adopted in the 1980s in line with the 'critical pedagogy' of Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire.

Critical literacy introduced the notion of texts in English teaching, arguing that any written piece or image that conveyed meaning would enable

students to "better understand power, inequality and injustice."<sup>140</sup> According to British academic Adrian Blackledge, critical literacy draws attention to written language and enables students to develop analytical skills to critique issues of power and resources in society with the goal of "transforming discriminatory structures."<sup>141</sup>

Self-described 'critical educational researcher and minority educator' Emeritus Professor Allan Luke is an Adjunct Professor of Creative Industries, Education and Social Justice at Queensland University of Technology and a former Deputy Director-General of Education in that state. Luke has said "the aim is a classroom environment where students and teachers together work to: (a) see how the worlds of texts work to construct their worlds, their cultures and identities in powerful, often overtly ideological ways; and, (b) use texts as social tools in ways that allow for a reconstruction of these same worlds."<sup>142</sup>

Critical literacy rejects traditional notions of explicit instruction in "autonomous, technical, neutral, and universal skills" for all young learners. Instead, researcher Margarita Fajardo argues, becoming literate is a socio-political process through which one becomes aware of historic power relationships.<sup>143</sup>

This approach also rejects traditional ways of teaching "anchored in the belief that teachers hold full authority to select course materials, accept and dismiss interpretations, and transmit their fully formed knowledge to students who act as passive recipients of information."<sup>144</sup> Dr Fajardo says students must be free to choose the texts and issues they believe to be relevant to their lives in order to "explore their own identities, challenge the dominant discourses and understand the complexities of institutional issues."<sup>145</sup>

In the same vein, Australian academics Kathy Mills and Len Unsworth maintain that students "need to be able to problematize assumptions in texts about gender, race, age, class, able bodies, beliefs and other social identities" and to "critically consider why they are being asked to read and use particular books, media or other texts within the social context of school."<sup>146</sup>

The preoccupation with studying 'texts' in order to identify hidden but dominant ideologies and encourage social activism to counter powerful forces in contemporary society has arguably left generations of students bereft of foundational knowledge of the English language and its linguistic heritage. This is particularly true of secondary school students, for whom exposure to formal grammar as part of explicit instruction in writing has become increasingly less assured.

Many of these young learners inevitably become the teachers who struggle to use, model and teach the national language to any sophisticated degree.

## Progressivism (1990s)

This decade was another watershed in education. While some academics maintain “the 1980s and 1990s saw many advances in the teaching of writing, particularly in primary classrooms,”<sup>147</sup> a ‘new literacy’ movement — encouraging ‘holistic’ approaches to reading and writing — was entering Australian schools and teacher education programs.<sup>148</sup>

Proponents of Whole Language, disappointed with the outcomes of process writing, increasingly supported the adoption of ‘genre theory’, which was destined to become the dominant influence on the teaching of writing in Australian schools in the 21st century.

With the theoretical groundwork achieved in the 1980s, genre theory as a writing methodology had developed to the point where students were creating what critics alleged were predictable ‘text types’ to explain, describe, persuade, review, recount and narrate. A range of genres has since evolved to include stories, text response, arguments, factual stories, explanations, information reports and procedures.

The limitations of process writing, meaning inadequate guidance for both students and teachers, made this latest methodology look reassuringly achievable. Its major proponents developed language resources to help teachers to understand how “the explicit teaching of functional grammatical knowledge ... enables students to understand how the structuring of the various genres is achieved.”<sup>149</sup> For example, Beverly Derewianka<sup>150</sup> and Sally Humphrey<sup>151</sup> became key providers of professional learning. With their teacher-friendly publications — many of which were sponsored by ALEA or PETAA — they reinforced the functional approach to grammar that underpins the Australian Curriculum: English as well as state/territory curriculum expectations.

Genre-based approaches have enjoyed considerable influence in Australia. Some proponents acknowledge that teaching approaches have become reductive, with text types taught as “formulaic straitjackets.”<sup>152</sup> Instead, says Professor Derewianka, teachers need “to understand how genres and register work together in order to identify the language demands that students need to master the various curriculum tasks they engage in.”<sup>153</sup>

Inconsistent school standards and practices in the teaching of writing make it likely that pre-service teachers will struggle with functional grammar. Those without any foundation in traditional grammar are at a particular disadvantage. The first iteration of the Australian Curriculum: English, which incorporates both traditional and functional approaches to grammar, has not provided the necessary clarity.

## Balanced Literacy

In the 1990s, American psychologist and phonics supporter Michael Pressley coined the term ‘balanced literacy’, emphasising the importance of decoding words and understanding their meaning. He felt certain that Phonics and Whole Language could co-exist.<sup>154</sup> Rather than seeing the hybrid methodology as a ‘political compromise’, Pressley “believed the Whole Language folks were right when it came to motivation. He took it that Whole Language was all about or mainly about getting kids interested in reading.”<sup>155</sup>

Advocates in the United States and Australia claimed that Balanced Literacy applied the best elements of Whole Language and Phonics through sharing work, coaching by the teacher, independent practice, and intensive word study. Whole Language advocates could now pacify their critics by claiming that they taught phonics.

Sceptics called Balanced Literacy a “disingenuous recasting of the whole language approach.”<sup>156</sup> Neuroscientist Mark Seidenberg, a proponent of scientifically rigorous approaches to reading (such as phonics), described it as “a way to defuse the wars over reading” and claimed it “succeeded in keeping the science at bay, and it allowed things to continue as before.”<sup>157</sup> Seidenberg was most concerned that Balanced Literacy provided “little guidance for teachers who thought that phonics was a cause of poor reading and did not know how to teach it.”<sup>158</sup>

Paul Thomas, Professor of Education at Furman University in South Carolina, exposed the fragility of the methodologies:

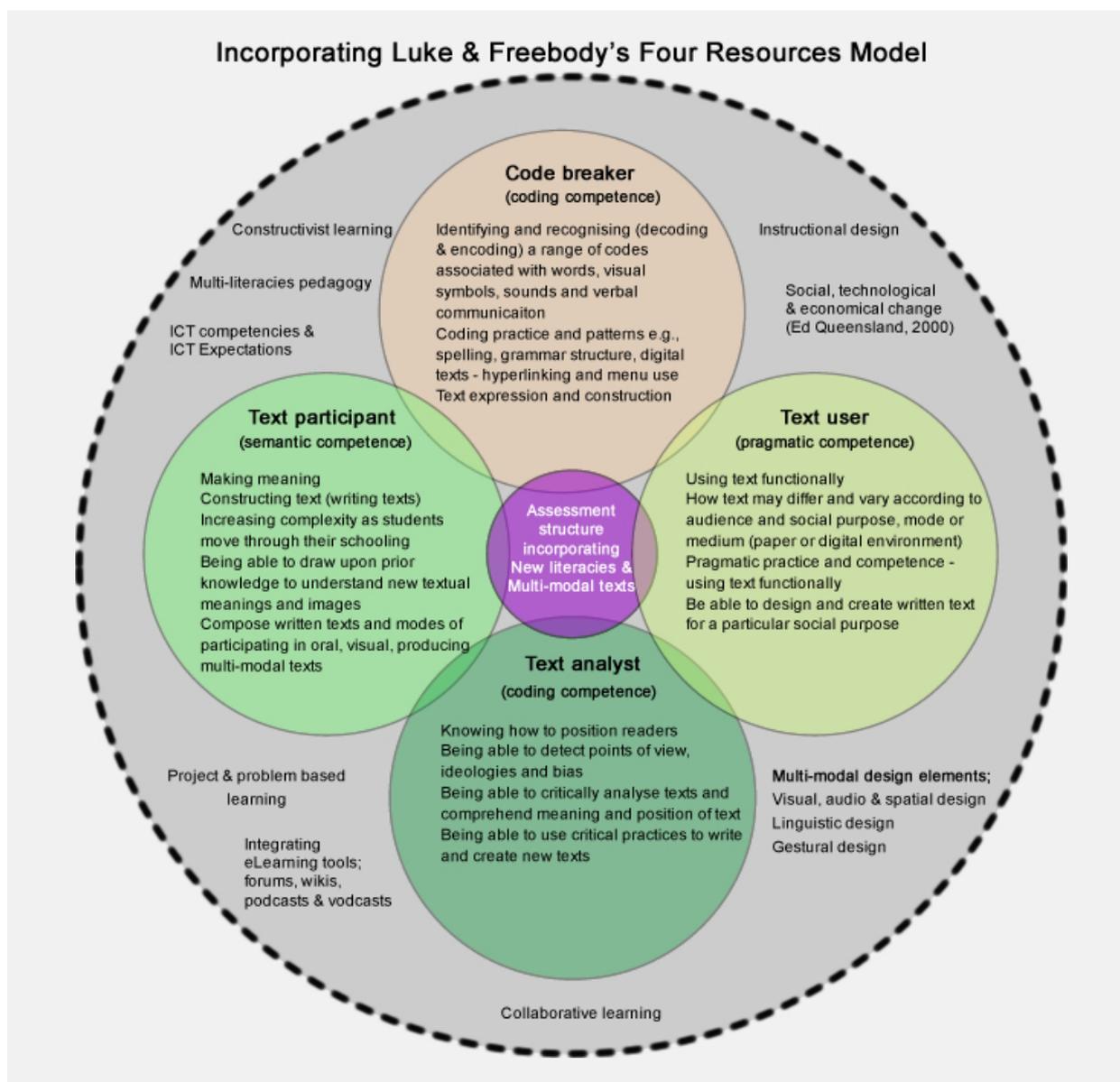
Both Whole Language and Balanced Literacy are philosophies of teaching and acquiring literacy; they provide evidence-based broad concepts to guide practice, but neither was originally intended to be programs or templates for how teachers teach or how students learn.<sup>159</sup>

Others, such as British literacy consultant Lyn Stone, maintain that the psycholinguistic approach of ‘guessing’ and ‘approximation’ reduces focus on actual language development and can contribute to writing difficulties experienced by very young learners.<sup>160</sup>

Following strong criticism of Whole Language methodologies in the early 2000s, government inquiries in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States affirmed phonics as pivotal to the effective teaching of reading.

Nevertheless, Australian advocates of Balanced Literacy included prominent academics and organisations such as ALEA and AATE, who tendered submissions to the 2005 National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy and supported the Four Resources Model developed by Allan Luke and Peter Freebody.<sup>161</sup>

Figure 4: Adaptation of Luke and Freebody's Four Resources Model<sup>162</sup>



The Four Resources Model may be regarded as an attempt at compromise, bringing together whole language, critical literacy and multiliteracies. While the 2005 National Inquiry referred to the model as “widely acknowledged and espoused among Australian teacher educators and classroom teachers”, it was considered to lack “empirical support.”<sup>163</sup> The Inquiry also deemed it unworkable because too few teachers possessed the “knowledge, training and teaching strategies” to pass on the necessary “code-breaking resources.”<sup>164</sup> The Four Resources model remains alive in Australian education documentation. For example, in its Literacy Toolkit, the Victorian Government identifies the Four Resources Model for Writing, developed by Harris, McKenzie, Fitsimmons and Turbill,<sup>165</sup> building on the model developed by Freebody and Luke (1990)<sup>166</sup> and Luke and Freebody (1999).<sup>167</sup>

The Four Resources model also features in literacy education syllabus documentation in primary and some secondary ITE programs.

Its influence in relation to critical reading and multimodal texts is evident in the first iteration of the Australian Curriculum: English. That work was led by Peter Freebody.

The Australian Curriculum: English is built around the “complementary tenets” of traditional Latin-based grammar and systemic functional linguistics (SFL), both of which support the three strands: Language, Literature and Literacy. Literacy specialists Beryl Exley and Kathy Mills say the curriculum’s hybrid nature reflects the position that such a conceptual arrangement is “necessary for working with contemporary multimodal and cross-cultural texts.”<sup>168</sup>

## Literacy in freefall (2000)

In 2003, Peter Freebody and Allan Luke stated that “this century-long search for a ‘holy grail’ of literacy instruction has been destructive and counterproductive.”<sup>169</sup> Simultaneously, they repudiated the idea that “there is or should be a single unitary model of reading and writing, nor a single monoculture or monologic of literacy, nor a single developmental pathway to literacy through schooling.”<sup>170</sup> For Australian students and their teachers, it remains highly problematic that — as conceded by these two influential academics — “one of the major critiques of experiential, meaning-driven approaches to literacy education has been its reliance on ‘natural’ processes of acquisition and development.”<sup>171</sup>

Three decades into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, policy instability is mirrored in a national curriculum said to be mired in “unclear policy and confusing standards”<sup>172</sup> and described as a “hodgepodge of fashionable fads.”<sup>173</sup> These ‘confusing standards’ and ‘fashionable fads’ include inconsistent training of teachers and adherence to constructivist and critical literacy approaches, including a hangover from Whole Language.

As recently as 2015, then University of Wollongong academic Margarita Fajardo worried about “a culture of acquiescence” wherein English teachers “seem to favour conventional literacy practices rather than critical literacy.”<sup>174</sup>

In Fajardo’s view, the priority is to identify authors’ biases and to “instil in students that using appropriate language forms to promote equitable world views may be more important than being grammatically correct.”<sup>175</sup>

In a climate of new literacy practices afforded by digital media, students are portrayed as “effective participants in emerging multiliteracies.”<sup>176</sup> Professor Len Unsworth says young learners must “understand how the resources of language, image and digital rhetoric can be deployed independently and interactively to construct different kinds of meanings.”<sup>177</sup>

The expectation that teachers will have expertise in “language, image and digital rhetoric” begs questions about the capacity of teacher education programs to address any deficits in these areas. This is particularly relevant in the case of universities accepting students with low senior secondary results and when, as literacy specialist Dr Peter Knapp argues, Australia’s “national and state curriculum documents lack any real precision on how writing should be taught.”<sup>178</sup>

Unresolved concerns about Australian students’ knowledge and skills in English mean that new approaches continue to be put forward.

A recent example is the *National Literacy and Numeracy Learning Progressions*,<sup>179</sup> intended to be paired with online formative assessment (continuous individual assessment) instruments.<sup>180</sup>

There is no evidence of this strategy being used by any high-performing education system to improve teaching and learning in literacy. Nevertheless, ACARA and the NSW Department of Education claim that these additional tools will “help to ensure literacy and numeracy are taught explicitly in schools, and that the literacy and numeracy needs of all students can be addressed.”<sup>181</sup>

In New South Wales, where “writing had been “forgotten” amid a strong public policy focus on reading,”<sup>182</sup> these lengthy documents purport to “allow teachers to more accurately locate a student’s current literacy and numeracy knowledge, understanding and skills to support planning for learning and teaching from the syllabus.”<sup>183</sup>

ACARA claims that the Literacy Progression “does not replace the Australian Curriculum: English” but “provides maximum student learning benefits when used as part of a whole-school strategy that involves professional learning and collaboration between teachers.”<sup>184</sup>

At a time when teachers complain of administrative burdens that make it harder to deliver the ‘crowded’ curriculum, the addition of learning progressions might appear counter-intuitive. According to literacy expert Professor Claire Wyatt-Smith, “The teaching of writing lacks coherence”, with “a maze of curriculum documents and maze of standards competing for teachers’ attention.”<sup>185</sup>

Researchers Franz Mosher and Margaret Heritage cite their investigation of American and New Zealand models to argue that “a well-defined, ordered curriculum can function, and provide many of the same benefits” afforded to learning progressions.<sup>186</sup>

In New Zealand, teachers deliver a “coherent organizational framework for curriculum that incorporates a progression in the acquisition of the knowledge, skills and understanding that promote literacy across the period of compulsory schooling.”<sup>187</sup> Its implementation has not been seamless.

Learning progressions are not new, but they function in ways unfamiliar to most Australian teachers, meaning professional learning is needed in their application as well as in the use of the associated online formative assessments. Taxpayers deserve a detailed evaluation of the effectiveness of this project.

## Conclusions

A combination of inconsistent academic expectations and practices, state and territory freelancing in curriculum implementation and teacher education, adoption of experimental methodologies, and failure to undertake regular, forensic evaluation of policies and practices has led to a loss of community confidence in Australian literacy education.

Pockets of excellence doubtless exist, but decades of policy instability and pedagogical experimentation have resulted in a literacy lottery in Australian school education.

If writing — in particular — still matters (and the various versions of the curriculum around the country indicate that it does), Australian education authorities and educators must redress historic policy failings while simultaneously responding to emerging imperatives and opportunities.

Unlike high-performing education systems such as Singapore and British Columbia, Australian education systems and curriculum documentation provide little guidance concerning the teaching of writing.<sup>188</sup> Initial teacher education programs have largely dropped the ball on writing instruction, at least in terms of ensuring that all graduating teachers demonstrate sophisticated control of the rules and conventions of English.

It is possible that the loss of teacher expertise in English language usage may be insurmountable.

There is no question about the extraordinary influence of rapidly changing technology on 21st century life and work. Students deserve every opportunity to work with digital tools to assist their acquisition of knowledge and development of communication skills.

However, the adherence of the Australian Curriculum: English to contemporary *multi multi multi* approaches

does little to address Australia's systemic failure to achieve and maintain high standards in English language instruction, specifically in writing.

As Drs Daylight and O'Carroll have observed in their work with teacher education undergraduates, "each year from 2014 to 2018, as our cohort became more and more 'digitally native', we observed greater difficulties with long form reading and consistently coherent writing."<sup>189</sup>

Significantly, an emerging body of research identifies the reasons for individuals choosing to become English teachers, and they do *not* include writing. The findings are particularly relevant to the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia.<sup>190</sup>

It must be noted that the much-heralded LANTITE, which purports to ensure that graduating teachers have the necessary literacy skills for working in Australian classrooms, includes only multiple choice and short answer items. The website specifies that **No extended writing is required**.<sup>191</sup> That assessment of teacher competence has been developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research.

A further concern is the failure to undertake rigorous research to establish the applicability and utility of existing and new methodologies in the Australian school context.

Finally, the variation in educational standards and pedagogical practices across Australia is a key hindrance and constant source of tension. The exertion of state and territory independence in this aspect of public policy makes it difficult to envisage the collaboration and consistency needed to deliver improved writing outcomes for all.

# Recommendations

## Australian Curriculum

- Develop an overarching intellectual framework for the Australian Curriculum that makes English literacy expectations visible and mandatory across every learning area and for every level of schooling, reflecting the best available evidence for learning, providing clear guidance to all teachers and incorporating disciplinary knowledge and skills as applicable.
- Remove the Australian Curriculum General Capability (Literacy).

## National assessment strategy

- Replace the NAPLAN writing test with an annual English language proficiency assessment for all year groups that allows students to demonstrate knowledge and skills acquired to date.

## Teacher Accreditation and Professional Learning

- Revise the AITSL National Professional Standards for Teachers (and Principals) to establish explicit

alignment with the Australian Curriculum, particularly in relation to professional expectations of literacy education.

- Mandate rigorous literacy testing for entry to Initial Teacher Education programs, followed by nationally accredited and consistent, annual professional learning in English language and literacy (both generic and discipline-specific).
- Require all current teachers to demonstrate capacity, or undertake a qualification in literacy as a component of teacher accreditation.
- Allocate appropriate jurisdictional funding for ongoing professional learning in the teaching of writing (online professional courses, micro credentialling).<sup>192</sup>

## Research

- Commit to Australia-based research (inclusive of NAPLAN and PISA data) to explain the performance trajectory of the nation's students and inform policy.

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## Appendix 1. Chronology of Literacy Theories and Practices

	Theories of Learning	Pedagogical Approaches in Australia	Australian Proponents
1901		Explicit teaching	
1960s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critical Pedagogy (Freire)</li> <li>• Whole Language (Goodman, K &amp; Y)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critical Literacy</li> <li>• Whole Language</li> </ul>	
1970s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constructivism (Vygotsky)</li> <li>• Critical Pedagogy (Freire)</li> <li>• Whole Language (Goodman, K &amp; Y)</li> <li>• Process Theory of Composition (Emig, Elbow &amp; Murray)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critical Literacy</li> <li>• Whole Language</li> <li>• Process Writing</li> </ul>	

1980s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constructivism (Vygotsky)</li> <li>• Critical Pedagogy (Freire)</li> <li>• Whole Language (Goodman, K &amp; Y)</li> <li>• Process Theory of Composition (Emig, Elbow &amp; Murray)</li> <li>• Semiotic Functional Model of Language or Hallidayan Theory (Halliday, 1985)</li> <li>• Genre (Martin, 1985; Halliday, 1985)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critical Literacy</li> <li>• Whole Language</li> <li>• Process Writing (Donald Graves, 1983)</li> <li>• Functional Approach to Grammar</li> <li>• Text Types (genre)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brian Cambourne &amp; Jan Turbill</li> <li>• Beverly Derewianka</li> <li>• Beverly Derewianka, James Martin</li> </ul>
1990s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constructivism (Vygotsky)</li> <li>• Critical Pedagogy (Freire)</li> <li>• Process Theory of Composition (Emig, Elbow, &amp; Murray)</li> <li>• Whole Language (Goodman, K &amp; Y)</li> <li>• Semiotic Functional Model of Language or Hallidayan Theory (Halliday, 1985)</li> <li>• Genre (Martin, 1985; Halliday, 1985)</li> <li>• Multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Balanced Literacy (Pressley) [Whole Language + Process Writing]</li> <li>• Critical Literacy</li> <li>• Functional Approach to Grammar</li> <li>• Text Types (genre)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ALEA, AATE, ACARA, Brian Cambourne &amp; Jan Turbill</li> <li>• Allan Luke, Peter Freebody, Barbara Comber, Mary Macken-Horarik</li> <li>• Beverly Derewianka, Frances Christie. Mary Macken-Horarik, Sally Humphrey, Susan Feez</li> <li>• Beverly Derewianka, James Martin, Frances Christie</li> </ul>
2000s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constructivism (Piaget &amp; Vygotsky)</li> <li>• Critical Pedagogy (Freire)</li> <li>• Semiotic Functional Model of Language or Hallidayan Theory (Halliday, 1985)</li> <li>• Genre (Martin,1985: Halliday, 1985))</li> <li>• Multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Balanced Literacy (Pressley) [Whole Language + Process Writing]</li> <li>• Four Resources Model (critical literacy in a postmodern text-culture)</li> <li>• Functional Approach to Grammar</li> <li>• Text Types (genre)</li> <li>• Subject-specific literacy (aka Curriculum Literacies; Disciplinary Literacy)</li> <li>• Multiliteracies</li> </ul> <p>Other:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NAPLAN (text types)</li> <li>• Literacy progression</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AATE, ALEA, ACARA, Brian Cambourne &amp; Jan Turbill</li> <li>• Allan Luke, Peter Freebody, Barbara Comber, Mary Macken-Horarik</li> <li>• Beverly Derewianka, Sally Humphrey, Frances Christie, Mary Macken-Horarik, Susan Feez, Mary Schleppegrel, Kristina Love</li> <li>• Beverly Derewianka, James Martin, David Rose.</li> <li>• Len Unsworth, Sally Humphrey, Mary Macken-Horarik</li> <li>• Kathy Mills, Len Unsworth, Eveline Chan, Clare Wyatt-Smith, Mary Macken-Horarik, Misty Adoniou, Carmen Luke</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ACARA</li> <li>• ACARA</li> </ul>

## Appendix 2. Glossary

AARE	Australian Association for Research in Education
AATE	Australian Association of Teachers of English
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Commission
ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
AERO	Australian Education Research Organisation
AITSL	Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership
ALEA	Australian Literacy Educators Association
ANU	Australian National University
CESE	Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation
DESE	Department of Education, Skills and Employment
ECU	Edith Cowan University
ESA	Education Services Australia
ETA NSW	English Teachers Association of New South Wales
IPA	Institute of Public Affairs
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
LANTITE	Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
NESA	New South Wales Education Standards Authority
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PETAA	Primary English Teaching Association Australia
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Program for International Student Assessment
TEMAG	Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group
VUCA	Volatile – Uncertain – Complex - Ambiguous

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Dr Deidre Clary is a former teacher of English and Deputy Principal in Australian secondary schools. She is an Adjunct Senior Lecturer in Secondary English and literacies education at the University of New England (NSW) and is currently teaching in the Secondary English program and the Master of Education program at the University of South Carolina. During a recent stay in Australia, Deidre was a curriculum consultant with ACARA, specialising in comparative curriculum studies. Her current research interests include adolescent literacy, critical media literacy and writing pedagogies.



### Fiona Mueller

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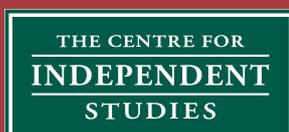
Dr Fiona Mueller is an Adjunct Scholar with the Centre for Independent Studies. After teaching English and foreign languages in secondary schools for over twenty years, Fiona joined the former NSW Board of Studies (now NESA) to work in education policy and curriculum development. On completion of her doctoral thesis, she taught at two universities and became Head of ANU College at the Australian National University. In 2016-2017, Fiona was Director of Curriculum at the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), during which she worked with education authorities across all sectors and jurisdictions and contributed to national and international research projects.

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