



# ANALYSIS PAPER SNAPSHOT



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

Deidre Clary and Fiona Mueller

We know that writing is a skill that must be learnt and practised and is all about clear thinking and mastery of language; children do not learn to write by osmosis. However, there has been a 10-year decline in Australian students' writing skills, as measured by the National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN).

- In 2018, more than one in five Year 9 students failed to achieve the national minimum standard in writing, meaning they were far less likely to be successful in the final years of secondary school.
- In 2019, Year 7 and 9 students' achievement in writing fell below the 2011 national average.
- By Year 9, boys' writing skills are, on average, up to two years behind those of girls.
- Secondary school students struggle more with writing than with reading and numeracy.
- Many aspiring teachers enter university programs with low levels of competence in English literacy and lack confidence in their writing skills when they graduate.
- The loss of teacher expertise in English language usage has dire implications for Australian students, and each

generation's decline makes it less likely that this can be reversed

- A long line of studies and reports underscores the concerns of parents, employer groups, tertiary institutions and other stakeholders about school leavers' preparedness for the literacy demands of post-school life and work.

### Policy failure has led to a generational decline in writing skills

- Over many decades, Australian literacy education has seen 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*.
- In addition to the problem of a 'crowded' and unnecessarily wordy national curriculum, there are unresolved and unhelpful tensions between advocates of different literacy methodologies.

- Generations of young learners have paid a big price for laissez-faire, constructivist approaches adopted without obvious due diligence being undertaken in relation to teacher expertise or any objective consideration of applicability — and effectiveness — for students in the Australian context.
  - There is a critical lack of rigorous, objective Australia-based research material specifically designed to justify, inform and evaluate educational change
  - In Australia, the lack of policy clarity and evidence-based decision-making is reflected in the hybrid 'balanced literacy' approach as well as the more recent fixation on 'multiliteracies', neither of which shows any potential to address this country's specific deficits in grammar and writing.
- Literacy expert Professor Claire Wyatt-Smith pinpoints that: "The teaching of writing lacks coherence", with "a maze of curriculum documents and maze of standards competing for teachers' attention."
- Writing has been largely 'forgotten' amid a much stronger policy focus on reading, likely due to the national preoccupation with Australian students' declining performance in international assessments of reading and mathematics
  - One of the major hindrances to improving English literacy standards is the variation in teacher education programs across Australia, partly the result of states and territories adhering to ACARA's advice 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."
  - There is massive disparity between public concerns about student progress and teacher expertise and professional organisations' claims of high standards and achievement.

## Solutions

- Australian education must focus on well-structured and explicit ways of teaching that ensure mastery of grammar

and high-quality written expression, and that needs to happen across all areas of the curriculum and throughout every year of schooling.

- Elsewhere in the world, high-performing systems know what works and are absolutely clear about the importance of high-quality language strategies.
- A critical first step is to conduct forensic, objective analysis of past policy decisions – and their effectiveness — in Australian literacy education
- The 2021 *Review of the Australian Curriculum* offered an ideal opportunity to evaluate literacy methodologies as part of 'refining, realigning and decluttering' a 'crowded' national curriculum. Regrettably, the narrow terms of reference did not include this.
- The 2021 *Quality Initial Teacher Education Review* — the latest in a long line of such investigations — aims to ensure that graduates of university education programs possess "the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions to be successful teachers in any Australian school." This should include a careful, objective evaluation of the literacy methodologies currently in use.
- The Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education Students (LANTITE) purports "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." There is no extended writing test, and placing the LANTITE at the *end* of teacher training programs is a stark policy difference from that of high-performing Singapore, where applicants are screened *before* admission to teacher education programs.

## Writing matters

Reversing a legacy of policy failure in Australian literacy education, including writing, depends on collaboration and consistency on the part of all those who profess to carry responsibility. At the heart of this work, there is the need for research into past policy decisions and current challenges in the Australian context.

Element	Recommendation
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.
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.
AITSL and Professional Learning	<p>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.</p> <p>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).</p> <p>Require all current teachers to demonstrate capacity, or undertake a qualification in literacy as a component of teacher accreditation.</p> <p>Allocate appropriate jurisdictional funding for ongoing professional learning in the teaching of writing (online professional courses, micro credentialling).</p>
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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