

1991

Who is teaching our children to spell? The literacy crisis in teacher education.

Owen F. Watts
Curtin University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte>



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Watts, O. F. (1991). Who is teaching our children to spell? The literacy crisis in teacher education.. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 16(1).
<http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.1991v16n1.3>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol16/iss1/3>

WHO IS TEACHING OUR CHILDREN TO SPELL?

THE LITERACY CRISIS IN TEACHER EDUCATION

Owen F. Watts
Curtin University

Anyone engaged in marking student essays at tertiary level today cannot fail but to be aware of the increasing inability of students to express themselves in grammatically correct and cogent argument. The problem is even more serious when it is prevalent among those students who are studying to become teachers. Lists of "school-boy howlers" derived from the students' essays are no longer funny, rather they are symptomatic of a crisis in literacy that is facing the educational systems of the nation. Testing of students within the Faculty of Education at Curtin University has shown that passes in Year 12 English examinations are of little use in predicting the ability of students to use language correctly or to be able to write effectively. Staff have difficulty in correcting errors because students no longer know the basic structures or understand the terminology. Is it being revisionist to call for an end to the *laissez-faire* approach of the creative writing curriculum and for a return to a more structured study of language? Do recent changes to the language curriculum, at least in Western Australia, indicate a response to community demands for more structure? This paper examines these issues in the light of an increasing inability of Education graduates to ensure their pupils achieve an acceptable level of literacy.

Testing of some 200 first year students in the Faculty of Education at Curtin University over the past three years has shown that passes in the Year 12 English examinations are of little use in predicting the ability of students to use language correctly or to be able to write effectively. The first year pre-service student groups in the Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary streams were tested in March and November in 1988, 1989 and in March 1990 using the ACER English Skills Assessment Test and an essay test adapted from the Cambridge Proficiency in English Examination. The results show that, after applying competency criteria to the functional skills, a substantial proportion of students in each stream had unacceptable levels of basic skills.

Recent reports into teacher education have indicated the need to increase the language competency of teachers. The Beazley Report

(1984) in Western Australia recommended that the literacy standards of teacher education students be improved. Changes to the upper school subject choice has, however, lessened the centrality of English in the curriculum. While a pass in English or English Literature is a requirement for Matriculation to Curtin University, the level of pass may not indicate competency. Recent reports from the United Kingdom suggest that examiners are prepared to accept papers riddled with poor grammar and spelling as long as the candidates' intent is conveyed. Anyone engaged in marking student essays at tertiary level today cannot fail to be aware of the increasing inability of students to express themselves in grammatically sound, syntactically correct and cogent argument. The problem is even more serious when it is prevalent among those students who are studying to become teachers. Lists of "school-boy-howlers" derived from student essays are no longer funny, rather they are symptomatic of a crisis in literacy that is facing the educational systems of the nation. Staff have difficulty in correcting errors because students no longer know the basic structures or understand the terminology.

An even more disturbing outcome of the decline is the inability of these students when, as classroom teachers, they are expected to teach a syllabus that is beginning to reflect community concern by re-emphasizing functional skills. The new K-7 English Curriculum introduced in 1990 by the Western Australian Ministry of Education, requires the teacher to have a personal level of language competence that, for many students in the tested cohorts at Curtin University, would seem to be beyond their ability.

This paper argues that if the teachers who are expected to teach such a syllabus themselves have a degree of competence below that required, the problem of literacy at all levels can be expected to worsen. It is also suggested that only by directly teaching the functional skills and the content of language can the problem be overcome. It is time, it is argued, that content take precedence over process and that creative writing be seen as useful only after the functional language skills have been thoroughly inculcated.

When the question of literacy standards is raised, there is usually a debate about whether one has defined "literacy" as the ability to use language at the superficial level or whether there is something larger that includes the context in which the language is being used. Remediation programs that view literacy as an integral part of the social psychology program in which the enhancement of the individual's self-concept is central call for the wider perspective. Such programs both reject the view that there is one literacy which does service for all contexts and situations, and deny the perception that students either have good expression or they do not. The academic nature demanded of university writing, it is argued, is quite different from that required in other forms of writing, though the superficial demands of the language remain the same. Students also perform differently in different study settings. The demands of analytic report writing are different from the skills required in creative writing. Literacy, by these criteria, has many forms and literature behaviour, by the same individual, may vary markedly according to context, content and intention (Clanchy, 1985, p3).

However, in arguing the case for concern about the context of the use of language, has the language itself been forgotten? Has the perception that the details are not important, providing the message is conveyed, been so effectively taught to the current generation of tertiary students, that their ability to construct a sound, grammatically correct sentence is now deficient? The results from testing the superficial skills of language usage among the first year intake to the Teacher Education students at Curtin University would seem to support the conjecture.

Samson and Radloff (1989, 1990) have reported their findings derived from testing of some two hundred first year students in the Faculty of Education. The first year pre-service student groups in each of the Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary streams were tested in March and November in 1988 and 1989 and in March 1990 using the ACER English Skills Assessment Test and an essay test adapted from the Cambridge Proficiency in English Examination. The results show that, after applying competency criteria to the functional skills, a substantial proportion of the students in each stream had unacceptable levels of basic skills. Samson (1989) in reporting the testing argued that "spelling and punctuation are skills which can be learned, provided effort, carefulness and motivation are employed". In which case, it was suggested, when setting the competency criteria for the basic skills, and given

the importance of those skills in the basic armory of teachers, that a score above 75% should be the cut-off point. The results for each stream over each of the testing periods showed that for spelling, competency was achieved by 70% of the Early Childhood group, 65% of the Primary group and only 43% of the Secondary group. When the measure was applied to punctuation the results were even worse with 37% of the Early Childhood group, 27.5% of the Primary group and a dismal 25% of the Secondary group achieving competency. The results over the three years of the testing program have show little change.

In setting the competency criteria for the ACER test, account was taken of those factors, such as ability levels, school experience, ethnicity and family background, which might determine the development of skills in reading comprehension. If better than a 60% score was applied, then 74.5% of the Early Childhood group, 71% of the Primary group and 62.5% of the Secondary group were shown to have reasonable comprehension skills.

A remediation program was established for those ten students from each program considered "at-risk" or achieving the lowest totals on their combined scores.

Such testing of first year students serves to highlight the problem currently confronting tertiary institutions. Is it the role of the universities to be teaching basic grammar, spelling and punctuation? It cannot be that only Curtin University is faced with a growing demand for service English classes from across the campus. Students are graduating from the high schools with passes in Year 12 English which, if anything, should surely indicate that they are at least functionally literate. Unfortunately, that can no longer be taken for granted. It is all too easy for Clanchy (1985) and others to argue for the multi-dimensionality of literacy and in so doing avoid the issue of functional literacy. Educators in Western Australia argued the difficulty of setting literacy tests on the grounds that no-one could define what it was that the tests would measure and that simply to measure the basics would be superficial.

No-one, it seems, is prepared to suggest that the situation will not improve until accountability for the declining standards is sheeted home. The community has begun to call for the re-introduction of language skills programs in schools while the teachers continue to avoid the issue.

Recent reports into teacher education have indicated the need to increase the language competency of teachers. The Beazley Report (1984) in Western Australia recommended that the literacy standards of teachers be improved. The problem faced by tertiary lecturers in helping students overcome their difficulties with language are well illustrated in the examples taken from student essays (see attached). In talking about grammatical errors, poor syntax, punctuation mistakes or even spelling, the lecturer is confronted by the almost total ignorance of the students. The correction of such common errors as those of noun/verb and noun/pronoun agreement does not proceed very far if the students do not know what a noun is. It would seem not unreasonable to anticipate that students who have been in classrooms for fifteen years would be able to get that far. Similarly, the scattering of possessive apostrophes across any word ending in 's', the imaginative use of contractions and the confusion of preposition and auxiliary verb in almost any piece of student writing would suggest a widespread lack of understanding of basic language structures.

What is so disturbing about the examples given is that they were taken from several classes of final year students less than three months from their appointment to their own classes. How can the community expect a raising of standards of literacy if the teachers who will be teaching the English curriculum cannot themselves manipulate the language? The newly introduced K-7 English Curriculum (1990) of the Ministry of Education in Western Australia reflects the growing community concern with functional literacy skills. The syllabus requires the teachers to have a personal level of language competency that, for many of the final year cohort, would seem to be beyond their ability. The testing of the first year students would seem to indicate that the situation shows few signs of improving.

The 1990 English Curriculum requires teachers to give specific attention to punctuation, word awareness, phonology and graphophonics. At the Year 4/5 level the teacher is required to "teach children to identify and use Greek, Latin and other roots, base words, prefixed and suffixes". At Year 2/3 the child should be introduced to synonyms, antonyms and homophones, gender and collective nouns and inflectional verb endings. To many of the newly graduated teachers such syllabus statements might be well nigh meaningless.

The problem then becomes circular. If the teachers graduate from the tertiary institutions with a paucity of language skills then they cannot be held responsible when the products of their teaching return equally deficient. Teacher education courses have notoriously low failure rates in most universities. Teacher educators have long held the belief that the qualities that go to constitute a good teacher should not be measured on scales that prevail in other areas of the university. The affective qualities may outweigh the cognitive, but is society willing to continue to accept that being a "good" teacher is sufficient to excuse being a poor spelling teacher or even a teacher who cannot spell? If teachers are to assist their pupils to develop language competencies, then they need to have those abilities themselves. The question remains, who is teaching our children to spell if the teachers themselves cannot spell? It might be argued that the question is simplistic but teacher education students today are graduating with Bachelor of Arts (Education) degrees. Surely a Bachelor of Arts degree says of the holder that this person is literate and educated. Teacher educators championed the change from teacher training to teacher education to give expression to the latter quality. Can it be hoped that teacher educators will also argue for a return to the centrality of language skills content in the school curriculum in order to give credibility to the former?

REFERENCES

- Beazley, K. (1984) *Education in Western Australia*. Report of the committee on inquiry. Perth Government Printer.
- Clanchy, J. (1985) Improving student writing. *HERDSA News*, 7, 3, 3-24.
- Radloff, A. and Samson, J. (1990) *Expository writing at tertiary level*. Paper presented to the annual conference of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australia, Brisbane, 6-9 July.
- Samson, J. (1989) *Faculty literacy programme*. Progress report to the Faculty of Education, Curtin University, March.
- Samson, J. (1990) *Literacy levels of first year teacher education students*. Paper presented to the annual conference of the WA Institute for Educational Research, Perth, 24-25 August.
- K-7 English Curriculum*. (1990) Ministry of Education. Perth: Government Printer.

APPENDIX

The extracts appearing below are taken from essays submitted by final year students in the Bachelor of Arts (Education) course. Most of the essays from which they have been drawn are literally filled with similar prose.

I feel that the report doesn't supply the reader with sufficient information about the chairman of the Committee it only states that he is a reciprocate of the Australian Order.

Many people feel intimidated at such vocal gatherings that their relevant issues are never raised.

There must have been a lot of well prepared ...

... must have been a lot of the states teachers ...

For anyone to understand ... then they must recognise the definitions given by the committee as what they passed their findings on.

The report then goes on to look at what they/the Committee ...

These were not recommendations merely a section of probable models.

... it is important for the response from the department to made available for workshops etc.

The issues of members of the community acting as guarantors for the schools loans is restrictive for the schools.

The Beazley Report was done by a lot of ...

I found that the parent that I interviewed, the govt. school principle and the two students believed that the community should be involved in the decisions made at the school level they affect them as parts of the school community.

This is particularly evident in high schools, the rest remains advisory to the principal ...

Generally the overall concensus was to favour greater community participation in schooling, obviously the advantages were recorded as being ...

The Education Department has a policy which wants teachers to be aware of the inequalities inherent in sex role stereotyping and that curriculum needs to be open to boys and girl.

Central services such as the Curriculum Branch and other developing materials are cautioned to be aware of it.

It seems obvious to me that the gathering of evidence was clearly thought out before doing so.

Finally I feel the Committee used this evidence very well by debating with it.

Throughout it was clear that the public was constantly involved and informed, this is important as it is eventually going to affect them.

I am writing about this to you because I hope to get some kind of feedback on my views of the issue from a member of Parliament of Western Australia, ie. You.

I decided to write to you to talk about something that has greatly influenced me lately, something that you should know about, if you already don't.

The only problem, or should I say, disadvantage for him doing this report is that the members in the Committee tried to cover almost too much information, and was therefore only covered in more generalised terms than specific detail of each area.

Finally, its great that the report ...

There needs to be limit imposed and in my opinion, the committee should have provided the whole schooling community with appropriate guide-lines regarding constraints, as well as for the encouragement of community involvement, to solve the possibilities of teachers being forced to ask of themselves and other teaching staff, "Can I be made to teach certain things in the classroom by members of the community, involvement that the teachers put forward and what I believe is the real issue in the involvement of the community in the school environment.

No organisation can operate correctly, if there is no ability to communicate between it's members. This includes the schools members to the community organisations.

I feel that the terms of reference in which the committee was required to inquire into and report upon were important matters in education and consisted of a wide range of areas that were of importance and worthy of searching into.

This paper will also provide for and againsts for the recommendations made by the Beazley Report.

The terms of reference located at the beginning of this report is fairly good with a lot of coverage on different areas, but however well these seem to be thought out, I don't feel that 13 terms of reference are adequate enough for all the problems that occur in schools, and the terms don't deal adequately with the issues presented as they are much too broad and general.

Which could be helped if the community were to get a closer look at the running of schools, and what actually does take place.

There is also a need to find real life possibilities coming from the report items, which would make an impact, and not just become an overcoat on existing problems in the education system.

Education is a communitive thing ...

He (Pestalozzi) solved this problem by the adventation of the Primary School. He also believed you learn by the 3 H's ie. Hand, Head, Heart.

... society and it's evils.

You can train someone to do something, but they may never know exactly why they are doing it.

... indoctrinating is teaching by doctriation.

The main thing is for the teacher to understand and organize their own values so they know about themselves.

Propose questions which allows the child to act on their own values and can listen to other's values.

The teacher has a committment to knowledge they are teaching.

... is where their is a a skill to be learned.

Giving the child each equal oppotunity and bringing out their hidden potential.

... to see where the child was at in their stage of development.

The teacher should also care for and be committed to the child this will help the child, in turn care for both the teacher and the knowledge which they are imparting.

... practicing the skills.

... societie's institutions are evil.

... is the principle of feature of Soviet education.

Montessori was an infamous educator in the slums of Rome. She was originally a lady doctor.

Also because it is quite logical and easy to understand.

They both try to attract attention with their headings, photo's and sometimes hints of sarcasm. The daily press articles always seemed to be standing on someones toes though - leaving room for someone to bite back.

People are being picky about things - when you can pick to pieces what they are saying while being picky.

... the front page is also shown with a person who could be a stressful teacher - quite effective.

Which gives the impression because their are quite a few articles and only a few letters that they are put in the paper which are not interesting (articles) - therefore hardly read - or the articles themselves are uninteresting.

They are placed throughout the newspaper, therefore it is isn't considered to be of great interest or importance, it may be hard to find them.

I would of thought that ... I feel could of done it differently.

... the reasons for the labour government taking it's time in fullfilling promises.

On average their maybe only one editorial a month to do with Education. Then again if there a contraversial issue there maybe more.

... theirs a picture of Roni ...

They may not of known that ... but they may of thought ...

... how hard and time concuming the teachers job is.

Depending on the importance of the article, depends on upon the size of the heading.

An exchange of cultures.

It is trying to persuade the reader as to which is the best school to send their children to.

The aim of this article was to present the views of the N.S.W. teachers and parent group in their campaign against the Federal government because of their decision to continue funding private schools.

The argument being that there was very few "true" Aborigines left. People eventually concented for the need of special education in the Northern regions of Australia.

The general concensus was that these experiences would develop the child within their own culture, whereby they are recieving maintenance towards their own herritage.

The editor has written about, four primary school children that will represent W.A. at a children's international summer camp in Japan.

The heading "Off to Japan" is catchy heading used to catch attention.

Letters to the editor allows for the public to write in their opinion on a current issue.

... to trot out the hackneyed cliques.

However the article gives insiuendous of schools, small private schools, "mushrooming" all over the country.

The aim of the newspaper article "New funding rules hit fringe schools" was to inform readers of the policy to restrict funds for new private schools, whereby waiting 24 months for Federal funding.

The articles seemed to mainly be placed on the left hand pages of the paper.

Most of the articles written about the various issues were emotive with headlines appealing to the reader because they are directly linked to them.

The aim of the article is to present his won opinion about the issue ...

SPELLING

arguement	origional sin	experiential
equiptment	forrest	sequencial
indoctrinization	difine	recieves
balance	educatuation	incoperates
comptempory	accomodate	occurr
repetition	inately	aboriginal
Knowledge Explotion		alot
waryness	oppertunities	attendance
criterea	consistant	impliment
beleives	independance	intergrated
repetative	repeatative	incalcate
socialable	agreeance	pocession
babtized	enforse	sences
benifits	connatations	diedactic
usually	handicaped	utillizing
councillors (for Guidance Officers)		labell
equipt (equipped)	relevent	trys (tries)
comradery	disfunctional	estemel
wealfare	approximately	ect (for etc)
proffessional	collage (college)	
modle (model)	excepting (accepting)	
acquire	incrediable	rappone
attached	aid (for aide)	personell
compliment (for complement)		challange
ajoining	seperate	recieve
dificiencies	acheivement	waisting
flexable	bumbs (bumps)	fulfill
fundemental	rappoor	noticable
occurrances	bused (bussed)	perminent
sensistive	stratergies	explit
recieve	privite	exstent
critisisms	reasonably	falacey
provokation	proffession	all to-gether
contraversial	benifical	liase