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# How well prepared are Australian preservice teachers to teach early reading skills?

According to national and international reports, Australian school students' performance in reading has shown a steady decline and a large percentage of students fail to achieve the reading skills necessary for life after school ([Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2017](#); [Thomson, De Bortoli, & Underwood, 2017](#)).

As with any area of learning, reading included, it is the beginning instruction that supplies the foundation on which to build more complex skills and knowledge. The two main skills that are necessary for early reading success are phonemic awareness and phonics. Phonemic awareness focuses on the smallest units of speech sounds in words, and phonics knowledge is based on the relationship between the alphabet letters and their corresponding sounds (phonemes). Research has shown that phonics knowledge plays a significant role in learning to read and spell, and that it is best taught using a systematic and explicit approach. Initial reading instruction, therefore, needs to be organised and delivered according to best practice identified in the research.

Following a systematic review of the literature in which the preparedness and knowledge of preservice teachers to teach early reading was investigated (Meeks, Stephenson, Kemp, & Madelaine, 2017), a survey, based on the surveys used in the research, was designed to investigate the subject-specific early reading knowledge of final-year preservice teachers enrolled in Australian primary and early childhood teacher education programs (see Meeks & Kemp, 2017, for the complete paper). Although all Australian teacher education institutions were invited to participate only 25% agreed to forward the survey to their students.

Preservice teachers' perception of their preparedness and ability to teach beginning reading and spelling was investigated as part of the study. The term preparedness was used to describe how well an institution was perceived to have provided the knowledge and skills necessary to teach beginning reading and spelling. On average, preservice teachers perceived themselves as being prepared. However, when questioned about their ability to teach the content of phonological awareness and phonics skills, up to 50% of preservice teachers indicated that they were not confident in their ability to teach these particular components of early literacy.

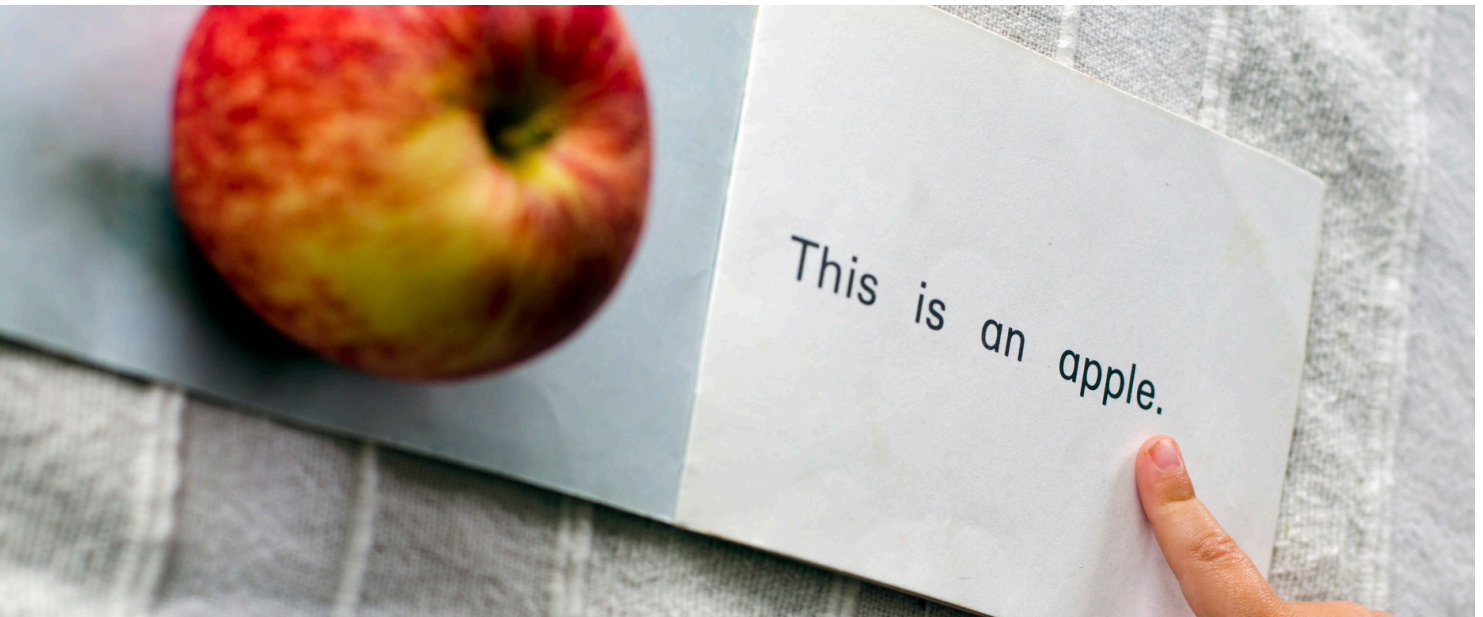
Preservice teachers' content knowledge and skills to teach early reading and spelling were also investigated. Results indicated that preservice teachers' knowledge of specific components of early reading instruction, such as phonemic awareness and phonics, was highly variable. For example, although most preservice teachers chose the correct definition for the word phoneme, fewer than half chose the correct definition for the term phonemic awareness. Most preservice teachers could select a pair of words that had the same initial sound, but many were unable to reverse the sounds in 'ice'



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and ‘enough’, or count phonemes in words. Questions designed to assess phonics knowledge revealed that fewer than half of respondents correctly defined the term ‘consonant blend’, and only 11% correctly identified a word that contained an open syllable. It is interesting to note that the correlation between the preservice teachers’ perception of their preparedness and ability to teach early reading and their knowledge and skill, as measured by the survey, was small and statistically non-significant.

The results of this study support the findings of previous research that few preservice teachers have sufficient knowledge and expertise to be effective teachers of early reading and spelling despite the fact that they generally believe that they are well prepared to teach these skills. These results indicate that there may be a need for reform in teacher preparation programs, especially in the area of early reading instruction.

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