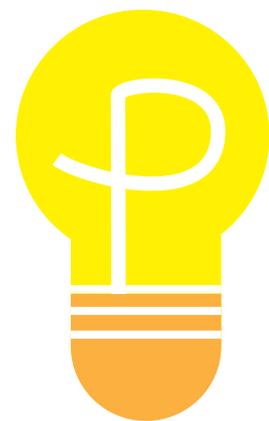




# Towards competency standards for language and literacy teachers

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**PrimTEd**



# Introduction

This paper outlines the preliminary position taken in the **Literacy Teaching Core Competency Standards Project** of the Consolidated Literacy Working Group of the Primary Teacher Education Project (PrimTEd). PrimTEd is a component of the Department of Higher Education and Training's Teaching and Learning Development Capacity Improvement Programme (TLDCIP). This document should be read in conjunction with the draft version of the *Standards for South African language and literacy graduate teachers* compiled by the Group.

This set of standards is a response to the findings of the Initial Teacher Education Research Project (ITERP) on the curriculum for English for Intermediate Phase student teachers and its enactment at five South African universities (Reed, 2014; Deacon, 2016) and to the research on Grade 4 and 5 learners' performance on the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) assessment of reading comprehension in 2011 and 2016 (Howie *et al*, 2012; Howie *et al*, 2017). The second PIRLS study found that 78% of our learners cannot read for meaning – in any language – after three years of schooling. Preventing this reading failure should be a priority. Reading failure is unnecessary and preventable. The PIRLS research team gave as its first recommendation “Strengthen the teaching of reading literacy and training of pedagogical content knowledge of teachers across all languages in the Foundation Phase and especially African languages” (Howie *et al*, 2017, p. 12).

One of the key findings from the ITERP research was that Initial Teacher Education (ITE) students are offered curricula which vary greatly in their adequacy and appropriateness as preparation for teaching languages and literacy in South African classrooms. Developing standards for literacy teachers is therefore one of the mechanisms that can help to prevent catastrophic reading failure. As Deacon (2016, p. 3) puts it:

The Initial Teacher Education Research Project (ITERP) was initiated in response to growing evidence that poor learner performance in South African schools is due, in significant part, to many teachers' lack of understanding of and inability to adequately convey the content knowledge of the subjects they are teaching. Education research the world over is in increasing agreement that one of the most important determinants of educational quality is the competence of teachers. It follows that the professional education, training and development of teachers, particularly with regard to subject content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge, is central to improving the quality of teaching.

Deacon also notes (p.9) that:

None of the universities were found to be adequately teaching new IP teachers how to teach reading and writing, not just in English but in any language, and this was compounded by the absence of a focus on children's literature in most ITE curricula. Nor was any university substantively addressing issues like how teachers should help learners navigate the Grade 4 shift in LoLT from home language to English, or deal with the challenge, especially prevalent in urban areas, of multiple home languages in a single classroom. Most institutions also did not give sufficient attention to the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) in their English subject and methodology modules (Reed, 2014).

The brief for the **Literacy Teaching Core Competency Standards Project** was firstly, to undertake a literature review of literacy teaching competencies and to analyse and compare these with the presumed competencies developed in courses/modules currently offered or in development at South African universities. Then, secondly, to develop a draft set of competency standards that could be used to guide the design and delivery of language and literacy teaching components of Initial Teacher Education programmes at South African universities.

The working group took the following decisions:

- (i) To write standards that apply to the teaching of language and literacy throughout the primary school (though with a strong focus on reading instruction in the Foundation Phase) so that all teachers understand what learners are expected to know and be able to do as they first engage with reading and writing, and as they progress to reading and writing more demanding texts.

There are three main reasons for doing this:

First, some teachers whose teacher training programmes focussed on teaching language and literacy in one phase are quite likely to teach in another.

Second, in the higher grades there are likely to be some learners who need support in initial literacy development and in some instances advanced learners in lower grades who need to be challenged with more demanding language and literacy activities than those stipulated in the curriculum for their grade.

Third, every teacher is required to be a language teacher to some extent, focussing on the specialised discourse and vocabulary of the subject he or she teaches.

- (ii) To write 'exit outcome' standards so that the focus is on what language and literacy teacher graduates should know and be able to do as teachers of literacy on completion of the four year Bachelor of Education degree (or the Post Graduate Certificate in Education).
- (iii) To integrate standards that focus on assessment with standards for instructional practice<sup>1</sup>, given that assessment is an integral part of teaching.

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<sup>1</sup> It should not take us four years (i.e. when children are already in Grade 4 in the Intermediate Phase) to realise that 78 per cent of our children cannot read. Good assessments can identify vulnerable readers in Term 1 of Grade 1 already – and Foundation Phase teachers should know this profoundly, and know how to help vulnerable readers come up to speed.

## What do we mean by ‘language’ in the South African schooling context

There is a reciprocal relationship between language and reading. In the current curricula for schooling in South Africa, languages are labelled ‘Home Language’, ‘First Additional Language (FAL)’ and ‘Second Additional Language’ for teaching purposes. In reality, these labels do not capture the complexity of learners’ language proficiency and linguistic repertoires. Children start school with varying levels of language proficiency (even in their home language) and this affects how readily they learn to read. In turn, how well and how often they read has an impact on their language proficiency – it increases vocabulary, use of complex syntactic structures, general knowledge, etc. Some learners may speak two or more languages in their homes but be learning in a school where neither of these languages is taught as Home Language. Where the language(s) of learners’ homes and communities is not taught at school, this adds to the challenge of becoming literate because learners may have very little knowledge of the language in which they are expected to learn to read and write. Other learners may use as their home language a variety of a language that differs from the ‘standard’ variety taught at school as Home Language.

By the time they enter the Intermediate Phase in Grade 4, the majority of South Africa’s learners are being taught in an Additional Language (English in most cases) as the medium of instruction across the curriculum as well as learning this language as a subject. One of the challenges for all teachers working in the Intermediate Phase is to support learners’ development of proficiency in this first additional language in order to maximise their opportunities for learning (Granville *et al*, 1998). In doing so, learners’ linguistic repertoires (all the languages and language varieties they know) can be drawn on to assist their progress as speakers, readers and writers.

In devising the draft standards, we have written two standards which aim to cross the ‘Home Language’ and ‘Additional Language’ divide and which are intended to be relevant to the teaching of literacy in all languages, and one standard in which the focus is on English as the First Additional Language (because of its dominance in the current school system). As key principles are common to Home and Additional Language teaching and learning each document should be read in conjunction with the others.

These are:

- *Graduate teachers have knowledge of language and literacy and how to teach learners to read and write*
- *Graduate teachers can organise systematic language and literacy instruction with a focus on instruction in reading and writing, guided by the requirements of the curriculum*
- *Graduate teachers demonstrate that they understand the knowledge, skills, and processes required to teach English as a First Additional Language.*

# What do we mean by literacy?

At the simplest level literacy is the ability to read and use written information and to write appropriately in a range of contexts.<sup>2</sup> In South Africa, in the schooling context, that range of contexts includes literacy in a home or first language that is one of the official languages as well as in English as a First Additional Language. More broadly, literacy involves the integration of speaking, listening, viewing and critical thinking with reading and writing, and it includes the social and cultural knowledge which enables a speaker, reader or writer to recognise and use language appropriate to different situation.

In recent decades the word has often been given an expanded meaning in the word 'literacies' as referring to the ability to understand or use visual images, computers, the internet and other technology, and other basic means to understand, communicate, gain useful knowledge, and use the dominant symbol systems of a culture.

The term 'literacies' itself can be used in a narrow or expanded way.

In the narrower sense, it refers to modern communications where written forms combine with auditory, visual, spatial, oral and tactile representations. Information, especially in the media, appear in multi-modal formats, increasing the importance of understanding these representations as well as the reliance on this type of format. The term 'multiliteracies' has been applied to such literacies produced through multiple media and communication channels within the context of globalisation and technological and social change.<sup>3</sup>

Typical of such 'literacies' are the following:

- Visual literacy:** Understanding visual communications, including the ability to process and represent knowledge through images.
- Digital literacy:** Gathering and synthesizing information from digital mediums, including online sources or mediums.
- Technological literacy:** Using technology responsibly to learn, communicate, distribute, and create.

In the broader sense, there is a growing tendency to use the term 'literacies' when referring (somewhat metaphorically) to 'competence or knowledge in a specified area'. Thus one can be 'literate' in the foundational or basic knowledge of the terms, discourses, jargon, symbols and basic principles of a range of disciplines and fields of knowledge or in a particular set of skills, e.g. "I am mechanically literate." , "He is scientifically literate."

Whilst language and literacy competencies apply to the whole of this literacy continuum, the competencies and standards this document focuses on are the basic ones applying to reading and writing in the earliest phases of general education. Nothing should detract from the necessary attention being given to early reading instruction and getting the foundational matters right. This is doubly important for instruction in African languages reading and writing instruction in African languages which differ from English in significant ways and for children from high poverty homes.

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<sup>2</sup> We have taken into account the research and views of a range of leading reading researchers, including Adams, 1990, Snow *et al*, 1998, the National Reading Panel, 2000 and Pressley, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> The term 'multiliteracies' has been popularised by a number of language and literacy scholars (Street, 1995, Gee, 1996, New London Group, 1996; Cope and Kalantzis 2000, Pahl and Rowsell, 2005, Stein and Newfield, 2006, Lotherington, 2007) who argue for rethinking the future of language and literacy education within the context of major social change: the globalisation of communication and labour markets, a rapidly changing English language, cultural and linguistic diversity and new forms of global citizenship.

## What do we mean by “standards”?

We use a recent definition in a Department of Higher Education and Training presentation (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017, p. 3) as a starting point :

Teacher knowledge and practice standards are statements that describe what a teacher needs to know and be able to do to carry out their core function professionally and effectively. The statements are specific to a subject area and school phase or to a specific extended role . . . The statements are not tied to a particular school curriculum statement. They relate more to the academic and practical knowledge required to teach a particular subject or discipline well and, if met by teachers, will allow them to deliver the curriculum that is in place at a specific time, and to adapt effectively when the curriculum changes.

Currently there are no such knowledge and practice standards for teachers of reading and writing in South African schools.<sup>4</sup>

## A plan for developing knowledge and practice standards

The current state plan, the ***Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa 2011 - 2025***, is that (Departments of Basic Education and Higher Education and Training, 2011, pp. 76-77):

Teacher knowledge and practice standards in each learning area/ subject would be developed to assist teachers to identify their specific development needs focused on their core functions (such as classroom teaching of a specific subject or in a specific phase, or for school leadership and management purposes etc.). These new standards would be complemented by diagnostic (self-) assessments and targeted programmes for continuing professional development. The focus would fall directly on what a teacher needs to know and be able to do in order to perform well (e.g. in order to teach the Grade 10–12 mathematics curriculum well).

According to this document, knowledge and practice standards (and diagnostic self-assessment tailored to these standards) have to be developed “by formally constituted groups of expert teacher educators, academic subject specialists, excellent practising teachers, and individuals from NGOs and other organisations with relevant expertise” (Departments of Basic Education and Higher Education and Training, 2011, p. 88). Such standards could inform the construction of Initial Teacher Education content at the curriculum level.

It is conceptually important in developing these teacher standards to understand that their purpose is to make something else happen – e.g., for Foundation level children learning to, indeed acquire the foundations for fluent reading and writing.

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<sup>4</sup> The lack of detailed standards for the teaching of reading is widespread. The ***Preliminary Report on Teacher Preparation for Literacy Instruction***, published by the International Literacy Association in 2015 and based on a 2014 survey in the United States of America found (p. 4) that when literacy could be located within state professional teaching standards, “it was typically present in one standard.” The majority of states did not have a requirement related to a specific number of hours in literacy or reading instruction coursework (where there were such requirements it ranged from 3 to 15 hours) and half did not require any coursework at all. States did not specify requirements in the area of literacy for practical teaching. Only 14 states had any assessment requirement of the trainee’s ability in reading instruction. The report recommended that state guidelines for pre-service teacher preparation should make explicit references to what candidates should know and be able to do in relation to literacy instruction.

The characteristics of what fully literate children should be able to do are well expressed in the list below (Medwell, Wray, Poulson, and Fox ,1998, p. 3):

Literate children should:

- *read and write with confidence, fluency and understanding;*
- *be interested in books, read with enjoyment and evaluate and justify their preferences;*
- *know and understand a range of genres in fiction and poetry, and understand and be familiar with some of the ways that narratives are structured through basic literary ideas of setting, character and plot;*
- *understand and be able to use a range of non-fiction texts;*
- *be able to orchestrate a full range of reading cues (phonic, graphic, syntactic, contextual) to monitor and self-correct their own reading;*
- *plan, draft, revise and edit their own writing;*
- *have an interest in words and word meanings, and a growing vocabulary;*
- *understand the sound and spelling system and use this to read and spell accurately;*
- *have fluent and legible handwriting.*

Language and literacy standards therefore have to be very specific in order to correspond to this ultimate purpose, that is, that children create are able to create meaning through reading and writing texts in a range of genres and modes.

We recognize that though reading instruction is an increasingly complex matter, developing the higher level literacy competencies is only accessible to children who can already read and reading research since the 1980s has consistently shown that knowledge of the sound/letter code is the strongest predictor of reading ability in the early years.

Also increasingly clear is the crucial importance of the five major components of reading, namely:

- *Phonemic awareness*
- *Word recognition*
- *Comprehension*
- *Vocabulary*
- *Fluency*

To Medwell *et al's* list above, can be included the following higher level competencies identified by Pahl and Rowsell (2005) in their work on multimodal literacies in the digital age:

- *use the internet to make connections between the local and the global*
- *use writing and online communication to participate with virtual communities linked with current interests;*
- *create multimodal texts using the affordances of language, sound, visuals, movement, animation, colour, logos, font*
- *draw on out-of-school language and literacy practices when designing and producing texts in the classroom.*

# What do literacy teachers need to know and do?

Medwell *et al* (1998, pp. 5-9) also provide a helpful set of hypotheses and findings about what effective reading teachers need to be able to do, summarised below:

**Systematically employ a range of teaching methods, materials and classroom tasks matched to the needs of the specific children they are teaching.**

These include:

The **deliberate, systematic and highly structured teaching of the codes of written language**, i.e. planned rather than simply ad hoc in relation to textual features at word, sentence and text levels and include (p. 5):

- *sound-symbol correspondences, e.g. the most usual pronunciations of letters and letter groupings, letter recognition, etc.*
- *word features and their structures, for example, syllables, prefixes, suffixes, inflections, etc.*<sup>5</sup>
- *spelling patterns, e.g. ight, ei (as in weir, their, weigh), etc.*<sup>6</sup>
- *vocabulary and word study, e.g. looking at synonyms, exploring word origins, vocabulary broadening*
- *punctuation, e.g. the effects of punctuation signs such as commas and question marks on text meaning*
- *grammatical constructions, e.g. subject-verb agreement, conjunctions*
- *text structures, e.g. narrative elements such as plot, setting, character, expository text features such as argument structure*

Learners need to understand the functions of what they are learning in literacy.

The creation of a **literate environment** which enhances children's understandings of the functions of literacy and gives them opportunities for regular and sustained practice of literacy.

The **modelling of effective literacy practices** by the teacher, from materials and from the children's own successful literacy outcomes, including the use of texts which the teacher and children either read or write together.

**Provision of focussed tasks and the systematic and continuous monitoring and assessment of children's progress.**

**Well developed subject knowledge about the nature and learning of literacy and its pedagogical principles which underpins their selection of teaching approaches.**

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<sup>5</sup> We would want to add something about word recognition and oral reading fluency – aspects that reflect automaticity in decoding.

<sup>6</sup> This is particularly relevant to the opaque orthography of English, but not so prominent in agglutinating languages, where morphological patterning is important.

**Knowledge of content**, i.e. what is it that children need to learn in literacy in order to be counted as successful (e.g. knowledge of literature, knowledge of the linguistic system, and skills). Literacy teachers teach children *about* reading and writing and *how to* read and write. Success in literacy is measured not by what children know about texts, print etc. but by what they can do with these (pp. 7-8). They need to know:

1. Word and sub-word level (phonics, spelling and vocabulary).<sup>7</sup>

- *phonological and alphabetical knowledge, e.g. knowing letter shapes, knowing that words are built up from letters and letter groups with sound values, knowing that a crucial unit in word attack is the syllable with its initial onset sound and its rime (the remainder of the syllable), knowing that analogy is a useful strategy in word recognition (having read peak makes it easier to read beak).*
- *knowledge of spelling strings and patterns, e.g. knowing the patterned basis to spelling (there are a limited number of possible spellings for individual syllables), understanding the role of morphemes in spelling (-ed, -ing, sub-, pre-, etc.). Also knowing about typical sequences of development in children's abilities to spell conventionally.*
- *vocabulary knowledge, e.g. being able to help children explore word origins and extend vocabulary, knowing about synonyms, antonyms, homonyms and homophones. Also understanding the importance of developing a core of words which are instantly recognisable to children.*

2. Sentence level (grammar and punctuation)

- *grammatical knowledge, e.g. knowing word classes (i.e. nouns, verbs, adjectives), grammatical functions in sentences (i.e. subject, verb, object), syntax (i.e. word order and the relationship between words and in sentences), and having command of suitable language with which to discuss these features with children. Also having an understanding about the ways in which children acquire syntactic knowledge.*
- *punctuation knowledge, e.g. knowing the uses and functions of a range of punctuation marks. Also understanding the likely course of children's learning about these.*

3. Text level (comprehension and composition)

- *knowledge of text structures, e.g. knowing that types of texts (stories, arguments, explanations, instructions) are structured differently, understanding the structural differences between types of texts and being able to talk meaningfully about these differences with children.*
- *knowledge of text features, e.g. knowing that stories have plots, events and characters, understanding typical developmental sequences in children's appreciation of these elements.*
- *knowledge of comprehension processes, e.g. understanding the importance of previous knowledge, of question setting and of adopting appropriate strategies for reading. Also understanding how comprehension develops and might be facilitated.*
- *knowledge of composition processes, e.g. understanding elements of the writing process such as drafting, revising, editing, proof-reading. Also understanding likely developmental sequences in children's abilities to use these processes.*

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<sup>7</sup> We recognize that some of this is not applicable to African agglutinating languages.

#### 4. Beyond individual texts (range and purpose)

- *knowledge of literature for children, e.g. knowing a range of suitable literature and authors for particular children, having some understanding of quality in children's literature, understanding how to enhance children's responses to literature.*
- *knowledge of the purposes and functions of various texts in social discourse, e.g. knowing the ways in which text function and structure are linked.*
- *knowledge of the ways in which literacy enables learning in a range of areas and of how opportunities for such development may be created.*

**Knowledge about pedagogy**, i.e. evidence-based pedagogic principles underlying the effective teaching of literacy, including the sequence of teaching and creating an enabling environment in which literacy might best be learnt.

**Knowledge about learners** (in general and in particular about the capabilities of those in the class) **and how they learn to read, write, and use language effectively** and what are the capabilities of the children in their classes.

Pahl and Rowsell (2005) also provide some other items about what effective reading and writing teachers need to help the learners

- *know the visual features of texts, including design, layout, images, image-word relationships, and*
- *how to read and construct graphs, tables, diagrams, etc.*

A summation, largely based upon the research conducted in the United Kingdom in the late 1990s by Medwell, Wray and others, includes, amongst others, the following characteristics of effective literacy teachers thus (Czislowski-McKenna, Cumming, Wyatt-Smith and Elkins, 2006, p. 11):

#### **Effective literacy teachers:**

- *explicitly teach a range of literacy skills and knowledge through demonstration and modelling*
- *teach decoding and spelling, in a systematic way that makes clear to students why these aspects are necessary and useful*
- *place great emphasis on students' knowledge of the purposes and function of reading and writing and of the strategies used to enable them to read and write*
- *pay systematic attention to the goals of reading and writing as well as technical processes such as phonic knowledge, spelling, grammatical knowledge and pronunciation*
- *clearly mark the beginning and end of lessons*
- *require students to present a review at the end of the lesson*
- *ask questions related to decisions and strategies*
- *teach at a brisk pace, regularly refocusing students' attention and use clear time frames.*

Wray, Medwell, Fox, and Poulson (2000) concluded from their study that some common characteristics are identifiable in the literacy teaching practices of effective teachers (and that these characteristics were not uniformly present in the literacy teaching of teachers in general). The most important of these is the teaching of a range of literacy skills and knowledge, at word, sentence and text levels, within the context of work on shared texts. Contextualisation of teaching appeared to make it possible for pupils to make active connections between these levels of knowledge. In addition, effective literacy teachers were explicit in making the purposes and processes of literacy clear to the learners, through modelling, demonstration, explanations and exemplifications.

Drawing on the work of Pahl and Rowsell (2005), Stein and Newfield (2006), Janks (2010) and Comber (2016), effective language and literacy teachers also:

- *teach learners what Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) term ‘the grammar of visual design’ and its contribution to meaning making on the page or screen*
- *teach critical language and literacy awareness*
- *teach critical visual literacy*
- *teach learners how to read and construct graphs, tables, diagrams, maps and other visual representations of knowledge*
- *bring learners’ out-of-school knowledge of digital technology and social media into the classroom.*

A key finding from a study by Poulson *et al* (2001) is that teachers’ educational and pedagogical beliefs and values influence their classroom practice and teaching decisions. This is all the more reason to introduce a scientific base into initial teacher education programmes and rigorous research into reading instruction should guide the profession.

Cumulatively, the findings and recommendations of these studies suggest that the compilation of literacy teaching standards could provide a useful framework for the design of teacher education curricula within the South African context with its socio-economic realities of poverty, exclusion and ongoing inequality.

## The format of standards

There are many different ways of presenting standards but in most cases each standard consists of a succinct statement followed by some elaboration of that standard (with information on the range covered by the standard and the assessment criteria for judging that the standard has been achieved).

Sometimes the elaboration includes reformulations of the standard for different teacher proficiency levels linked to teacher experience or roles. Others include exemplars of behaviour.

Standards for teachers are not the only way in which to describe what effective teachers do. Standards are necessarily concise and describe different aspects of teaching behaviour that in the classroom are usually not separated but done together. But they are a useful outline of what good teaching practices are.

Good literacy teaching practices are those of a teacher “who works with others to make meaning with text from texts” and a critical literacy teacher is one who is “in addition, interested in what all kinds of texts (written, visual and oral) do to readers, viewers and listeners and whose interests are served by what these texts do” (Janks, 2010, p. 19).

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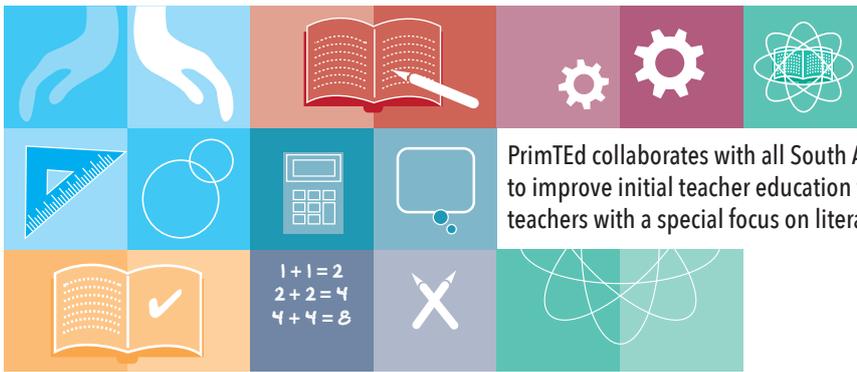
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PrimTED collaborates with all South African universities to improve initial teacher education for primary school teachers with a special focus on literacy and mathematics.



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