

**RESEARCH ADVISORY**

# Literacy Teacher Preparation

International Literacy Association & National Council of Teachers of English  
2017

**T**op-down educational policies of the past two decades have challenged the effectiveness of and the need for teacher preparation programs, leading to a proliferation of recommendations, regulations, and alternative pathways to teaching (e.g., National Council on Teacher Quality, use of value-added methods to measure teacher effectiveness, Teach for America, and Relay Graduate School of Education). When based on evidence-based practices and principles, innovation can support and has supported beneficial change, but many of the educational policies and alternative pathways in recent years have had little research to support them. Yet their impact on the public understanding of teaching and learning has been significant, driving continuous discussions about improving teacher education. One constant message has been that teachers and teacher quality matter. It follows that the programs that prepare teachers also matter.

Concerned in particular about the misconceptions regarding literacy teacher preparation and recognizing the importance of educating teachers entering the profession, the International Literacy Association (ILA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) brought together a task force charged to review and analyze the research on teacher preparation for literacy instruction. This effort arose from frustration and disappointment with frequently repeated mistaken claims about literacy teacher education—what Zeichner and Conklin (2016) called the “echo chamber” effect.

Our extensive review and analysis of research in literacy teacher education counters the narrowness and repetition of political discourses about teacher education. It provides a set of defining, evidence-based characteristics of teacher education practices that are associated with advancing prospective teachers’ learning and classroom performance and have implications for teacher education programs and public policy.

There is substantial evidence documenting the impact of teacher preparation courses and field-based experiences for advancing prospective teachers’ learning and teaching capabilities, despite a lack of funding for large-scale longitudinal studies that follow prospective teachers across their course work and into their initial teaching years. Yet public discussions and policies that dismiss the power and impact of teacher preparation course work leading to initial teacher certification largely

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fail to reference this evidence. This body of evidence stands in contrast to examinations of alternate and truncated/fast track teacher education programs where, despite years of research, there is no consistent evidence of effectiveness for teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

From our analysis, we have identified a convergence of evidence that supports our conclusions. This convergence is based on (a) evidence across numerous studies that are course based and/or field based, are activity specific, and document teacher learning and practices and (b) evidence taken from systematic analyses of effective literacy teacher preparation programs. The advantage of deliberate examination of convergence is to build a systematic body of evidence (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005) and to link preparatory practices to outcomes of teacher learning and teacher practice. Noting a much smaller set of studies that investigates impact on students' literacy achievement, we also have identified practices implemented by beginning teachers that are associated with student gains.

Evidence shows that the practices we have identified have a history of demonstrated effectiveness across course work and programs and hold promise to be sustainable and support teacher learning beyond short-term testing of impact. To this last point, for example, longitudinal studies have indicated that by the second and third years of teaching, teachers are drawing on their professional knowledge from their preparation programs to guide their teaching practices, whereas this knowledge in practice may not be observed during the first year of teaching when teachers are trying to reconcile new routines with previous expectations (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2009).

Our research has identified the following four critical quality indicators for prospective teachers' learning and new teachers' performance.

## **Knowledge Development**

Several features of literacy teacher preparation contribute to prospective teachers' knowledge development and are associated with important outcomes for classroom instruction.

## Depth and Breadth of Knowledge

An emphasis on depth and breadth of a well-defined knowledge base is a key indicator of quality preparation. Deep conceptual understanding of both content and pedagogical knowledge offers a framework for prospective literacy teachers' instructional and curricular decision making that is required for effective teaching, increased confidence in their role as teachers, and understandings of more complex forms of instruction (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

The content emphasis includes the following:

- Knowledge development in foundational content in the study of multiple literacies, literacy learning, and language development
- Curriculum content and goals that include a study of text demands, including print, multimedia, and multimodal texts
- Child and adolescent development
- Theories of teaching and learning within social contexts, including developing the capacity to teach diverse learners
- Subject matter content and pedagogy that is applied to practice

## Coherence Across Course Work

Added to the emphasis on building depth and breadth of knowledge is the impact of coherence. Highly effective literacy teacher education provides coherence across purpose, goals, and program philosophy; across course work and field experiences; and across theory, research, and practice. Grisham (2000) identified coherence of vision across the literacy teacher education program as the most powerful influence on teachers' acquisition and application of pedagogical knowledge. Conversely, a lack of coherence, in which students are forced to draw connections between disparate and unconnected content or a lack of connections across course work and field placements, can inhibit abilities to apply what was learned (Sampson, Linek, Raine, & Szabo, 2013).

## Literacies of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities

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et al., 2009). Course work addresses issues such as race, class, gender, culture, language, educational equity, and teaching for social justice. It enables new teachers to draw on students' cultural and linguistic knowledge to support instruction, to teach in a culturally responsive manner, and to teach English learners.

Such preparation changes new teachers' perspectives from deficit views of students to views that acknowledge differences as assets (Gross, Fitts, Goodson-Espy, & Clark, 2010). It enables teachers to identify the multiple factors of student difference that shape literacy learning and helps them provide instruction that is responsive to students' diversity and histories.

## Application of Knowledge Within Authentic Contexts

Prospective teachers increase their competence by applying content and pedagogical knowledge within authentic teaching contexts that include prolonged engagement and explicit guidance and mentoring; field experiences that support prospective teachers' differentiated instruction, including opportunities for one-to-one instruction (tutorial settings); and engagement with culturally and linguistically diverse students and families.

Given such supports, prospective teachers use what they have learned during their literacy teacher preparation course work when teaching in pre-K–12 field placements, and later in their own classrooms, and they teach with competence.

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### **Prolonged Engagement and Explicit Guidance and Mentoring**

Prolonged engagement and explicit guidance and mentoring are two features of literacy teacher education that facilitate prospective teachers' application of literacy content and practical knowledge to their assessment and teaching practices. That guidance must include explicit explanations, use of examples and demonstrations, focused and specific feedback, frequent practice, and applications in multiple settings (Risko et al., 2008). With supported mentoring and prolonged engagement in field settings, beginning teachers more likely will teach with and maintain evidence-based literacy instruction and they will stay in the profession (Ronfeldt, Schwartz, & Jacob, 2014).

## **Focused Field Experiences**

Highly effective teacher preparation provides varied field experiences with tutoring, small-group and whole-class instruction, and community- and family-based programs. Field experiences prepare prospective teachers to observe student performance and engagement, administer and interpret multiple formative and summative assessments, and use data to plan instruction that is appropriate for and supportive of individual differences. Field experiences provide an increased understanding of students' knowledge and experiences and how these impact literacy development (Clift & Brady, 2005).

Engagement in extended opportunities for teaching, along with mentoring, is instrumental in facilitating prospective teachers' ability to set clear goals and generate evidence of students' success and responsiveness to instruction. Both contribute to prospective teachers' increased comfort and confidence and long-term applications. Maloch and colleagues (2003), for example, found that first-year teachers who graduated from highly effective literacy teacher education programs maintained a focus on assessing and implementing literacy instruction that met their students' needs. Similarly, Hoffman and colleagues (2005) followed graduates two and three years into their teaching and reported sustained abilities to provide high-quality instruction that was engaging and responsive to student differences.

Additionally, numerous studies have reported on the value of tutoring experiences as part of the process of learning to teach. Tutoring is associated with increased teacher ability to individualize instruction generally and to provide appropriate instruction for students who are experiencing literacy difficulties. Tutoring also produces increased feelings of competence, confidence in teaching abilities, and a change from views of low expectations to increased acknowledgment that students can succeed when the learning environment and instruction are appropriate.

## **Engagement With Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students and Families**

Highly effective teacher education programs provide prospective teachers opportunities for sustained engagement with students and families whose histories, experiences, culture, and

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languages may be different from their own with the goal of preparing teachers to understand differences as a resource for students' learning and effective teaching and to capitalize on students' individual differences. Research has indicated repeatedly that highly effective teacher preparation programs prepare teachers who hold dispositions, knowledge, and strategies for enacting culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogies and working toward social justice in schools and communities (Akiba, 2011).

## Ongoing Teacher Development

The most effective teacher preparation programs equip prospective teachers to engage in self-critique and analytical thinking and inspire them to seek continuous professional learning. Methods courses that couple teaching opportunities with these features are associated with prospective literacy teachers having confidence in their teaching decisions and classroom instruction and in their development of assessments that are flexible and responsive to multiple factors that affect the lives of children in and out of school. These outcomes are associated with applications of knowledge in the first years of teaching (i.e., noted as a second-year teaching outcome) and student gains (Boyd et al., 2009).

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### **Guided Self-Critique**

Prospective literacy teachers need carefully planned and mentored opportunities during preparation for “debriefing” and reconciling prior beliefs with new knowledge and theories about pedagogy. With such guidance, prospective teachers develop pedagogically sound knowledge, skills, and dispositions that respond to and change with curriculum, students, and classrooms in order to create an environment that supports literacy learning for all students regardless of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and/or ability.

### **Analysis of Social Justice Issues**

Highly effective literacy teacher preparation supports prospective teachers' continuous identification and reflection on social injustices in the school curriculum, including in their own enactment of the curriculum and their revision of curriculum and teaching to improve the educational experiences

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and achievement of their students. Furthermore, some highly effective teacher preparation programs maintain these learning supports for teacher candidates into their induction years of teaching.

Fecho and colleagues (2004) and Smagorinsky and colleagues (2002) followed prospective teachers from their university course work into their student teaching semesters and first-year teaching positions, finding evidence of the new teachers' drawing from their university education to resist restrictive curricula at their schools. Anderson and Stillman (2010) also reported on prospective teachers' growing ability to adapt the standardized curriculum to meet the expectations of the school and its teachers while also infusing principles, practices, and goals about teaching diverse learners they had learned and come to value in their teacher preparation.

### **Engagement in Professional Learning Communities**

Participation in communities of professional practice enriches reflection, collaboration, and the exchange of constructive feedback among teachers, preparing them to offer and receive critical feedback. Numerous studies have established that reflection as a practice, when focused and mentored by knowledgeable others, can advance teachers' work. Furthermore, sustained participation in collegial and collaborative communities of professional practice reinforces continued professional learning among teachers and has a positive impact on student achievement (Goddard, Goddard, & Tschannen-Moran, 2007).

Learning communities that are situated within and engage reflection on the teaching of diverse populations have been shown to drive positive gains in literacy teachers' knowledge development and their stances toward social justice in society and in schools (Akiba, 2011).

### **Ongoing Assessments**

Conducting ongoing assessments is central to continuous improvement in the preparation of individual teachers and the development of effective programs. There is compelling evidence from the findings of the International Reading Association's (IRA; now ILA) Commission for Excellence in Teacher Preparation in Reading (2001) to support four critical



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assessment points that are prominent across programs of excellence: program admission, progress monitoring, benchmarking accomplishments, and tracking success.

Multiple measures are used to both assess candidates' readiness for entry into the program and plan for adaptations to the program to meet individual needs. Flexibility informed by ongoing assessments is the key to optimal assessment practices. This outcome has support in Lacina and Block's (2011) study of distinguished literacy teacher preparation programs, where they found that distinguished programs offer "an ongoing assessment process that employs multiple instruments" (p. 333) to inform a variety of audiences in making instructional and programmatic decisions.

Assessment in teacher education is something to be embraced as a tool for learning and growing. The blunt instruments used to rank and rate programs (e.g., the analysis of course syllabi content by Greenberg and Walsh [2012] and value-added assessments of student learning as proposed by the U.S. federal government) too often interfere with the shared goal of all audiences to improve practices. A better balance must be employed that supports all audiences in their uses of assessment to fulfill their needs and respect the work of others.

## **Program Admission**

Assessment tools and practices associated with the admission of students into a preparation program can address both screening and diagnostic purposes. In the case of the IRA (now ILA) study of excellent programs, a number of the programs required students to complete a personal application for admission that describes goals and preparation. These applications were often complemented by screening/admission interviews that were used not only to make admission decisions but also to begin to shape the program to meet the students' interests and needs, building on dimensions of teachers' lives (e.g., motivation) that are not tied to skill performance and background knowledge. There has also been recent and promising work around the use of "situational judgment tests" that attempt to assess potential teacher education candidates in reference to "non-cognitive attributes—interpersonal skills, motivational tendencies, and personality traits" (Klassen, Durksen, Rowett, & Patterson, 2014, p. 107). These are attributes that have been

shown to be important in teachers and teaching but that are not typically assessed as part of program entry.

### **Progress Monitoring**

Assessment within programs tends to rely on two data sources. Assessments within organized, graded courses are often used to monitor a student's progress through a program. Assessments within practicum-based programs (e.g., internships and student teaching) often follow a model of moving from formative to summative evaluations by facilitators, supervisors, and cooperating teachers. The formative assessments are used to provide feedback and support to students. The summative evaluations are used to determine satisfactory completion of the program. Typically, there are options for students who have not passed to repeat experiences with the goal of raising performance standards.

### **Benchmarking Accomplishments**

Programs of excellence in the IRA study tended to support students as they built a teaching portfolio that represented their developing teacher identity and practices. Portfolios are used as an assessment tool both within and across program experiences to encourage reflection and growth. However, they can be difficult to use effectively. Recent work with electronic portfolios to promote reflection and the development of teacher identity in a learning community has shown considerable promise (Strudler & Wetzel, 2011).

### **Tracking Success**

One of the findings from the IRA study of programs of excellence was the attention within programs to gather data on their past graduates to inform program revisions. The American Psychological Association (APA; Worrell et al., 2014) issued a fairly comprehensive report and set of recommendations for assessment in teacher preparation programs. The report recommends a multifaceted approach to assessment that includes both assessment strategies within programs and following up on graduates in their teaching. This report cautions users against attempts to rely on one measure or one approach to program assessment and evaluation.

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### **Application of Knowledge Within Authentic Contexts**

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### About the International Literacy Association

The International Literacy Association (ILA) is a global advocacy and membership organization dedicated to advancing literacy for all through its network of more than 300,000 literacy educators, researchers, and experts across 75 countries. With over 60 years of experience, ILA has set the standard for how literacy is defined, taught, and evaluated. ILA collaborates with partners across the world to develop, gather, and disseminate high-quality resources, best practices, and cutting-edge research to empower educators, inspire students, and inform policymakers. ILA publishes *The Reading Teacher*, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, and *Reading Research Quarterly*, which are peer reviewed and edited by leaders in the field. For more information, visit [literacyworldwide.org](http://literacyworldwide.org).



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