



Self-Efficacy Practices That Impact Effective Reading Instruction for Young Learners

Lisa Minicozzi and Jennifer Dardzinski

CONTEXTUAL AWARENESS

“Why do I only need to take six semester hours of literacy when a large part of my day will be spent teaching students to read?” “How do I actually teach students to read; does the school district show you how?” “When will I learn something about teaching literacy skills to the kids who are having trouble?” pre-service teachers “I’m in a school that implements 90- minute literacy blocks for kindergarten through second graders. The mentor teacher says there is a big focus on assessment, to see if the students are meeting their grade level benchmarks. Is this true?” “Professor, will you teach us how to balance all of these literacy expectations from the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)?”

These are just a few common questions we have heard over the years during advisement or course-related discussions with teacher candidates in our New York State institutions. We continue to be baffled by the

L. Minicozzi (✉)
Adelphi University, New York, NY, USA
e-mail: lminicozzi@adelphi.edu

J. Dardzinski
Five Towns College, Dix Hills, NY, USA

lack of preparedness our teacher candidates perceive. Many have only two to three semesters of coursework, and then, they begin their student teaching experiences. These novice teachers will be immersed in primary schools that focus on teaching emergent literacy skills and reading development. In many of these classrooms, teacher candidates will see an emphasis on foundational reading and writing skills across the curriculum, a focus on text complexity and greater attention given to informational text. In addition, teacher candidates must also understand the role of content learning standards in the teaching of reading.

Effective literacy teaching is like assembling a puzzle—locating pieces (coursework, field experiences, reflection), and determining how they fit together, all in an effort to create a more complete picture. In this chapter, we will explore ways that teacher education programs can improve the self-efficacy of teacher candidates thus enhancing the pursuit of literacy for all students.

Contemporary K-2 classrooms are dynamic learning environments with lots of moving parts. Not only do teacher candidates feel underprepared to teach foundational literacy skills, but they also feel genuinely ill-equipped to assess students' reading abilities. We have heard teacher candidates ask, "What are running records," or "How often am I supposed to track students' progress...will you show me how to do this?" Comments like these have cropped up semester after semester, indicating just how uneasy teacher candidates feel about teaching literacy across early childhood and primary-level classrooms.

Maybe these students felt unprepared because in New York State teacher education programs only require teacher candidates to take a minimum of six semester hours in the teaching of literacy skills; listening, speaking, reading, and writing to native English speakers (Office of College and University Evaluation, 2014). It is time to take a closer look at what essential learning objectives are being addressed in foundational literacy courses for teacher candidates at the program level in New York State as well as other jurisdictions. According to the National Council on Teacher Quality (2018), fewer than four in ten professors taught the components of effective reading instruction. In addition, a 2013 UNESCO report affirms that teacher training fails to prepare teachers with specific pedagogical content knowledge in the areas of math and reading. This is further corroborated by a Canadian study which called attention to the lack of appropriate literacy preparation for teacher candidates (Gambhir, Broad, Evans, & Gaskell, 2008). Dissatisfaction

with teacher quality has become a global concern, sparking reform initiatives aimed at increased clinical or field-based learning opportunities (Puryear, 2015). As responsive teacher educators, we find ourselves concerned about the transferability of what teacher candidates learn through coursework and how they apply those skills in their own classrooms during field-based experiences and student teaching. From a practical standpoint, this chapter will address the following questions:

How impactful are teacher education programs in building teacher candidates' self-efficacy?

What is the relationship between teacher candidates' self-efficacy and their knowledge of teaching early literacy?

INTRODUCTION

For most children, learning to read is a developmental process that follows a sequence of behaviors. Foundational reading skills are generally developed by students in the primary grades (Brown, 2014). Teachers of young children know that in order for students to master reading, there needs to be a comprehensive approach that aims to guide students toward proficiency in written as well as oral communication. These skills serve as a literate foundation for later learning. Generally, successful early readers have been shown to retain such skills which lead to improved learning outcomes across multiple domains (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006). Moreover, the literacy and language skills students need to understand narrative texts differs from the skills required to understand reading and writing in different academic disciplines (Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010). It is not surprising that reading in particular can be a difficult task for many young children and consequently, in the United States, are not meeting basic proficiency on state reading assessments. According to the 2017 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), 65% of eighth-grade students scored, "below proficient," which indicates that many children are reading below-accepted grade-level benchmarks.

It is a well-established through research (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006) that children who gain early reading proficiency will meet with greater academic success than their peers who struggle with reading skills. Yet, teacher candidates recognize that teaching a struggling reader is not a simple task (Kindle & Schmidt, 2011). Therefore, understanding

the multifaceted nature of reading instruction requires confident, knowledgeable, and highly effective teachers. We have certainly found that highly effective teachers are educators who engage students with meaningful learning, create positive and joyful associations with school, and impact student achievement. Research supports these notions and confirms that teachers remain a vital factor in students' literacy performance (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2017). If teacher educators know this all to be true, why are so many teacher candidates feeling unprepared to teach literacy in K-5 classrooms?

Indeed, a review of the literature on literacy pedagogies taught at universities and how future teachers will implement effective literacy strategies into their daily practice reveals that many teacher candidates feel ill-prepared to teach literacy in their own K-5 classrooms (Moats, 1999; NCTQ, 2018). For decades, teacher educators have followed the historic trends in reading pedagogy known as the *reading wars*—the debate between emphasizing whole language (teaching word recognition) or phonics (teaching decoding). In 2000, the National Reading Panel published its seminal report, *Teaching Children to Read*, which identified effective or evidence-based practices for teaching young children to read. Despite this report, almost twenty years later, recent research has signaled concern over the growing gap that exists between teacher preparation and what empirical evidence says about the teaching of reading (NCTQ, 2018; Salinger et al., 2010).

Teacher educators are acutely aware of what is effective, recommended instructional practice to support the development of students' reading skills; however, it is unclear if teacher candidates are being taught all of the components of effective reading instruction. There also seems to be considerable variation among elementary teacher education program requirements for field-based learning. We have found that teacher candidates benefit from extended opportunities (fieldwork) to practice skills and strategies modeled through coursework with K-5 students.

COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE READING INSTRUCTION

According to the National Reading Panel (2000), effective reading instruction should address the domains of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. In addition to understanding the effective components for reading instruction, teacher candidates must also appreciate the developmental continuum for learning to read

and write. Teacher candidates should also have a strong knowledge base in syntax, semantics, and text structure in order to build comprehension and writing skills. Finally, having an awareness that individual students' needs and sociocultural contexts influence learning can better help teacher candidates differentiate instruction to meet the diversity evident in today's classrooms. Teacher education programs should emphasize a research-based core curriculum that focuses on best practices in all aspects of reading instruction (Moats, 1999).

HOW SHOULD TEACHER EDUCATORS TEACH READING?

The teaching of reading is a complex task. In our work with teacher candidates, we have observed many challenges and barriers in how they come to understand the practical aspects of planning and implementing effective literacy instruction. As a first step, teacher educators might clearly identify the five components of effective reading instruction for teacher candidates. Decades of research have shed light on what constitutes effective reading instruction: basic phoneme awareness (letter sound correspondence), systematic and explicit instructional strategies, engagement with a variety of texts which involves shared and independent reading activities, exposure to vocabulary rich environments, strategies to build reading comprehension skills, and ample opportunities to write to foster deeper understanding of what is read (Lyon, 1998; Moats, 1999). We recommend that all teacher candidates have exposure to initial coursework that focuses on the aforementioned core components of effective reading instruction. Coupled with coursework, teacher candidates need field-based experiences that enable them to apply the content-related skills to classroom learning.

Table 2.1 is an example of how one teacher educator aligned course learning objectives ("students" are teacher candidates) with the components of effective reading instruction. This chart also illustrates a practical application for teacher candidates to reference during fieldwork experiences.

THE ROLE OF SELF-EFFICACY IN TEACHER EDUCATION

Effective literacy teaching is about pedagogical and content knowledge as well as confidence in delivery. Strong literacy teachers have the ability to teach skills, strategies, and concepts to all young learners, and they are

Table 2.1 Example of the components of reading instruction in learning objectives and practical applications

<i>Components of effective reading instruction</i>	<i>Learning objective</i>	<i>Practical application</i>
Phonemic awareness	Students will be able to understand that words are made up of individual sounds (phonemes) c/a/t	Use multisensory approaches for recognizing sounds in words (tapping out words). Teach teacher candidates about explicit instruction—blending and segmenting sounds—make games
Phonics	Students understand the relationships between letters and sounds to speak and write words	Have teacher candidates create lessons for: word families, sorting, consonant blends, digraphs. Create sequential phonics lessons across a week to highlight the importance of systematic phonics instruction
Fluency	Students develop understanding of the importance of reading accurately, with meaningful expression and appropriate speed	Use strategies that focus on decoding and building on vocabulary. Introduce teacher candidates to appropriate fluency software applications (1-minute read app) to guide oral reading development
Vocabulary	Students learn the importance of oral language development	Work with teacher candidates to create lesson plans that focus on word recognition. Create opportunities for teacher candidates to see, hear, read, and write new words during read alouds, word walls, word sorts, (Frayer model)
Comprehension	Students understand that comprehension is one skill in building reading which includes decoding, encoding, and fluency	Engage teacher candidates in activities that model learning techniques to help monitor student progress. Use questioning and conferencing as a means to assess student understanding. Focus on story maps, main idea, concept development, details

affirmed in their ability to do so. Beginning teachers have a tendency to adopt a teaching style similar to the way their master teachers taught or to recall their past experiences as a learner (Alger, 2007). When teacher candidates model themselves after others who possess the skills and talents necessary to overcome challenges, this can boost their sense of self-efficacy and nurture their teaching capabilities (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). It is likely that when teachers believe they can meet the diverse learning needs in a class and are successful in doing so, their sense of self-efficacy improves. Teacher candidates would benefit from practical experiences with effective teachers to develop the necessary skills needed to teach emergent literacy, K-5. It is critical for teacher educators to understand the cyclical relationship between self-efficacy and teacher performance in order to better support teacher candidates. As Alger (2009) suggests, learned practice is an essential ingredient for improvement of any task. Given the complexities inherent in teaching literacy, K-5, how then do teacher educators support the development of teacher candidates' practice and strong sense of self-efficacy?

Most teachers express that they are not adequately prepared to take on the many challenges of daily classroom teaching. Teacher candidates need to appreciate how their self-efficacy plays a role in their ability to persist through difficult times and to seek help when needed. For the purposes of this chapter, self-efficacy is defined as beliefs teacher candidates hold about their direct abilities to teach within the context of literacy instruction.

WHAT IS SELF-EFFICACY?

Self-efficacy is situated within a broader theoretical framework, social cognitive theory. Having been researched and explored for over 25 years, teacher efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to advance student learning, has been linked to teacher effectiveness and professional growth. According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy is the extent to which individuals believe in their ability to successfully execute a task. In turn, one's beliefs then influence behavior. This being said, teachers' behaviors can be influenced by personal beliefs about one's competency and then the course of action taken to execute a specific task. Within this framework, Bandura (1977) outlined four sources of influence in which self-efficacy can be developed: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological state. As applied to the field of teaching,

mastery experiences represent actual teaching, vicarious experiences involve a candidate observing another individual teaching (participant observations), verbal persuasion includes any teaching content communicated to a candidate, and physiological state refers to the emotional state a candidate feels while engaging in experiences related to the previous three sources of information. Bandura concludes that mastery experiences provide the most effective way of gaining self-efficacy.

Having the ability to successfully execute a task builds confidence and competence. Teacher educators have to build teacher candidates' self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation to become resilient teachers. In an era of accountability and rigorous content-based learning, teachers who believe they can successfully teach all children will demonstrate teaching behaviors that support this goal (Protheroe, 2008). Therefore, it is recommended that teacher educators include multiple direct experiences during coursework and program planning, for teacher candidates to work with a variety of learners in field-based environments to grow self-efficacy beliefs.

DEVELOPING SELF-EFFICACIOUS TEACHERS OF LITERACY

Focusing on the teaching of literacy, teachers who feel confident in their ability to teach the essential reading components (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension) may have improved learning outcomes for their future students (Tetley & Jones, 2014). Our teacher candidates have shared, "having the time to really practice running records helped my confidence," and "once I understood how easy the iPad reading app was to work I was able to share it with a parent and together we guided the student to build his fluency over a very short time." As we have found anecdotally, with our teacher candidates, as they gain proficiency with their knowledge of effective reading strategies, and have directed hands-on experiences, their sense of efficacy grows.

Indeed, we have evidence from our own program delivery that teacher candidates' self-efficacy beliefs increased as a result of positive fieldwork experiences and in class interactive lessons. Our teacher candidates have defined positive experiences as "hands-on," "working one on one," and "having the opportunity to teach either whole group or small group reading lessons." These descriptions can be generalized to the literature on teacher self-efficacy more generally. According to Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) teacher efficacy takes into consideration both the perceived

competence to teach and contextual features such as students' motivational levels, content-related materials, pedagogical approach, and school environment. For that reason, teacher efficacy is dependent upon the teaching task and its broader context. As illustration, a first-grade teacher in a progressive suburban district with ample resources would have a greater sense of self-efficacy than the same teacher in an inner-city urban environment which lacked adequate resources. This first-grade teacher might have the same level of teacher preparation but the context in which she finds herself teaching impacts her confidence and ability to successfully teach (due in part to limited resources).

In review, teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy:

- Plan thoughtful and well-crafted lessons;
- Tend to be open to new ideas;
- Demonstrate a willingness to experiment with a variety of pedagogical approaches to meet the diversity of needs in the class;
- Exhibit resiliency and persistence when faced with challenges;
- Take ownership of students' learning outcomes and try to meet their needs;
- Believe they can impact student achievement.

REDEFINING FIELDWORK EXPERIENCES

Given the fact that mastery experiences provide the most effective way of gaining self-efficacy, field experiences need to include mastery level competencies to expand and challenge personal beliefs while providing growth opportunities for teacher candidates. Rethinking field experiences to enact more *learning by doing* and less participant observation could better prepare teacher candidates for the challenges and dilemmas of teaching literacy in K-5 classrooms. Having authentic field-based learning opportunities that are linked to literacy coursework outcomes would greatly benefit teacher candidates. For example, having teacher candidates conduct a reading assessment, write up a report, and determine the appropriate instructional reading level for a student, would contribute to their positive efficacy beliefs during teacher education and beyond.

In order to effectively teach reading to young children, teacher candidates need time to develop their craft—hone strategies and skills learned through coursework with a clear focus on reading and writing instruction. How then do we prepare teachers to be highly competent and

optimistic about supporting students' literacy development in today's K-5 classrooms? We begin by redesigning course syllabi to better align with the demands presently reflected in contemporary classrooms.

Table 2.2 illustrates an example of alignment between the components of effective reading instruction and coursework experiences (e.g., assignments) as well as fieldwork (practical) applications.

In order for teacher candidates to gain confidence in their teaching abilities, it becomes incumbent upon teacher educators to provide rich coursework opportunities (e.g., field-based experiences, immersion activities) that explicitly focus on the teaching of reading instruction. Teacher candidates grow their confidence as they gain both content and pedagogical knowledge. As Alger (2009) suggests, practice is an essential ingredient for improvement of any task. We recommend that teacher education programs regularly assess their current field-based partnerships to ensure a successful teacher candidate learning experiences. Contemporary classrooms need highly qualified teachers, ready and willing to take on the charge of teaching reading to all learners.

Field-based experiences should be constructive, consistent, and directly related to coursework. Cultivating improved opportunities for field-based learning is becoming a global concern. As recently outlined in a pan-European study, there is tremendous variance with regard to field-based practicums. For example, a prospective primary-level teacher candidate may be required to fulfill 40 hours of field-based learning in Latvia, as opposed to a teacher candidate's required 900 hours in Austria (Eurydice, 2011). Since we know that the more time a teacher candidate spends in the classroom the better prepared they feel, we advocate for coherent and continuing field-based learning opportunities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Many colleges of education across the United States are experiencing teachers feeling underprepared to meet the diverse needs represented in today's classrooms. According to the National Council on Teacher Quality (2018), only 39% of undergraduate teacher preparation programs surveyed focused on the five essential components of effective reading instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension). We reiterate that teacher candidates should be exposed to consistent coursework that embraces all components. Yet, findings show that beginning teachers do not always embrace

Table 2.2 Illustration of the components of reading instruction in coursework experiences and fieldwork applications

<i>Components of effective reading instruction</i>	<i>Coursework experience</i>	<i>Fieldwork application</i>
Phonemic awareness	Create lesson plans that focus on phonemic awareness	Read big books, clapping syllables, and word families. Have teacher candidates conduct whole class lessons focusing on letter–sound correspondence
Phonics	Review common letter–sound relationships, including sounds for common letter patterns, so that readers can apply them in decoding unfamiliar words	Explicit instruction working with a small group of children. Have teacher candidates assess children and organize guided reading groups
Fluency	Read about fluency strategies, learn how to conduct a running record	Have teacher candidates practice enacting running records, repeated reading, paired reading, reader’s theatre, audio-assisted reading
Vocabulary	Emphasize that vocabulary plays a key role in learning to read	Allow time for children to independently read. Explicit teaching of specific vocabulary words and dictionary use. Have teacher candidates practice reading aloud to whole group and small groups
Comprehension	Review behaviors that good readers use to make sense of text. Comprehension instruction to assist students to become purposeful, active readers that take control of their own reading comprehension	Use semantic organizers to assist students, monitor by asking specific questions. Have teacher candidates assess students to monitor reading progression

a theoretical approach to understanding pedagogy (Flynn, 2007). Over two decades ago, Commeyras and DeGroff (1998) asked, “how much and what practices constitute as enough, and to what degree are teaching practices being influenced by the new trends?” (p. 434). Without an understanding of teacher education learning, teacher educators cannot be confident that their efforts will be beneficial to prospective teachers.

It is recommended that teacher education programs direct attention to developing programmatic fieldwork experiences that directly link with course learning objectives. Embracing such an approach may ensure that teacher candidates are realizing the full potential of field-based learning as authentic teacher preparation training. Research in this area highlights the *practice* aspect of teacher training as a scaffold for deeper understanding, increased notions of self-efficacy, and an essential component to feeling successful as a teacher (Tatar & Buldur, 2013).

COURSEWORK IN EMERGENT LITERACY AND FIELDWORK

Teachers of young children need to have a solid theoretical understanding of how children learn, emphasizing the complexity of symbolic thinking and how it precedes phonemic awareness. Early childhood teachers benefit from preparation that explores how to effectively integrate a variety of developmentally appropriate curricula and methods for teaching early literacy skills (Bredenkamp & Copple, 2009). When thinking about younger children, we recommend taking a multisensory approach so that young learners have kinesthetic experiences to build literacy skills. As espoused by the NAEYC and IRA (1998), teachers of young children must establish developmentally appropriate literacy goals and continually adjust instructional strategies for the variety of learning needs represented in K-2 classrooms. For example, foundational emergent literacy coursework should include exploration of developmentally appropriate curricula and methods for teaching early literacy skills, infancy through second grade. A primary focus of any emergent literacy course for early childhood teachers ought to emphasize the vital role of the early childhood teacher in supporting literacy development in young children, both in a home and/or school setting. Teacher candidates need to understand the intrinsic values of literacy in the home and in school and that emergent literacy begins well before kindergarten. In addition, teacher candidates would have ample opportunities to enact a variety of pedagogical strategies and approaches including, storytelling, remediation, enrichment, spelling and writing skills for both native and non-native English Language Learners. Linked directly with coursework, it is recommended that teacher candidates execute a minimum of 25 hours of fieldwork, in literacy learning settings, involving supervised participant-observer opportunities for students to both see and interact with young children in various stages of emergent literacy development.

COURSEWORK IN INFORMATIONAL TEXT AND FIELDWORK

Since the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), there is an emphasis on the teaching of literacy through the academic disciplines. Children use informational text well beyond the walls of the classroom throughout various aspects of their lives. Therefore, teachers today must consider instructional strategies to help young children master varied literacy skills and, at the same time, learn new content as they read. Children need to understand the overall organization of a text to make a meaningful connection between content items presented in the text, identify the main idea, and learn new content. In order for children to understand informational text, teachers need to effectively teach general text structures (text description, compare and contrast, problem/solution, cause/effect, and sequence) through examining the organization of text. Ultimately, we recommend that children receive explicit instruction for text structures along with reading a variety of texts. Teachers can provide this experience by defining concepts, use of various teaching methods, and providing a variety of ways to organize or map out the information in the text that highlights content connections such as with graphic organizers.

Informational text offers the potential for increased engagement by students. Students with limited reading ability can still access information about the natural world, local history, culture, or figures from history as they build their vocabulary and comprehension. More specifically, visual/spatial learners benefit from the use of organizers, maps, photographs, and charts in informational texts. In these forms, content information is offered and structured in concise pieces of information that may be manageable for students from special populations with evolving reading skills. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) analyses found that teachers who had more professional training were more likely to use teaching practices that are associated with higher reading achievement on the NAEP tests.

It is important for teacher candidates to be competent teaching informational text. Research indicates that today more than ever, adults are reading nonfiction, informational text material, including web-oriented resources (Smith, 2000). In order to prepare young learners for real-world reading practices and improved reading engagement, teacher preparation programs should look to focus on the importance of reading informational text. As we have discussed, learned practice is an essential

ingredient for improvement of any task (Alger, 2009). Having teacher candidates design lessons that define and identify the features of informational text during fieldwork experiences, would prepare them to meet the complexities of teaching literacy in today's K-5 classrooms.

PREPARING FOR DIVERSE CLASSROOMS

Preparing teacher candidates to be culturally responsive teachers requires colleges of education to have teacher candidates participate in diverse field placements. In doing so, teacher candidates have time to tutor and work individually with all learners to better understand the many factors of student difference that influence literacy learning. Research has indicated that new teachers need to be encouraged to engage in dialogue about language, literacy, and social justice and be prepared for the rich and diverse contexts they will encounter in their teaching career (Gross, Fitts, Goodson-Espy, & Clark, 2010). In addition to teaching the components effective reading instruction, teacher candidates must be knowledgeable about intervention protocols and systems to support literacy development for struggling readers. They need to understand research-based practices and effective instructional strategies to continually provide learning opportunities for all students, especially those from diverse backgrounds.

As the research suggests, literacy and language development is multifaceted, ideologically shaped, and content-specific (Eckert, Turner, Alsup, & Knoeller, 2004). We agree that effective literacy instruction is not a “one-size fits-all” approach to teaching and requires today's teachers to adapt their instruction to better meet the needs of students. Therefore, it is important for teacher educators to provide opportunities for teacher candidates to analyze strategies in identifying individual student learning needs and differences to be able to design effective literacy plans to accommodate growth. As the research suggests, it is beneficial for teacher candidates to have direct experiences working with diverse learners to bridge theoretical understanding and practical application to classroom learning (Voss & Bufkin, 2011). Essentially, teacher candidates benefit from ongoing trial and error—having the opportunity to enact an approach and assessing the impact on student learning.

Early in the teacher education program, teacher candidates need to understand the different skills, abilities, linguistics, and cultural characteristics in classrooms. This background knowledge can help shape

teacher candidates' instructional approaches and ensuing self-efficacy beliefs. Taken together, the components for effective literacy instruction, fieldwork experiences, and background on accounting for learning differences all contribute to essential elements for teacher education courses in literacy and English language arts. Teacher educators who effectively teach reading:

- Include course objectives that focus on the teaching of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension;
- Underscore that reading is a developmental process;
- Introduce a range of pedagogical strategies;
- Introduce a range of assessment measures to monitor reading progress;
- Provide literacy-rich fieldwork experiences that allow teacher candidates to apply skills and strategies to practice;
- Prepare teacher candidates to be sensitive to the impact of race, class, culture, economic disadvantage, and disability in an emergent literacy program;
- Model effective strategies to incorporate instruction in multicultural, gender, class, global, and environmental issues.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHER EDUCATORS

Many colleges of education across the United States are full of teacher candidates feeling underprepared to meet the varied needs of students today. This chapter has offered recommendations for revisions to course syllabi and redefining fieldwork experiences, but other opportunities are also available. For example, one university in the Southeastern United States is taking action by increasing the amount of field experience for teacher candidates in low socioeconomic schools. Teacher candidates are assigned to mentor teachers for the entire fieldwork experience of two consecutive semesters. Mentor teachers act as liaisons between the university and school district and also serve as mentors to the teacher candidates. As reported by these teacher candidates, "I gained valuable insight from my college professors and mentor teachers, and was able to apply what I learned during the student teaching experience." Another teacher candidate stated that "the most beneficial aspect of the literacy coursework at the university was that it integrated fieldwork, we gained valuable practical experience, we were required to teach lessons that revolved around writing, fluency, language development using props, morphology,

and read aloud.” “I really liked how there was an emphasis on the importance of oral language, books and print knowledge and phonological awareness in emergent reading and how these domains may be scaffolded in the upper grades.” Overall, teacher candidates reported they felt very prepared to teach in diverse classrooms. Whether implementing strategies to struggling readers or challenging students to read at a higher level, teacher candidates developed a deeper understanding of the integration of theory and practice as compared to the traditional teacher candidates. Not surprisingly, the school district administrators stated these teacher candidates were better prepared to teach the diversity of learners present in today’s classrooms, then the more traditional graduates.

Reimagining literacy coursework to include direct fieldwork experiences to create a focused practicum experience with supported mentoring will engender an environment based on evidence-based literacy instruction (Rogers, Marshall, & Tyson, 2006; Ronfeldt, Schwartz, & Jacob, 2014). Teacher candidates need opportunities to challenge their assumptions, broaden their belief systems, and develop a more complex understanding of literacy, diversity, and schooling.

Not surprisingly, we recommend that teacher education programs emphasize collaboration between university faculty, mentor teachers, and teacher candidates. Faculty members need to better understand the real-world teaching demands placed on teacher candidates in order to prepare them throughout their program of study. We have seen too many teacher candidates feel disconnected and criticize program experiences with comments like, “When was the last time Professor Duncan taught in a second grade classroom?” or “My university supervisor doesn’t understand how much time is really spent on literacy.” Collaboration in conjunction with critical reflection remains the key to creating dynamic preparatory experiences for today’s teacher candidates.

As is the case of most teacher education programs, emphasis should be placed on having teacher candidates understand the importance of critical reflection. As teacher candidates begin to make autonomous classroom decisions, they refine their teaching identity and develop their sense of self-efficacy. As part of their preparation, teacher candidates are often asked to challenge traditional pedagogical methods to further enhance their ability to grow as educators. Fostering critical reflection within the context of the content-driven learning standards is an important aspect of bridging the divide between theoretical understanding and effective classroom reading practices.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This we know to be true—as teachers, when the lesson goes well on any given day, we feel almost unbeatable. When students have engaged with the material, worked through challenges, and shown a level of mastery, there isn't a better reward for teachers. Teacher educators have a vital role to play in developing knowledgeable, confident, and well-prepared teacher candidates to meet the diverse reading needs in contemporary K-5 classrooms. By arming teacher candidates with theoretical knowledge and evidence-based literacy practices, they will have the ability to implement and support instruction for all readers. The current educational classroom climate has a heavy focus on literacy development, typically students spend between 60 and 90 minutes a day just on skill building. Therefore, preparing teacher candidates to understand and more importantly be able to enact the components of effective reading instruction will increase self-efficacy beliefs and in turn promote positive learning outcomes for classroom learners.

Yes, the teaching of reading is a complex task—one that requires a shared responsibility between mentor teachers and university educators. By equipping teacher candidates with the necessary knowledge and hands-on experiences necessary to support literacy learning, teacher education programs can better prepare new teachers to meet the many challenges that are essential with educating students today. In doing so, colleges of education can build teacher candidates' sense of self-efficacy which in the age of accountability and standards is of critical importance. Teachers who genuinely believe they can reach all students demonstrate a commitment to education that is inclusive and ultimately successful for all children.

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