

Professor Orientation in Teacher Preparation

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Few experiences are as exciting as watching a child learn to read and continue to conquer academic tasks of increasing complexity. Few experiences are as heartbreaking as witnessing an intelligent, motivated student struggle with reading into adulthood, unsure of even simple words. Reading is the foundational skill upon which academic learning rests; a limited reading ability debilitates academic, financial, emotional, mental, and social success. Yet, those training to become teachers are still learning outdated instructional methods that hinder the literacy development of students. It is critical that university-level teacher preparation incorporates the evidence-backed Structured Literacy method for reading instruction in order to meet the needs of struggling students.

Current Literacy Instruction Methods

For decades, the question of how best to teach students how to read has been debated amongst experts, teachers, and parents, resulting in a great deal of attention and research dedicated to instructional methods. Today, teacher candidates are often presented with either the Whole Language approach, which focuses on providing students with a literacy-rich environment, or the Balanced Literacy approach, which combines the Whole Language environment with some phonics instruction.

Yet, students continue to struggle, evidenced by decades of declining reading scores. Nearly 30% of high school seniors rank as Below Basic readers, essentially unable to read. Current instructional methods have done little to address this troubling decline, as Whole Language and Balanced Literacy methods have shown to be unsuccessful for struggling students. These students, predominantly from low-income homes and students of color, are the most in need of Structured Literacy.

Structured Literacy

In 2000, a National Reading Panel deemed code-based instruction, also known as Structured Literacy or the Science of Reading, as beneficial for all students but essential for beginning readers, English Language Learners, and struggling readers, including students with dyslexia.

In Structured Literacy, teachers systematically introduce concepts and skills in a logical order, using multisensory techniques. As noted by the reading panel, Structured Literacy is particularly crucial for beginning readers, English Language Learners, and struggling readers. Yet this method is not usually incorporated in university teacher education courses.

In my study I interviewed 13 university teacher education professors and reviewed syllabi, memos, and university websites. These sources provided data around professor awareness of the needs of struggling readers and frequency of Structured Literacy in teacher preparation programs.

Study Findings

The study found what teacher candidates learned depended on their professor's reading orientation. Candidates with Whole Language professors learned that struggling students required increased reading exposure and books linked to student interests. Balanced Literacy professors offered unsuccessful students' reading assessments with a possible intervention of a more structured reading program. Only candidates with Structured Literacy professors learned a preventative approach: universal assessment, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and accommodations to "catch them before they fall."

The majority of teacher education programs did not mention dyslexia.

Alarmingly, for the ~15% of students with dyslexia, most teacher candidates will not know what dyslexia means. None of the Whole Language curricula included dyslexia. One third of the Balanced Literacy curricula and 100% of Structured Literacy programs presented how to identify and provide instruction for students with dyslexia. Special Education professors were more likely to cover dyslexia; most of the General Education and Master's programs ignored it. This omission disregards not only students with dyslexia but beginning readers, other struggling students, and English Language Learners who require code-based instruction for reading success.

Most professors learned to read easily without code-based instruction.

Unlike the 60% of students who require code-based instruction, all professors learned to read easily with Whole Language or Balanced Literacy. None struggled in school; all reported life-long reading enjoyment. The professors did not share the reading needs of most students, complicating their understanding of learning difficulties and the need for Structured Literacy.

Recommendations

Reading instruction is an integral factor for students' academic and financial futures. Below Basic readers are the students most in need of Structured Literacy, disproportionately from low-income homes and African-American and Hispanic students. Unfortunately, most teacher candidates learn Whole Language or Balanced Literacy reading instruction, not the Structured Literacy that benefits all students, but is required by close to 60% of students.

There is no need to accept that 30% of American high school seniors do not know how to read. When universities hire professors knowledgeable about Structured Literacy, embed dyslexia in teacher education curricula, endorse the universal assessment to prevent reading failure, and promote professor self-awareness of reading bias, teachers will be prepared to help all students learn to read.