

## **Exploring the Literacy Leadership Practices of Literacy Teacher Educators**

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### **Abstract**

Literacy teacher educators must actively engage as literacy leaders who are advocates for literacy, continuous professional learners, and responsive leaders. However, the literature base for literacy leadership is narrow and does not specifically address literacy teacher educators. To address this research gap, the current study explored current literacy leadership practices of literacy teacher educators and challenges they encounter during their literacy leadership pursuits. Using a survey research design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected among 65 experienced literacy teacher educators affiliated with university-based teacher preparation programs located in the South Central United States. Quantitative data were tabulated and reported as frequencies, and qualitative data were analyzed using three levels of coding. Findings revealed preliminary understandings about the literacy leadership practices of literacy teacher educators and pointed to three practical implications for teacher preparation programs administrators and leaders of professional organizations.

*Keywords:* literacy leaders, literacy leadership, literacy teacher educators

In an era of accountability and heightened responsibilities, it is clear that all classroom teachers must be literacy leaders. Literacy leaders are teaching professionals who are familiar and savvy with navigating institutional micro-politics within their school systems (Tang, Chen, & Wong, 2016) and know how to establish and maintain effective relationships with their colleagues (Broemmel & Swaggerty, 2017). Literacy leaders also know how to promote a positive culture of literacy within their classrooms (Houck & Novak, 2017; Swanson & Da Ros-

Voseles, 2009) and network actively among other teaching professionals across disciplines and grade levels to engage in collaborative professional learning (Chilla, Waff, & Cook, 2007; Cobb, 2005; Francois, 2014; Murphy, 2004; Novak & Houck, 2016; Overholt & Szabocsik, 2013; Steeg & Lambson, 2015). Furthermore, literacy leaders stay informed about current literacy issues (Smith, 2006) and possess a refined understanding of research-based instructional practices that support literacy learning among diverse learners (Wepner, Gómez, Cunningham, Rainville, & Kelly, 2016). Ultimately, engagement with literacy leadership practices brings teaching professionals a sense of vitality and enthusiasm that is encouraging, enriching, and empowering both personally and professionally (Cobb, 2005; Turner, Applegate, & Applegate, 2009).

Much literature published within the past decade has advocated for teacher educators to address and develop leadership skills among preservice teachers (Ado, 2016; Bond, 2011; Dunlap & Hansen-Thomas, 2011; Holland, Eckert, & Allen, 2014; Pucella, 2014; Rogers & Scales, 2013). Additionally, the International Literacy Association (ILA, 2018) recognized the importance of leadership within their professional standards for classroom teachers in PreK-12 grade levels. With such a focus on leadership among preservice and practicing teachers, it is of equal importance that attention is also given to individuals who prepare teachers—literacy teacher educators.

Within the existing knowledge base, the term “literacy leader” is commonly used as a reference for PreK-12 school professionals who hold an administrative (e.g., principal) or quasi-administrative (e.g., literacy coach) position. Little is known about literacy leadership among literacy teacher educators, and a few researchers have attempted to investigate this area. For example, Wold, Young, and Risko (2011) examined “distinctive features” of literacy teacher

educators who had a substantial and positive influence on the professional literacy practices of award-winning PreK-12 teachers (p. 157). However, Wold et al. elicited viewpoints from PreK-12 teachers in their study, rather than from those who were involved with their preservice teacher development. We sought to address this gap by collecting data about literacy teacher educators from literacy teacher educators themselves.

We are literacy teacher educators who actively engage with literacy leadership. We also recognize our position as models of literacy leaders among the preservice teachers we serve. Recently, we conducted a research investigation that examined preparation practices that literacy teacher educators use to cultivate literacy leadership among preservice teachers (Sharp, Piper, & Raymond, 2018). Our findings revealed a great need for increased attention to literacy leadership during teacher education. With this finding in mind, we wondered, how do literacy teacher educators practice literacy leadership themselves? Unfortunately, we found limited literature on literacy leadership and available literature focused on practicing teachers, specialized literacy professionals, and school administrators (e.g., Cobb, 2005; Chilla et al., 2007; Houck & Novak, 2017; Overholt & Szabocsik, 2013).

In this article, we present findings from a research endeavor that explored the following research questions: How do literacy teacher educators engage as literacy leaders? What challenges do literacy teacher educators encounter during literacy leadership pursuits? As an under-researched area, our primary goal for the current study was to present a preliminary snapshot for the literacy leadership practices of literacy teacher educators and identify ways in which they may be better supported as literacy leaders.

### **Review of Relevant Literature**

Literacy teacher educators play a pivotal role in developing preservice teachers as literacy leaders within PreK-12 grade levels and must be literacy leaders themselves. However, the term “literacy leader” is a common designation for literacy coaches, reading specialists, or comparable PreK-12 literacy professionals in literacy education research, not literacy teacher educators. Therefore, we used ILA’s (2018) professional standards as a reference point to identify key characteristics of literacy leaders. According to these professional standards, literacy leaders are advocates for literacy, continuous professional learners, and responsive leaders. In the absence of literature specific to literacy teacher educators, we consulted relevant literature that describes each of these key characteristics in practice among literacy professionals.

### **Advocates for Literacy**

Literacy leaders view literacy learning as a top priority and are committed to developing high-levels of literacy skills among PreK-12 students (Murphy, 2004; Taylor, 2004). Literacy leaders model positive attitudes towards literacy and believe that every student is capable of being “an independent, joyful reader and writer” (Taylor, 2004, p. 27). Literacy leaders advocate for the learning needs of their students primarily through professional connections and collaborations (Fletcher, Greenwood, Grimley, & Parkhill, 2011; Shanton, McKinney, Meyer, & Friedrich, 2010). Within a connected and collaborative school environment, literacy leaders engage in honest conversations and work with colleagues to implement evidence-based literacy practices that attend to specific learning needs of students (Fletcher et al., 2011; Murphy, 2004;). Additionally, literacy leaders look beyond the school environment and create linkages with students’ home environments to maximize literacy learning (Murphy, 2004).

### **Continuous Professional Learners**

Every school has its own unique context, culture, and learning atmosphere. In order to best serve the uniqueness of a school's environment, literacy leaders must engage in continuous professional learning activities through informal and formal means (Fletcher et al., 2011). Informal professional learning activities typically consist of routine discussions or meetings with colleagues, whereas formal professional learning activities encompass more structured events led by experts. Collectively, literacy leaders view professional learning activities as collaborative endeavors where they may share "their awareness of challenges and imperfections of their knowledge" safely among others (Shanton et al., 2010, p. 308). By participating in continuous professional learning activities, literacy leaders develop current, research-informed understandings about literacy that replace old patterns of thought (Rogers, 2014). Fortified with the most up-to-date information, literacy leaders also update their pedagogical practices to establish "optimum learning conditions" that "effectively raise literacy achievement" among all students (Fletcher, Grimley, Greenwood, & Parkhill, 2012, p. 80).

### **Responsive Leaders**

In order to be effective, literacy leaders must be responsive leaders (Calo, Sturtevant, & Kopfman, 2015; Mongillo, Lawrence, & Hong, 2012) who approach literacy teaching and learning as a shared endeavor (Lassonde & Tucker, 2014). Literacy leaders draw upon the collective expertise of all stakeholders within a school community to create a shared vision and common goals for literacy (Bean et al., 2015). By doing so, literacy leaders recognize and value all stakeholders and provide "meaning and context to literacy learning and improvement" (Greenleaf, Katz, & Wilson, 2018, p. 107). As agents of change, literacy leaders play the roles of coach, collaborator, consultant, facilitator, mentor, and supervisor to build capacity and

sustainable education practices that are tailored to the specific needs of students (Lassonde & Tucker, 2014).

## **Methods**

### **Context**

The current study was part of a larger-scale study conducted in the South Central United States. We employed a survey research design to explore aspects of literacy teacher preparation from the viewpoints of literacy teacher educators. In the current study, we focused our analysis to explore data related to the literacy leadership practices of literacy teacher educators, as well as challenges they encounter during literacy leadership pursuits.

### **Research Sample**

Due to nuances and state requirements for teacher licensure, we created a purposive sample of literacy teacher educators in a single state located in the South Central United States (Cappello & Farnan, 2006). From the state education agency's website, we obtained a listing of all state-approved teacher preparation programs (TPPs) and filtered it to include only those which were based at regionally accredited universities. Among these 67 university-based TPPs, we conducted extensive online searches on each university's website to identify instructors who teach literacy-focused courses for preservice teachers. Since literacy-focused courses may be taught in multiple departments across a university, we performed a broad search to include faculty members affiliated with various academic departments, such as curriculum and instruction, education, English, literacy, reading, and teaching and learning. During our search, we accessed faculty member listings on departmental webpages, class schedules, and course syllabi. Our search efforts resulted in a pool of 457 potential respondents.

### **Instrumentation**

We created an electronic survey in Google Forms that included two questions concerned with literacy leadership. In a closed-ended question, we asked respondents to indicate specific ways in which they engage as literacy leaders and included a fixed list of answer options (e.g., reading literature, attending professional learning activities) and an open answer field. In an open-ended question, we asked respondents to describe challenges they encounter during their literacy leadership pursuits.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

We collected data during a five-month time frame. When the survey period opened, we sent an informative email to all potential respondents that explained the purpose of the study and invited them to participate. Individuals who elected to participate used a hyperlink included within the email to access the survey and provide consent electronically. Beyond informed consent, survey respondents were not provided any additional information prior to gaining access to survey questions. We tracked participation in a spreadsheet and sent monthly reminders to encourage participation among non-respondents. When the survey period closed, we received 65 completed surveys.

To achieve the goals of the current study, we retrieved data collected from the questions concerned with literacy leadership. We analyzed data from the closed-ended question quantitatively by tabulating responses and reporting frequencies (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2014). We analyzed data from the open-ended question qualitatively by conducting three levels of coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). In the first level, we used open coding to label initial concepts present in the data. In the second level, we used axial coding to confirm the accuracy of codes and group similar codes into themes. In the third level, we reviewed codes within each theme to confirm their coherence and identify the presence of any subthemes. We completed

each level of coding independently and used analytic memo writing to document questions, reflections, and thoughts that materialized (Saldaña, 2016). After we completed our independent analyses in each coding level, we held virtual research team meetings to discuss and harmonize our findings.

### Findings

Of the 65 respondents, five were male and 60 were female (see Table 1). All respondents were literacy teacher educators with one or more years of experiences in training preservice teachers as state-certified classroom teachers for PreK-12 grade levels. Additionally, more than 80% of respondents ( $n = 57, 87.7\%$ ) held full-time positions as literacy teacher educators in their respective universities. Overall, the majority of respondents were affiliated with public universities ( $n = 44, 67.7\%$ ) and were in the Carnegie Classification of Master’s Colleges & Universities: Larger Programs ( $n = 17, 26.2\%$ ), Doctoral/Professional Universities ( $n = 19, 29.2\%$ ), and Doctoral Universities: High Research Activity ( $n = 10, 15.4\%$ ). Every respondent provided information to either one or both survey questions concerned with literacy leadership, which we have summarized below.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics and University Characteristics*

Participant Demographics and University Characteristics	<i>n</i>
Gender	
Female	60
Male	5
Years of Experiences in Training Preservice Teachers	
1 Year or Less	--
2-4 Years	7
5-7 Years	9
8-10 Years	15
More than 10 Years	34
Current Professional Role at University in TPP	
Adjunct Instructor	8

Instructor/Lecturer	11
Assistant Professor	13
Associate Professor	20
Professor	13
Type of University	
Private	21
Public	44
Carnegie Classification	
Baccalaureate Colleges: Diverse Fields	4
Master's Colleges & Universities: Small Programs	6
Master's Colleges & Universities: Medium Programs	2
Master's Colleges & Universities: Larger Programs	17
Doctoral/Professional Universities	19
Doctoral Universities: High Research Activity	10
Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity	7

## Quantitative

Our examination of quantitative data revealed a number of ways in which respondents engage as literacy leaders (see Table 2). The highest frequencies occurred with reading various types of literature. Findings showed that more than half of respondents read professional journals that report effective practices ( $n = 38$ ) and an almost equal number of respondents read professional journals that report research ( $n = 37$ ). Findings also showed that just under half of respondents read professional books ( $n = 32$ ).

Table 2

### *Reported Literacy Leadership Practices*

Literacy Leadership Practices	<i>N</i>
Reading Literature	
Professional Journals that Describe Practices	38
Professional Journals that Report Research	37
Professional Books	32
Attending Professional Learning Activities	
Hosted by Professional Organizations	35
Hosted by Regional Education Service Centers or State Agencies	21
Hosted by Local School Districts	10
Other	
Professional Collaborations	20
Scholarly Endeavors	13

Design and Lead Professional Learning	7
Leadership	2

Lower frequencies were reported for attendance at various types of professional learning activities. Although findings demonstrated that more than half of respondents attend activities hosted by professional organizations ( $n = 35$ ), only one-third of respondents reported attendance at activities hosted by regional education service centers or state agencies ( $n = 21$ ). Moreover, findings revealed that less than one-quarter of respondents attend activities hosted by local school districts ( $n = 10$ ).

Responses provided for the “other” option revealed four additional ways in which respondents engage as literacy leaders. Twenty respondents reported engagement with the following professional collaborations:

- Collaborations among literacy teacher educators and teacher educators from other disciplines (e.g., “work in the school with curriculum personnel,” “network with researchers and leaders in the field of literacy education,” “talk with colleagues about effective practices”);
- Collaborations with individuals who were not teacher educators (e.g., “collaborate with others often outside the field of education,” “attend seminars with thought leaders”); and
- Collaborations with individuals accessible through digital platforms (e.g., “online professional development via Twitter,” “webinars in this field”).

Thirteen respondents also noted their involvement with scholarly endeavors, which included “conducting research,” “the presentation of research findings,” and supporting research efforts among “graduate and doctoral students” and “colleagues.” Additionally, seven respondents described consultant work involving the design and implementation of professional trainings for

literacy practitioners, and two respondents reported service work on “boards and advisory groups” within the literacy profession.

## **Qualitative**

Three themes emerged during qualitative data analysis that described specific challenges respondents encounter during their literacy leadership pursuits. These themes included: Inadequate Resources, Limited Partnerships, and Constraints with Professional Learning Activities. We have presented a summary of these themes below.

**Inadequate resources.** Respondents shared inadequacies they encounter with access to resources. For example, respondents referred to the lack of time to “read, think, and collaborate with peers.” One respondent explained:

The longer I am out of the public school classroom, the more time I need to spend in today’s classroom observing teachers teaching and making sure that I am up-to-date on the demands and expectations of the public school classrooms.

Respondents also acknowledged shortages with financial resources “to cover travel costs to conferences.” To overcome travel expenses, one respondent suggested a need for “a stronger state journal” that disseminates evidence-based literacy practices focused on state-based classrooms, teachers, and curriculum.

**Limited partnerships.** Respondents expressed limitations they encounter with partnerships. Overwhelmingly, respondents recounted issues with instituting internal TPP partnerships (e.g., “I would like monthly meetings with other reading faculty here at the university.”). Respondents also revealed shortcomings with developing external partnerships and expressed a desire to connect literacy teacher educators affiliated with other TPPs (e.g., “It would be wonderful to have an organized network of university professors throughout the state

who prepare literacy professionals.”). Additionally, respondents noted that they interact infrequently with other educational entities, such as “local schools and districts,” “regional service centers,” and state-level education agencies.

**Constraints with professional learning activities.** Respondents divulged specific constraints they encounter as consumers of professional learning activities. Respondents explained that there was a lack of available “online training and webinars” that address current and relevant content, such as “teaching online courses” and “using digital textbooks.” Respondents also disclosed challenges they encounter as providers of continuous professional learning. For example, one respondent stated, “I need my university to value presentations just as much as publications.”

## **Discussion**

First and foremost, we were pleased to see extremely positive stances towards literacy among respondents. This is of extreme importance, as literacy leaders must model positive attitudes towards literacy (Taylor, 2004) and view literacy learning as a top priority for all students (Murphy, 2004). As literacy leaders, literacy teacher educators have a strong potential to influence future professional behaviors of preservice teachers (Wold et al., 2011).

We were surprised by the low levels of participation in different types of continuous learning activities, collaborations, consulting, and service work. This was particularly surprising since most of the respondents were seasoned literacy teacher educators who had several years of experiences in training preservice teachers. However, our findings did shed some light on the challenges that literacy teacher educators face during literacy leadership pursuits. Although our findings provide only a preliminary snapshot of this under-researched area, they do suggest practical implications.

First, TPP administrators must institute frequent opportunities for all TPP stakeholders to collaborate with literacy teacher educators. Teacher education is an interdisciplinary enterprise, and TPP administrators must overcome the “numerous contextual factors” that hinder professional collaborations in university settings (Weiss, Pellegrino, Regan, & Mann, 2015, p. 101). By doing so, literacy teacher educators are poised to lead professional, cross-disciplinary collaborations that value and draw upon the collective expertise of a wide range of stakeholders. Such collaborations should include TPP stakeholders within the university such as instructors from all academic disciplines, as well as TPP stakeholders beyond the university such as PreK-12 school district personnel and community members (Bean et al., 2015; Greenleaf et al., 2018; Wishart & Triggs, 2010).

Second, TPP administrators must prioritize and strengthen their support of ongoing professional learning. These efforts may require increases to current funding streams and experimentation with distance learning platforms. Although this may prove challenging for universities that have limited resources (e.g., small budgets for professional learning, short-staffed TPPs), participation in continuous professional learning is vital for literacy teacher educators to remain up-to-date in their discipline and teaching practices (Smith, 2003). Low-cost alternatives for professional learning activities may include attending trainings offered within the university, ascertaining feedback from preservice teachers and PreK-12 school district personnel, and establishing professional learning communities among teacher educators. Professional learning activities may also include attending trainings offered within PreK-12 school districts to allow for co-mingling between literacy teacher educators and practicing PreK-12 professionals. Additionally, digital tools and virtual learning platforms also offer countless learning

affordances, flexibility with scheduling, and substantial cost savings to support ongoing professional learning among literacy teacher educators (Rientes, Brouwer, & Lygo-Baker, 2013).

Third, leaders in professional organizations should identify ways that they may support literacy teacher educators as literacy leaders. For example, several respondents indicated that time and financial resources were common barriers hindering their engagement as continuous professional learners. Thus, professional organizations may consider designing and implementing professional learning activities that are more cost-effective or delivered virtually. Furthermore, we encourage professional organizations to align their resources and services with the current needs of literacy teacher educators and continually evaluate their effectiveness.

### **Limitations and Areas for Future Research**

As with any research endeavor, there were methodological limitations in the current study that we must acknowledge. The current study was exploratory and sought to add preliminary understandings to an under-researched area. With this in mind, the sample size was appropriate to achieve the study's purpose but warrants caution with generalizability of our findings. In addition, data were self-reported, so respondents may have held differing interpretations of the term "literacy leadership" or what constitutes literacy leadership practices. This limitation may affect the reliability or validity of reported findings. We recommend that follow-up studies elicit participation from larger samples and employ more rigorous research methods. We also encourage researchers to examine the literacy leadership practices of literacy teacher educators more comprehensively and conduct longitudinal studies that investigate the trajectory of literacy leadership development. Efforts to grow the limited research base for this area have a strong potential to introduce and advance a new area of knowledge and lead to an

increased awareness, including the establishment of a universally accepted definition and inventory of promising literacy leadership practices.

### **Conclusion**

Teacher education is a challenging profession, particularly in a complex and changing educational arena. To navigate the PreK-12 teaching profession successfully, classroom teachers must be literacy leaders who are advocates for literacy, continuous professional learners, and responsive leaders (ILA, 2018). Consequently, it makes sense that literacy teacher educators must also embody the characteristics of literacy leaders. However, little is known about the ways in which literacy teacher educators engage as literacy leaders or the challenges that they encounter during literacy leadership pursuits. Findings from the current study address this research gap and provided a preliminary snapshot of this under-researched area by investigating what literacy teacher educators self-report. While our work has made an important contribution to the existing knowledge base, there is still much work to be done to gain a clearer picture of the literacy leadership practices of literacy teacher educators.

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