



AN EXAMINATION OF CHALLENGES AND PRESSURES

ENCOUNTERED BY LITERACY TEACHER EDUCATORS IN TEXAS

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Abstract: Similar to K-12 classroom teachers, literacy teacher educators are susceptible to high levels of stress and burnout. The objective of the present analysis was to add to the limited base of available literature and specific challenges and pressures experienced by literacy teacher educators in Texas ($n=61$). Data from an open-ended survey question were collected and analyzed using content analysis techniques and three separate coding phases. Data analyses resulted in the following five categories: External Accountability and Mandates, Conceptions about Literacy and Professionalism, Characteristics of Preservice Teachers, Appropriate Classroom Settings, and Literacy Curricula and Preparation Program Requirements. Three implications from these findings were described, along with recommendations for practice.

Keywords: literacy teacher educators, challenges, pressure, supports, burnout

During the past several decades, the role of K-12 classroom teachers has been transformed by ever-increasing expectations and responsibilities (Finley, 2010). In an era of accountability and educational reform, classroom teachers face significant pressure associated with a number of factors, including

standards-based instruction, high-stakes testing, diverse student learning needs, inequities with resources, and teaching evaluations (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Teaching has been recognized as “one of the most emotionally taxing professions” (Newberry & Allsop, 2017, p. 875) characterized by high levels of teacher stress and burnout (Helou, Nabhani, & Bahous, 2016). Herman, Hickmon-Rosa, & Reinke (2018) suggested a reciprocal relationship between teacher stress, burnout, and efficacy. Grounded in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), a teacher’s sense of efficacy is related to student outcomes, such as academic performance (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). However, current teacher attrition rates are high, and the most prominent reason that teachers voluntarily leave the profession is the challenges and pressures associated with student academic performance (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Concerns with teacher stress, burnout, and efficacy have led to recommendations for ways in which teacher preparation programs may address these issues (Brown & Nagel, 2004). However, teacher preparation programs contend with a number of outcomes-based measures; state mandates, policies, and regulations (Cochran-Smith, 2003); and significant “curricular demands” (Brown & Nagel, 2004, p. 39). In Texas, for example, teacher preparation programs must offer a curriculum based in scientific research that addresses relevant Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills; the Educator’s Code of Ethics and Standards; the detection and education of students with dyslexia; mental health, substance abuse, and suicide among youths; setting and maintaining high student expectations; classroom management skills; and the framework for the teacher evaluation system (Texas Secretary of State, 2016). Heightened expectations for the preparation of classroom teachers have, in turn, placed a great responsibility on teacher educators. Teacher educators face enormous pressure to develop and deliver relevant and rigorous curricula that prepare preservice teachers for the complexities associated with teaching (Wilson & Loewenberg Ball, 1996). In addition to responsibilities associated with teaching, teacher educators must also manage additional job expectations required among higher education faculty members, such as engagement with scholarship and service work (Boyer 1990).

At the time of the present analysis, extant literature largely examined challenges and pressures encountered among novice teacher educators (e.g., Kosnik et al., 2011; Saito, 2013; Trent, 2013). Some literature examined challenges and pressures among experienced teacher educators within the disciplines of physical education (Williamson, 1993), career and technology education (Brewer & McMahan, 2003), mathematics (Vomvoridi-Ivanovic & McLeman, 2015) and science (Wiebke & Park Rogers, 2014). A few recent pieces also examined challenges and pressures among experienced literacy teacher educators (Kosnik, Menna, Dharamshi, 2016; Kosnik, Menna, Dharamshi, Miyata, & Beck, 2013; Kosnik et al., 2015). The goal of the present analysis was to add to this emerging body of research by investigating challenges and pressures encountered by experienced literacy teacher educators in Texas.

Review of Relevant Literature

In today’s technologically advanced world, what it means to be literate has drastically changed (National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2013). This shift and the changing demographics and diversities in K-12 classrooms (Eng, 2013) have prompted teacher educators to transform how preservice teachers are prepared with literacy. Effective literacy teacher preparation should provide preservice teachers with research-based understandings of content

and pedagogical knowledge, opportunities to practice applying content and pedagogical understandings within authentic school contexts, and ways to practice continuous teacher development (International Literacy Association & NCTE, 2017). In addition, effective literacy teacher preparation programs should conduct frequent and varied assessments to measure learning among preservice teachers. K-12 student academic success is contingent on literacy proficiency (Reardon, Valentino, & Shores, 2012); therefore, literacy teacher educators must instruct and prepare preservice teachers to address the literacy needs of students for all grade levels and content areas (Draper, 2002). With this in mind, literacy teacher educators work diligently to support the development of literacy behaviors, knowledge, and skills among preservice teachers while simultaneously developing their ability to “to work confidently with culturally and linguistically diverse children and families, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds” (Rogers, 2013, p. 7).

In addition to evolving curricula and learner needs, literacy teacher educators contend with decreasing autonomy as a result of increasing standardization among teacher preparation programs (Kosnik et al., 2016). Literacy teacher educators may also grapple with the dual identities of being a former classroom teacher and newly appointed teacher educator, particularly since K-12 and higher education institutions maintain separate and distinct educational systems and professional expectations (Kosnik et al., 2013). For example, teacher educators experience more self-directedness than K-12 classroom teachers (Kosnik, Dharamshi, Miyata, & Cleovoulou, 2014). Furthermore, literacy teacher educators must engage in continuous development and refinement of their practice and attend to many responsibilities beyond teaching, such as the management of scholarly endeavors, engagement in collaborations with other education and non-education professionals, and active participation in service to their institution and profession (Kosnik et al., 2015).

Preparing competent and effective literacy teachers can be a challenging undertaking due to the unique challenges and pressures associated with literacy teacher educator’s positions as teacher preparation professionals and university faculty members. The goal of the present analysis was to investigate this under-researched area more closely and to identify ways in which literacy teacher educators may be supported with overcoming these challenges and pressures.

Methods

Context

The present analysis was employed using data collected from a previous study conducted among literacy teacher educators in Texas. The goal of this study was to ascertain their views of literacy preparedness among preservice teachers. Data were collected using an electronic questionnaire created in Google Forms, of which 65 responses were received. Respondents were all experienced literacy teacher educators who prepare preservice literacy teachers for the following teaching certification areas: early childhood/preschool, elementary grades (Kindergarten-5th Grade), middle grades (6th-8th Grades), secondary grades (9th-12th Grades), special education, and English as a second language.

Data Collection and Analysis

For the present analysis, data were collected from the following open-ended survey question: What are challenges and pressures that you encounter with the preparation of literacy professionals? Data

encompassed responses provided by 61 respondents who described specific challenges and pressures that they encounter during the preparation of literacy professionals. Responses consisted of a total of 3,066 words, with each response averaging 50 words.

Data were analyzed using content analysis techniques (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). First, a codebook was developed that consisted of initial coding categories derived from relevant literature, such as *conceptions of literacy*, *life/school/work balance*, and *standardized testing*. Next, independent reviews were conducted, and data were coded systematically in three separate phases using open, axial, and selective coding (Böhm, 2004). During each phase, members of the research team met to discuss coding strategies until they were reached complete agreement. New codes that emerged and were agreed upon were added to the codebook.

Findings

Data analyses led to the development of the following five categories: External Accountability and Mandates, Conceptions about Literacy and Professionalism, Characteristics of Preservice Teachers, Appropriate Classroom Settings, and Teacher Preparation Program Requirements (see Table 1). Findings for each category are presented below, along with excerpts of supportive data, in ascending order.

Table 1

Categories	Examples of Codes	Examples of Supportive Data
External Accountability and Mandates	standardized testing	“The elephant in the room is the STAAR exam. Best practices in literacy instruction have a back seat to test preparation in our schools.”
Conceptions about Literacy and Professionalism	conceptions of literacy	“Many preservice teachers may not have had a successful reading background themselves. So, they are not open to understand literacy as novice professionals.”
Characteristics of Preservice Teachers	life/school/work balance	“Preservice teachers who are nontraditional students often juggle full-time employment, family, and personal responsibilities.”
Appropriate Classroom Settings	qualified mentors	“Preservice teachers go into classrooms for observation and do not see the type of instruction that is advocated as a best practice.”
Teacher Preparation Program Requirements	lack of time	“The ability to fit all of the important information into the allotted course times is very challenging.”

External Accountability and Mandates

Within this category, respondents made 13 statements that described challenges and pressures they encounter from external accountability and mandates. Seven of these statements referenced “school district mandates,” state education agency policies, and “government regulations” as hindrances, with one respondent claiming that these aspects create “a mismatch between the world we want them [preservice teachers] to be able to build and the world as it exists in schools in the present day.” The remaining six statements in this category illustrated how standardized testing greatly limits access “to appropriate field and clinical practice” and also impacts the quality of literacy instruction and assessment that

occurs in schools. For example, one respondent stated, “When our preservice teachers are in the field, there is a HUGE amount of time being devoted to testing state/standardized prep and not enough time with alternative means of instruction and assessment.”

Conceptions about Literacy and Professionalism

Within this category, respondents made 14 statements that described challenges and pressures they encounter with conceptions about literacy and professionalism among preservice teachers. Seven of these statements referred to beliefs about literacy that preservice teachers hold due to their previous personal experiences. One respondent remarked, “Requiring preservice teachers to think beyond and challenge their existing beliefs is a difficult transition for them.” The remaining seven statements in this category depicted under-developed ideas of professionalism exhibited among preservice teachers. For example, one respondent noted that preservice teachers see themselves as “college students just getting through another class,” rather than as aspiring professionals. This respondent further explained, “Making a connection to their future professional lives is very important to me, and it takes some time to develop that point of view.”

Characteristics of Preservice Teachers

Within this category, respondents made 17 statements that described challenges and pressures they encounter with respect to characteristics of preservice teachers. These statements recounted specific attributes among preservice teachers that create obstacles for learning, such as “low literacy levels,” “motivation and commitment levels,” and “lack of background knowledge.” Respondents also acknowledged that many preservice teachers “juggle full-time employment, family, and personal responsibilities,” while others demonstrate irresponsibility by missing scheduled classes and electing to not complete course requirements. One respondent noted that they sometimes confront prejudices held by preservice teachers.

Appropriate Classroom Settings

Within this category, respondents made 18 statements that described challenges and pressures they encounter concerning appropriate classroom settings for preservice and novice teachers. With respect to preservice teachers, 12 statements portrayed issues related to the availability of “qualified mentors” and “schools that have effective processes in place.” One respondent stated:

Sometimes there is a disconnect between higher education and the realities of the classroom. We [literacy teacher educators] teach them [preservice teachers] best practices, but the implementation that the school districts require in order to meet accountability standards may vary from the research-based effective practices we teach.

With respect to novice teachers, six statements described issues related to preservice teacher graduates “finding teaching positions in which they will be supported with implementing best teaching practices.” One respondent explained:

Our graduates who find jobs in districts that support reading and writing workshop, balanced literacy, guided reading, etc. are successful with implementing these approaches once they become teachers. However, our graduates who end up in teaching positions that don’t support these approaches are often unsuccessful at implementing practices learned in our program.

Teacher Preparation Program Requirements

Within this category, respondents made 31 statements that described challenges and pressures they encounter as a result of the requirements of their respective teacher preparation programs. Overwhelmingly, respondents commented on the lack of time they have available to address concepts sufficiently during



coursework and constraints associated with providing “more real-world experiences” in authentic classroom contexts. With respect to coursework, one respondent commented, “We try too hard to include too much. When we do this, substance and depth are sacrificed.” With respect to the provision of more real-world experiences, one respondent detailed their value:

Literacy is complex. Learning and reading about literacy in the university classroom can be very one-dimensional, especially with the more complex literacy topics, such as assessment. To fully understand the concepts and knowledge that it takes to be an effective literacy educator requires preservice teachers to be in the schools and the classrooms regularly and engaged in hands-on learning with real students. Once you add the student into the equation, the preservice teacher is able to understand and apply the concepts more easily. A lot of those “aha” moments occur in the context of working with a real student.

Discussion

Findings from the present analysis have confirmed previous understandings and revealed new insights concerning the challenges and pressures encountered by literacy teacher educators. Preparing competent and effective teachers is “complex work in an increasingly demanding environment” (Sahni & Deswal, 2015, p. 1). Therefore, it is of vital importance that literacy teacher educators have access to specific supports that assist with overcoming challenges and pressures associated with literacy teacher preparation. With this in mind, our findings have suggested three implications for which we propose recommendations for practice.

First, our findings demonstrated that literacy teacher educators have rich, comprehensive understandings of challenges and pressures associated with literacy teacher preparation. Kosnik et al. (2014) referred to literacy teacher educators as “the nexus point for literacy education” and affirmed that they were “ideally suited to be leaders” (p. 59). We encourage teacher preparation program administrators to empower highly knowledgeable and skillful literacy teacher educators to lead program improvement efforts for literacy education. Positioning exceptional literacy teacher educators as leaders of program improvement provides an appropriate platform for all teacher preparation program stakeholders to engage in open dialogue and address common challenges and pressures as a collective body. Such efforts enable literacy teacher educators to collaborate with colleagues by providing information for relevant literacy issues that impact K-12 teaching and learning practices (Nguyen, Benken, Hakim-Butt, & Zwiép, 2013); developing ways to integrate literacy meaningfully across content areas (Hall-Kenyon & Smith, 2013); and creating innovative approaches to meet teacher education program requirements, such as infusing co-taught units of instruction into existing coursework (Pufpaff & Yssel, 2010).

Our findings also underscored the need for an organized network of literacy teacher educators, such as a statewide literacy consortium. Instituting such a network of literacy professionals promotes the building of strategic partnerships and pooling of intellectual and capital resources for the common goal of improving literacy teacher preparation. Many et al. (2006) studied a state-funded consortium that once operated in the Southeast United States and described the “professional synergy” (p. 347) that occurred through professional learning; mentoring; and “collegial, critical, and informative” discourse (p. 346). Due to the nuances associated with teacher certification among state education agencies (Cappello & Farnan, 2006), a state-based network would provide Texas literacy teacher educators with a supportive group of professionals. Such a group could possibly be affiliated with an existing professional literacy organization, such as Coalition of Reading and English Supervisors of Texas (CREST), Texas Association for Literacy Education (TALE), or Texas Council of Teachers of English Arts (TCTELA).

Lastly, our findings highlighted several topics for which literacy teacher educators require resources and training. Based on challenges and pressures reported in the present analysis, suggested topics include: (a) advocacy tools with which to navigate policies and mandates, (b) instructional strategies to transform beliefs about literacy and professionalism, (c) methods to address sensitive issues with dignity, (d) procedures for training classroom teachers and school administrators to serve as mentors, and (e) literacy frameworks for teacher preparation programs. Engagement with ongoing professional learning is an expectation for literacy teacher educators (Kosnik et al., 2015), yet these efforts are generally self-directed and limited to current offerings. Loughran (2014)

asserted that professional learning among teacher educators “must be purposefully conceptualized, thoughtfully implemented, and meaningfully employed” (p. 280). We encourage literacy teacher educators to develop partnerships with entities that specialize in professional learning, such as nonprofit agencies (e.g., Center for the Collaborative Classroom) and literacy professional organizations (e.g., CREST, TALE, TCTELA). Through these partnerships, both entities can work collaboratively to develop resources and implement trainings for literacy teacher preparation topics require the most support.

Conclusion

Preparing future teachers with literacy is a privilege and awesome responsibility for literacy teacher educators. In order to reduce stress and prevent burnout, it is essential that literacy teacher educators have a voice and safe space to discuss challenges and pressures they encounter and propose possible supports (Kosnik et al., 2016). The present analysis sought to investigate current challenges and pressures that literacy teacher educators in Texas have encountered. Findings revealed specific topics from which three recommendations for practice were proposed. Future studies should continue investigating this under-researched area so that literacy teacher educators regain a sense of vitality and enthusiasm that is encouraging, enriching, and empowering both personally and professionally (Cobb, 2005; Turner, Applegate, & Applegate, 2009).

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