

**Developing Instructional Capacity and Competence among Preservice Teachers:
Voices of Literacy Teacher Educators**

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Abstract

High-quality literacy teacher preparation is critical for K-12 student success and an important topic. Teacher educators must develop instructional capacity and competence among preservice teachers, and the current study sought to discover how literacy teacher educators promoted understandings with curriculum, instructional approaches, and resources among preservice teachers. Using Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, we retrieved relevant survey data and examined reported preparation practices qualitatively. Our findings were congruent with preparation practices reported in extant literature for developing instructional capacity and competence among preservice teachers. Findings also revealed an imbalance with preparation practices, from which recommendations for literacy teacher educators were made.

Keywords: literacy, instructional capacity, instruction competence, preparation practices, teacher educators

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High-quality literacy teacher preparation is critical for K-12 student success (Hollins, 2017; International Literacy Association [ILA], 2015; Lacina & Block, 2011) and has recently been deemed as a topic of great importance (ILA, 2018b). In 2015, ILA examined requirements for literacy teacher preparation and determined that further research was needed, particularly with identifying preparation program features that promote literacy teacher effectiveness. Subsequently, ILA and the National Council of Teachers of English recognized research-based preparation program features that are necessary for cultivating well-prepared literacy teachers:

- coursework that develops content and pedagogical knowledge among preservice teachers;
- frequent opportunities for preservice teachers to apply learned knowledge within authentic contexts;
- learning experiences that develop behaviors and thinking patterns among preservice teachers for engagement with continuous professional learning; and
- the use of ongoing assessments to evaluate readiness, progress, and benchmarking accomplishments of preservice teachers, as well as overall program effectiveness.

(ILA & NCTE, 2017).

Teaching is complex and requires proficiency with a wide variety of professional practices (Labaree, 2000). With respect to instructional practices, literacy teachers face numerous challenges with providing equitable, inclusive, and individualized instruction for all aspects of literacy among an increasingly diverse student population (Alvermann, 2002; Frankel, et al., 2013; Gambrell, et al., 2011; Roe, 1992; Schwartz & Gallant, 2009). In order to navigate the complexities associated with teaching and learning literacy, preservice

teachers must experience rigorous teacher preparation that develops competence with “the theory-to-practice decision-making process” (Wickstrom, et al., 2006, p. 27). In knowing that preservice teachers often possess naïve beliefs about teaching (Butaud & Raymond, 2015), teacher educators must guide preservice teachers to become reflective practitioners who inform their instructional practices with theory (Hodges, et al., 2016), data from a wide variety of assessments (McKenna & Walpole, 2005), deep knowledge about students (Vaughn, et al., 2015), and input from students themselves (Groff, 2014). Thus, literacy teacher educators must be mentors to preservice teachers and support their development of reflective teaching by explicitly demonstrating and modeling effective instructional practices; cultivating deep understandings of literacy skills and processes; and providing feedback that is respectful, encouraging, and growth-oriented (Wold, et al., 2011).

From an instructional perspective, literacy teachers must have deep understandings of “the elements of a balanced, integrated, and comprehensive literacy curriculum and have developed expertise in enacting that curriculum (International Reading Association [IRA], 2010, p. 9). A considerable amount of literature published within the past decade describes ways in which literacy teacher educators develop instructional capacity and competence among preservice teachers (e.g., Dharamshi, 2018; Fang, 2014; Kavanagh & Rainey, 2017; Kosnik, Menna, Dharamshi, & Beck, 2018; Le Fevre, 2011; Many & Aoulou, 2014; Marri et al., 2011; Martin, Chase, Cahill, & Gregory, 2011). Our goal for the current exploratory study was to contribute to this body of research using the elements delineated in a set of internationally recognized professional literacy standards for novice teachers of all grade levels (IRA, 2010). Specifically, we sought to discover how literacy teacher educators

promoted understandings with curriculum, instructional approaches, and resources among preservice teachers.

Review of Literature

ILA is an internationally recognized professional standards that describe the behaviors, knowledge, and skills desired among novice literacy professionals (ILA, 2018a; IRA, 2010). At the time of the current study, there were six professional standards: (1) Foundational Knowledge, (2) Curriculum and Instruction, (3) Assessment and Evaluation, (4) Diversity, (5) Literate Environment, and (6) Professional Learning and Leadership (IRA, 2010). Within each standard, specific corresponding elements were outlined, along with specific examples of how competence may be demonstrated for each professional role (i.e., education support personnel, classroom teacher, reading specialist/literacy coach, teacher educator, and administrator). The current study focused upon the elements associated with the second standard, Curriculum and Instruction, for classroom teachers. The Curriculum and Instruction standard stated that preservice teachers “use instructional approaches, materials, and an integrated, comprehensive, balanced curriculum to support student learning in reading and writing” (p. 8). The following review of literature provides a brief description for each element associated with this standard, as well as specific literature-based examples of preparation practices.

Curriculum

The first element within the Curriculum and Instruction standard specified that preservice teachers, “use foundational knowledge to design or implement an integrated, comprehensive, and balanced curriculum” (IRA, 2010, p. 20). Preservice teachers must learn ways to align curriculum with requisite standards (e.g., state or national standards) and base

implementation of curriculum on the interests, experiences, and prior understandings of their students. Preservice teachers must also learn to collaborate with other professionals to meet the individual needs of all students and evaluate their implementation of curriculum to ensure learning goals are met.

One way in which literacy teacher educators develop competence with aspects of curriculum among preservice teachers is through authentic tasks in coursework. For example, Rule, Montgomery, and Vander Zanden (2014) executed a series of lessons in a curriculum methods course that demonstrated how to integrate aspects of literacy (i.e., reading and writing) into content area instruction (i.e., social studies) to foster social-emotional development (i.e., compassion) among young students.

Literacy teacher educators also develop competence among preservice teachers with this element through field-based experiences. For example, Rogers, Cooper, Nesmith, and Purdum-Cassidy (2015) designed a field-based learning activity for preservice teachers to plan and implement a curriculum that integrated reading (i.e., children's literature) into a content area (i.e., mathematics) among actual third- and fourth-grade students. As literacy teacher educators, Rogers et al. empowered preservice teachers to make their own decisions regarding curriculum with input from the teacher in their assigned classroom. By doing so, preservice teachers were able to practice making curricular decisions based upon their specific classroom contexts and students' learning needs.

Instructional Approaches

The second element within the Curriculum and Instruction standard specified that preservice teachers “use appropriate and varied instructional approaches, including those that develop word recognition, language comprehension, strategic knowledge, and reading–writing

connections” (IRA, 2010, p. 20). Preservice teachers must develop a repertoire of instructional approaches and learn how to select, use, and differentiate specific instructional approaches based upon intended purposes, research-based rationales, and students’ needs. Preservice teachers must also learn how to evaluate the effectiveness of selected instructional approaches, as well as how to augment instruction with a variety of resources to enhance student learning.

One way in which literacy teacher educators develop competence with this element is by combining university-based classroom learning with field-based experiences. For example, Gillett and Ellingson (2017) sought to develop preservice teachers’ understandings with running records and described two different approaches they use based upon the format of their courses. With both approaches, preservice teachers first receive explicit and guided instruction in the university-based classroom from a designated expert (i.e., the literacy teacher educator or a current school district literacy professional) on how to use running records. To promote deeper understandings, explicit and guided instruction were supported with helpful resources, such as audio recordings of students reading, explanatory professional development videos, and closely related professional texts. Next, preservice teachers left the university-based classroom setting to complete multiple running records with actual students in local schools under the guidance of a classroom teacher. Afterwards, preservice teachers worked with a designated expert to analyze data from their running records and plan follow-up instructional approaches based upon the learning needs of each student.

Resources

The third element within the Curriculum and Instruction Standard specified that preservice teachers “use a wide range of texts (e.g., narrative, expository, and poetry) from

traditional print, digital, and online resources” (IRA, 2010, p. 20). Preservice teachers must learn how to use research to guide their selection and use of digital, online, and print resources. Furthermore, preservice teachers must learn how to create a classroom library of such resources that is accessible and inclusive for all students.

There are a number of ways in which literacy teacher educators develop both personal and professional competence among preservice teachers with traditional print, digital, and online resources. For example, Kerry-Moran (2016) used traditional print books during course activities to develop reading expression among preservice teachers. Kerry-Moran also noted the value of using traditional print books to model use of effective read-aloud instructional strategies and techniques. Similarly, Larson (2013) designed a series of course tasks to familiarize preservice teachers with tools and features associated with digital books. Consequently, these course tasks simultaneously cultivated preservice teachers’ understandings of how to incorporate digital books into instruction effectively. In this same manner, Damico and Pano (2016) described a classroom activity that required preservice teachers to independently read and evaluate information from various online sources concerning the controversial topic of climate change. Through participation in this activity, preservice teachers developed their own systematic approach to critically read and evaluate online texts and learned how to impart these skills among their own students at the same time.

Theoretical Framework

According to Bandura (1971), the fundamental concept of social learning is that learning, “is a continuous reciprocal interaction between behavior and its controlling conditions” and emphasized “the important role played by vicarious symbolic and self-regulatory processes” (p. 2). Bandura (1971, 1977) developed the model of Social Learning

Theory by taking the concepts of classical and operant conditioning presented in behaviorist learning theories and combining them with concepts associated with observational learning and mediating processes.

Bandura (1971) posited, “Virtually all learning phenomena resulting from direct experiences can occur on a vicarious basis through observation of other people’s behavior and its consequences for them” (p. 2). Through observations, an individual encodes behavior and may imitate observed behaviors later (Bandura, 1971, 1977, 1989). When an individual imitates a behavior, they receive either negative or positive reinforcements from others, which may affect future behavior imitations. Mediational processes are concerned with the cognitive functions that occur during observational learning. Bandura (1989) defined four mediational processes:

- Attentional processes determine notable behaviors when an individual’s attention has been aroused.
- Retention processes encode notable behaviors into an individual’s memory.
- Behavioral production processes transform behaviors stored in an individual’s memory into appropriate actions.
- Motivational processes evaluate positive and negative reinforcements experienced from enacted behaviors to determine future use.

Since Bandura’s (1971, 1977) Social Learning Theory posited that learning can occur through both direct and vicarious experiences, Bandura, Adams, and Beyer (1977) examined the role of self-efficacy in both types of learning situations. Their findings revealed that direct experiences led to “higher, more generalized, and stronger” levels of self-efficacy among learners than vicarious learning experiences (p. 136). This finding, along with the tenets of

Bandura's Social Learning Theory, provided the theoretical framing for our analysis of the ways in which literacy teacher educators promoted understandings with curriculum, instructional approaches, and resources among preservice teachers.

Methods

The methodology for this qualitative study is discussed through context, data collection, and analysis.

Context

In a previous cross-sectional study, we examined the viewpoints of literacy teacher educators concerning the preparedness of preservice teachers in relation to the ILA's professional standards for novice classroom teachers (Sharp, Raymond, & Piper, 2018). We designed an electronic survey instrument that included a combination of closed- and open-ended questions related to the elements and standards. With the closed-ended questions, respondents rated how they viewed levels of preparation among preservice teachers for each element associated with all six standards (i.e., Not At All Prepared, Slightly Prepared, Somewhat Prepared, Very Prepared, and Extremely Prepared). With the open-ended questions, respondents described how they addressed elements associated with all six standards in their preparation practices.

After we developed the survey instrument in our previous study, we conducted a pilot test among 20 individuals. Pilot test participants included literacy teacher educators, higher education leadership faculty, and literacy leaders within K-12 who provided feedback regarding the clarity and functionality of the electronic survey. Based upon this feedback, we made a few minor revisions to wording on the survey instrument to enhance readability.

Once we finalized the survey instrument, we created a database of literacy teacher educators who were affiliated with the 67 teacher preparation programs accredited by the state's education agency. We identified literacy teacher educators by consulting the website for each teacher preparation program and other publically available information, such as class schedules. Through our web search efforts, we identified 457 literacy teacher educators. We invited each literacy teacher educator to participate in the previous study via email during a designated 4-week period and sent one reminder at the beginning of the final week to encourage participation. When the survey period closed, 65 literacy teacher educators had completed the survey (see Sharp, Raymond, & Piper (2018) for a full reporting of quantitative findings).

Data Collection and Analysis

To achieve the goal of the current study, we retrieved qualitative data collected in our previous study from the open-ended question, "Specifically, how do you promote literacy professionals' understandings with instructional approaches, materials, and curriculum to support student literacy learning." We analyzed data by element (i.e., curriculum, instructional approaches, and resources) with open and axial coding (Saldaña, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We first used open coding to break down data and begin labeling discrete concepts and categories. We then used axial coding to make connections between concepts and categories, as well as identify the presence of any sub-categories (see Table 1 for examples). Throughout the coding process, we used the constant comparative method to search for similarities and differences within and across the data (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Merriam, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Reliability and validity were further established through the maintenance of a

written codebook and frequent research team meetings that were held to ensure intercoder agreement (Saldaña, 2016).

Table 1

Elements, Categories & Sub-categories, and Concepts

Elements	Categories & Sub-categories	Concepts
Curriculum	Content-based (Broad)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate content areas • Comprehensive curriculum analysis
	Content-based (Narrow)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach lesson planning • Use assessments to drive instruction
	Standards-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Align instruction with state standards
Instructional Approaches	General Instructional Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small groups • Deliver mini-lessons
	Reading Instructional Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read literature aloud • Use shared reading
Resources	Types	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children’s literature texts • Text sets
	Evaluation Techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developmentally appropriate texts • High-quality texts

Findings

In the current study, there were 65 respondents, from a possible pool of 457 identified literacy teacher educators, which achieved a low response rate. However, approximately 85%

of respondents ($n = 55$) indicated that they had five or more years of experiences with preparing literacy professionals. Thus, we determined that the research sample for the current study consisted primarily of knowledgeable and seasoned literacy teacher educators. The following sections present the findings for the elements of curriculum, instructional approaches, and resources.

Curriculum

Within the element of curriculum, respondents indicated that they develop competence among preservice teachers by addressing content- and standards-based curriculum planning. According to respondents, content-based curriculum planning included both broad topics (e.g., how to create an integrated curriculum, how to conduct a comprehensive curriculum analysis) and narrow topics (e.g., individual lesson planning, sequencing, and assessments for a unit of instruction), whereas standards-based curriculum planning focused upon how to align instruction with the mandated state educational standards. One respondent emphasized that preservice teachers must be, “able to connect coursework with real-world application of instructional approaches and base it all on state curriculum standards.”

Findings revealed ways in which respondents addressed curriculum among preservice teachers within the university classroom. For example, one respondent shared that they place a heavy emphasis on “extensive hands-on practice with lesson planning and implementation.” Similarly, another respondent explained that they require preservice teachers to “develop balanced literacy units.” In this same manner, respondents also described ways in which they attempt to make connections between the university classroom and field-based contexts. For example, one respondent made arrangements for preservice teachers to, “conduct observations

in classrooms where balanced literacy programs are being implemented” and then facilitated follow-up class discussions concerning “high-quality examples” of their observations.

Instructional Approaches

Within the element of instructional approaches, respondents indicated that they develop competence among preservice teachers by addressing general and reading instructional strategies. According to respondents, general instructional strategies encompass a wide range of teaching practices appropriate for any curricular area. These teaching practices included small group instruction, mini-lessons, cooperative learning strategies, instructional scaffolds, and differentiation. In contrast, respondents noted that reading instructional strategies encompassed specific teaching practices for balanced literacy components. These teaching practices included read-alouds, shared reading, and guided reading.

Our findings reflected a myriad of ways in which respondents addressed general and reading instructional strategies among preservice teachers within the university classroom.

These included:

- instructor modeling of “skills-based instruction with specific phonemes and graphemes while using children’s books, worksheets, and games;”
- “hands-on practice” with balanced literacy components;
- “small group” cooperative learning games; and
- classroom discussions.

Findings also demonstrated ways in which respondents tried to make connections between content learned in the university classroom and teaching practices in field-based contexts. Respondents noted that preservice teachers complete “lots of field experiences working with children in schools,” so they incorporated assignments that required preservice

teachers “to reflect on what they have learned in class and what they are seeing in the K-12 classrooms.” One respondent acknowledged that the great efforts they made with addressing the element of instructional approaches “equips [preservice teachers] with resources and strategies for use in clinical teaching and future classrooms.”

Resources

Within the element of resources, respondents indicated that they develop competence among preservice teachers by addressing types of resources available to support instruction, as well as how to select suitable resources. The types of resources that respondents referred to were individual children’s literature texts, text sets, professional texts, and digital media. With these resources in mind, respondents specified that they also show preservice teachers how to use specific evaluation techniques to identify developmentally appropriate, high quality, and varied resources.

Our findings reflected a small number of ways in which respondents addressed resources among preservice teachers within the university classroom. One respondent noted that their own use of “varied and thoughtfully-selected materials” influenced how preservice teachers could select quality resources for their future classrooms. Another respondent explained that they first “share a wide range of materials and resources” with preservice teachers and then task preservice teachers with locating and selecting “a wide range of materials for their own use.” Although respondents expressed “the belief that materials themselves do not teach,” it was not clear how respondents made connections with resources among preservice teachers between the university classroom and field-based contexts.

Discussion

Teaching is a complex, multifaceted profession (Labaree, 2000). As schools are impacted by accountability (Graue, et al., 2017; Oldham, 2018) and classrooms become more diverse (Alvermann, 2002; Frankel et al., 2013; Gambrell et al., 2011; Roe, 1992; Schwartz & Gallant, 2009), much attention has been given to teacher preparation and teacher quality (Adnot, et al., 2017; Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001; Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Goldhaber, et al., 2018). With respect to literacy teachers, preservice teachers must develop competence with “the theory-to-practice decision-making process” (Wickstrom et al., 2006, p. 27) and learn how to “unite their training, professional knowledge about students’ needs and interests, as well as the social dynamics of classroom interactions” (Block, et al., 2002, p. 181). Additionally, preservice teachers must be able to effectively demonstrate that they can meet the learning needs of all learners through appropriate lesson accommodations, adaptations, and modifications (Dee, 2010). It is evident that high-quality literacy teacher preparation is vital for K-12 student success (Hollins, 2017; ILA, 2015; Lacina & Block, 2011).

Effective literacy teachers know how to “use instructional approaches, materials, and an integrated, comprehensive, balanced curriculum to support student learning in reading and writing” (IRA, 2010, p. 8). Thus, preservice teachers must learn ways to: (a) implement an aligned, standards-based literacy curriculum that considers the interests, experiences, and prior understandings of their students; (b) select, use, and differentiate specific instructional approaches and evaluate their effectiveness; and (c) select, use, and provide all students with access to a variety of quality digital, online, and print resources. As mentors, literacy teacher educators must employ preparation practices that promote instructional capacity and

competence among preservice teachers to support their development as skilled novice literacy professionals (Grossman, et al., 2009; Wold et al., 2011). In the current study, we invited a sample of knowledgeable and seasoned literacy teacher educators to describe the preparation practices that they use to develop preservice teachers' understandings with curriculum and instruction and used Bandura's (1971, 1977, 1989) Social Cognitive Theory as a theoretical lens with which to examine and determine the significance of our findings.

Our findings revealed that literacy teacher educators foster preservice teachers' understandings with: (a) content- and standards-based curriculum planning; (b) general and reading instructional strategies; and (c) types of resources, including how to select suitable resources. Literacy teacher educators reported a diverse collection of course-based learning activities that occurred within the university classroom and field-based learning activities that took place in authentic contexts, such as K-12 schools. Thus, our findings were congruent to preparation practices that were described in extant literature.

In terms of quantity of preparation practices, our findings uncovered a variety of preparation practices that literacy teacher educators use to address the elements of curriculum and instructional approaches. However, we noted that there was a shortage of preparation practices that literacy teacher educators use to address the element of resources. Moreover, our findings did not reveal explicit ways in which literacy teacher educators provide preservice teachers with course-based training or field-based learning activities focused on differentiating instruction in response to individual student needs.

While it is critical for teacher educators to be mindful of practices that support preservice teachers' development, the findings also assert that teacher educators must consider the role of learning and implementation of instructional practices as rooted in the social

learning theory. Promoting a high-quality literacy learning environment will increase preservice teachers' understandings of literacy education.

Implications

Based on these findings, we encourage literacy teacher educators to engage in a comprehensive self-analysis of their own preparation practices to ensure that preservice teachers are sufficiently prepared as competent novice literacy teachers. One area we encourage literacy teacher educators to examine carefully are ways in which they prepare preservice teachers to address differentiated instruction in the classroom. Literacy teacher educators should ensure that learning experiences implemented in the university classroom and field-based contexts throughout the entire program work in harmony to promote preservice teachers' growth with differentiated instruction. Conducting a self-analysis may reveal gaps and areas of teacher preparation that literacy teacher educators need to address more evenly. More importantly, we encourage literacy teacher educators to examine the effectiveness of their preparation practices. As Kosnik and Beck (2008) noted, "What was taught [to preservice teachers] was not always what was learned" (p. 124).

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

As with any research endeavor, there were three major limitations with the current study. First, sample size was small and limited to literacy teacher educators who were affiliated with teacher preparation programs in one geographic area which limits the generalizability of the findings. Follow-up studies could be conducted that utilize larger sample sizes and include participants from multiple areas, regions, and countries. Second, analysis was limited to data collected from one survey that was electronically disseminated and may have affected the extent to which respondents reported information. For example,

survey participants may have disregarded the survey due to spam filters or the time commitment for completion. Future studies should use research designs and data collection methods that gain more prolific insights from literacy teacher educators, such as distribution of hard copies of the survey at professional conferences, focus groups, and individual interviews. Third, our analysis was exploratory and only considered the preparation practices reported by literacy teacher educators. We did not examine the extent to which preparation practices impacted preservice teachers' understandings. Future studies should examine preparation practices in more detail to identify specific preparation practices that promote higher levels of efficacy among preservice teachers. Based on these limitations we strongly encourage teacher education stakeholders not to generalize our findings beyond the sample population in this study. Rather the voices from these teacher educators should be viewed as a springboard for a similar study with a larger population.

Conclusion

Fostering instructional capacity and competence among literacy teachers is of primary importance in an era of accountability and diversity. Schools contend with ever-changing challenges and pressures that influence curriculum, instructional approaches, and resources. Literacy teacher educators play a vital role in preparing novice literacy teachers to navigate these challenges and pressures effectively. As literacy teacher educators design learning experiences for preservice teachers, it is critical that they rely upon preparation practices that bridge learning in the university classroom to authentic school contexts. With this in mind, literacy teacher educators should also stay connected to practicing literacy teachers and how they attend to curriculum, instructional approaches, and resources in their classrooms. By doing so, literacy teacher educators position themselves to learn about novel and innovative

teaching practices associated with curriculum and instruction, as well as areas that may require more attention during teacher preparation.

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