

Literacy Learning and Teacher Education in the Primary Grades



Learning to read effectively remains an elusive goal for far too many of this nation's children. Several statistics support the premise that despite copious amounts of research conducted each year into the best methods for teaching reading, many children remain at risk of failure in school. It has been estimated that 20% to 50% of first graders in the United States experience some difficulty in learning how to read (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1995). Richek, Caldwell, Jennings and Lerner (1996) estimated that one-third of the school population in America has learning problems related to reading. Between the academic years 1976-77 and 1989-90, the number of U.S. students receiving instruction for learning disabilities increased approximately 150%, while the total number of students remained the same (Weaver, 1994). Annually,

one out of nine students in the United States receives remedial reading services (Slavin & Madden, 1989) while 40% of California's first grade children are eligible for Title I services (Hiebert, 1994).

While there is some improvement in reading achievement since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind legislation, schools in the United States still have a long way to go to help children become more proficient readers. This is especially true in Georgia where results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (typically called America's report card) indicate that 71% of 4th graders who took the test in 2005 scored at or below basic levels of proficiency. A look at the long-term trends indicates that Georgia's scaled reading scores have improved slightly but not significantly since

1992. This may be an indication that Georgia's students are not reading at a level that will help them be competitive in a complex, global society.

Teacher educators in Georgia are concerned about preparing teachers who can help children attain high levels of proficiency in literacy. As a result, representative teacher educators from public and private institutions that prepare teachers came together in the summer of 2006 to look at our state data. We used the data as a spring-board to develop our consensus values and beliefs to support pre-service and in-service teachers in educating students in grades Pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade. In the following sections we will describe those critical conversations, our beliefs concerning a core body of knowledge that all reading teachers should know, and how we are working to improve reading instruction to impact student reading achievement in Georgia.

Literacy and Literacy Teacher Preparation Program

Although many relevant and important topics were discussed during the 2006 Literacy Summit, common threads of information and concerns continued to emerge in the hours of discourse. Thus, the Pre-kindergarten through 3rd Grade Summit Group articulated the following primary position during the summit: To achieve consistent standards for literacy teacher training, every Georgia Pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade teacher preparation program should ensure that its pre-service teachers have essential core knowledge in literacy that is research based. In addition, the pre-service teachers should be able to apply their acquired knowledge and skills to positively impact Pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade students' learning.

What is the essential core knowledge in literacy for pre-service teachers? The Pre-kindergarten through 3rd Grade Group recognized the National Reading Panel's Report as an obvious response, in part, to this question. In addition to the five areas (phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension) of

reading instruction identified by the National Reading Panel, the group discussed the declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge that should be taught in the primary grades as a foundation for developing literate adults. This group agreed that there is a core body of knowledge that all teachers of reading need to know. However, the participants believe there is a more comprehensive set of dimensions beyond the five addressed by the National Reading Panel that is necessary in the development of the complex process of literacy. These expanded dimensions include the following:

- oral language development including phonological awareness, vocabulary, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic usage (Pullen & Justice, 2003);
- concepts about print and visual processing of print (Clay, 2002); the reading/writing connection as reciprocal processes (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000);
- listening, speaking, viewing, and visual literacy (Smollin & Lawless, 2003);
- time, choice, and opportunity for discussion and response to literature (Beck, McKeown, Worthy, Sandora & Kucan, 1996);
- an on-going variety of assessments that inform instruction (Hansen, 1998); and technology that is available, effective, and teachers know to use (Leu, Castek, Henry, Coiro, & McMullan, 2004). This group also felt very strongly that there needs to be room for variation in instructional methods based on the needs of individual learners (Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005). While this list is not exhaustive, the participants felt very strongly that these dimensions be noted.

How Did the Literacy Summit Discussion and Study Impact Three Georgia Universities in Terms of Pre-service Teacher Education and Student Achievement?

First, the universities reviewed and revised [when needed] the current literacy curriculum to strengthen the focus on essential core knowledge. Three universities will elaborate on this process in the next section.

Secondly, the universities acknowledged field experiences as an important component in the application of essential core knowledge in literacy education. The Pre-kindergarten through 3rd Grade Group acknowledged that teacher educators, prospective teachers, and classroom teachers have long identified field experiences as a major, if not the most important, part of pre-service teacher preparation. It is broadly assumed that field experiences are the key components of preparation where prospective teachers learn to bridge theory and practice, work with colleagues and families, and develop pedagogical and curricular strategies for meeting the learning needs of a diverse population (Hollins & Guzman, 2005).

Augusta State University

Faculty at Augusta State University spent the semester prior to the summit working on a Backward Mapping project examining the literacy courses currently taught to see where any gaps or overlap may occur. As a result, conversations were already in progress about possible changes that might need to occur. Some work had already begun including the alignment of all undergraduate courses to the current International Reading Association Standards, the inclusion of all Georgia Performance Standards, and the incorporation of the National Reading Panel data into the appropriate courses. After the summit, ASU instructors responsible for the education of early childhood literacy courses continued the discussions started at the summit.

Plans are in place to change the title of two courses to include the word READING or LITERACY and to change the course description of at least one of the courses. Instructors responsible for the four required reading courses are examining the objectives of the courses to check for overlapping content and to assure that the objectives in the syllabi accurately reflect what is being taught in the classes. In addition, course assessments are being aligned to course objectives to assure that the outcomes being measured accurately reflect the course objectives.

Finally, Augusta State University is in the process of designing a Master's of Arts and Teaching degree for Early Childhood Education. Graduate students who earn this Master's degree will earn initial certification. Because students needed four classes in reading, the three reading endorsement classes were built into this graduate program. The fourth class is a children's literature pedagogy course.

Augusta State University was one of the schools selected to participate in the University System of Georgia's Reading Consortium's research on Early Childhood Literacy Teacher Preparation. The Dean has give permission for the faculty to participate and the instructors are looking forward to participating in this groundbreaking research.

Columbus State University

The Reading Consortium has greatly influenced this university's teacher education reading curriculum; the summit reinforced that the Reading Consortium is on target with the major components [National Reading Panel's researched-based areas for reading success—phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension] that structure quintessential core knowledge for the Columbus State University, College of Education reading courses. In addition to the National Reading Panel's research and other reading research [Best Practices], the College of Education's emphasis in its reading curriculum includes a strong focus on assessment in both its undergraduate and graduate programs.

The pre-service and in-service teacher responds to struggling readers by identifying the problem(s) [formal and informal assessment using reading technology and other appropriate assessment instruments], providing appropriate intervention based on assessment results, and, then, post-assessing to measure student achievement and adjust instruction. Does this plan work? Significant data collected confirms that student achievement improves with this direct approach to reading instruction.

Columbus State University's undergraduate and graduate reading courses stress the importance



of knowledge application through course-required field experiences. Thus under the supervision of their professor, students apply their acquired knowledge and skills in partner schools, on-campus reading institutes and camps, and, if a graduate student, the teacher's own classroom. It is common knowledge that the pre-service and inservice teachers benefit from their training and hands-on experience. Who else benefits from this venue? Assessment data supports that the children are the primary beneficiaries of the College of Education field experiences in reading—their academic achievement is enhanced. During their one-on-one experiences, the child's achievement is improved and often there is a grade level increase in reading ability [word recognition, comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency].

To summarize, the summit served as a confirmation that the College of Education's reading courses are aligned with research as well as what other reading-teacher educators consider essential to teacher preparation [essential core knowledge in literacy for pre-service teachers]. Furthermore, the College of Education's reading courses are aligned with the International Reading Association Standards,

the Georgia Performance Standards, and the National Reading Panel's Report.

The reading field experiences were also validated during the summit as an essential component. Both the undergraduate and graduate reading courses include field experience, classroom-based reading research [Best Practices], and case studies. The 2006 Literacy Summit served to validate, reinforce, and strengthen the CSU position on teacher education in the field of reading.

Valdosta State University

Valdosta State University's Early Childhood and Reading program received national accreditation from the International Reading Association and the Association for Early Childhood International in the fall of 2006. Discussions held at the Higher Education Summit guided our thinking as we developed assessments to document that our teacher candidates met national and state standards. Faculty members also reviewed course syllabi and assessment data to note areas for improvement in our program.

Valdosta State continues to be on the cutting edge in literacy research and service to the schools in our region. The Dewar College of Education will also participate in the University System of Georgia's research on Literacy Teacher Preparation. Additionally, Valdosta State is one of 15 universities selected to serve on The National Reading First Higher Education Consortium (NRFHEC). The NRFHEC is a joint venture between the National Center for Reading First Technical Assistance (NCRFTA) and the Vaughn Gross Center for Reading and Language Arts (VGCRLA) at the University of Texas at Austin. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, NRFHEC is designed to develop a faculty leadership model that will promote and sustain the integration of scientifically-based reading research (SBRR) and scientifically-based reading instruction (SBRI) into pre-service teacher preparation programs. Valdosta State is pleased to represent Georgia on this national consortium.

In addition to research, Valdosta State is proud of its history of service to local schools. Many faculty members serve as consultants to local school districts and the impact on these schools is well documented. We are especially proud of our partner school, S.L. Mason, that achieved the Georgia Accountability System Silver Award. This award is given to schools that have made Adequate Yearly Progress for the last two years and exhibit the greatest gain in percentage of students meeting and exceeding the standards (96th percentile). The faculty of the College of Education continues to work toward the goal of developing teachers who are knowledgeable, expert practitioners who can also implement evidence-based strategies to meet the literacy needs of a diverse population of learners.

Recommendations

To achieve consistent standards for literacy teacher training, every Georgia Pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade teacher preparation program should ensure that its pre-service teachers have essential core knowledge in literacy that is research based. Pre-service teachers should be able to apply their acquired knowledge and skills to positively impact pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade students' learning and other critical literacy dimensions, the discussions of the working groups recommended that the University System of Georgia's Reading Consortium write a formal request that the Professional Standards Commission (PSC) review and clarify the current position on undergraduate students receiving the reading endorsement. There was some discussion regarding the confusion concerning when schools were offering the reading endorsement for graduate credit and were now told that undergraduate students would be receiving the reading endorsement upon graduation. Members of the literacy teacher preparation group felt that students who completed the reading endorsement at a graduate level demonstrated a higher mastery level than newly graduating teachers. Recognizing the need to show that recent graduates are highly qualified to teach reading, members of the summit asked that the PSC consider a special designation of "highly qualified" on teaching certificates rather than

undergraduates being given the reading endorsement.

In addition, the Pre-Kindergarten through 3rd Grade Group discussed the need for continued mentoring after graduation. The literacy teacher preparation group suggested that the Reading Consortium work closely with groups currently working with teacher induction in the state to enhance induction programs in the area of literacy education.

Finally, the members of the summit spent a significant amount of time addressing the research or lack of meaningful, significant, quality research in the area of early childhood literacy teacher preparation in the state of Georgia. Members of the summit discussed possible alternative forms of research that would allow the Consortium to obtain relevant data to ascertain the status of literacy teacher preparation in the state of Georgia. Possible forms of data included gathering information from syllabi and instructors to create a matrix of objectives that are covered in courses taught across the state.

These recommendations were presented at the final session of the literacy summit. The Reading Consortium has acted upon two of the three recommendations. A letter with the recommendation to the PSC has been submitted to the Consortium and the Consortium has adopted literacy teacher preparation as its research agenda. Universities that prepare early childhood teachers have been contacted at random and asked to participate in a research study. Hopefully at the end of this two to three-year study, we will know more about the status of literacy teacher preparation in the state of Georgia.

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To learn to read is to light a fire;
every syllable that is spelled out
is a spark.

— VICTOR HUGO, *Les Miserables*



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