
The Importance Of High-Quality Preservice Teacher Education

Teaching reading effectively to a broad range of children demands a high level of knowledge and competence on the part of teachers. Clearly, high-quality preservice education is essential to providing teachers with the knowledge and skills they need. **The competencies specified in the previous section are necessary to teacher candidates, as well as to experienced teachers, in any area of certification that includes kindergarten, first grade, second grade or third grade.** For example, all candidates being prepared for K-6 elementary certification should have the competencies specified in this document; and so should those being prepared for dual certification in elementary and special education. (Of course, the competencies specified in this document apply primarily to reading and language arts. Additional competencies will be needed that are not specified here.)

To develop the competencies specified in this document, preservice teacher education must provide candidates with an extensive knowledge base, including knowledge about oral-language and literacy development, the structure of written English, individual differences that affect literacy acquisition, methods of assessment, and instructional resources and activities. Schools of education must provide programs that are grounded in current scientific knowledge about how children learn to read and about best instructional practice, such as the research findings reviewed in Section I. Teacher candidates should be trained to apply to the interpretation of educational research an understanding of basic scientific concepts, including the importance of gathering evidence through systematic observation and testing, stating claims in ways that are potentially falsifiable, and considering a cumulative body of evidence (see, e.g., Stanovich, 1993-1994).

Schools of education should prepare prospective teachers to deliver instruction that is conceptually driven rather than method driven (Baron, 1999). That is, teacher preparation should emphasize the competencies important to learning to read and a variety of methods for developing those competencies, with the idea that different instructional approaches may be appropriate for different children. It should not focus on a "one-size-fits-all" method.

At the state level, a variety of policies and practices could assist teacher education institutions in developing the extensive knowledge base required of primary-level teachers. For example, higher education institutions could be encouraged to develop an interdisciplinary subject-area major focused on literacy acquisition, which might combine course work in areas such

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as speech and language development, cognitive psychology and reading. This kind of major would require expertise and close collaboration from faculty in a range of departments. In addition, the state could provide incentives to institutions to expand their scope of training, such as by funding new faculty positions to bring in experts in underrepresented areas (Baron, 1999).

Finally, just as public schools should use assessment data to guide their instruction of children, teacher education programs also should be guided by assessment data. Higher education institutions should seek feedback from recent graduates and from public schools about competencies in which beginning teachers may be weak, and they should use this feedback to improve their teacher preparation programs. Data from state-mandated assessments (e.g., PRAXIS II) may be similarly useful.

The Need For Ongoing Professional Development

Given the depth and breadth of knowledge required by primary-level teachers, as well as the fact that the scientific knowledge base about reading is continually increasing, it is not possible to give prospective teachers all the knowledge they need in a four- or even five-year program. Rather, teacher education should be viewed similarly to other kinds of professional education, as a process that involves not only rigorous preservice training, but also continuing professional development throughout an individual's career. Experienced teachers should be provided with a variety of opportunities for professional development to help them stay current with research findings in their field. These opportunities should include not only in-service training, but also the chance to attend professional conferences, to engage in research, to visit model programs, to seek mentoring from other educators or to provide such mentoring and continued support while attempting to implement new ideas and programs into the classroom.

Teacher education is a process that involves rigorous preservice training and continuous professional development.

Conclusion

This report has provided specific reading and reading-related competencies that are important for primary-level children and their teachers, as well as a detailed rationale, based on current research evidence about reading, for these competencies. As specified in Public Act 99-227, this report, along with assessments of the needs of priority school districts, will be used in the design of a statewide Early Reading Success Institute, to commence operation in the 2000-2001 school year. The institute will provide professional development to primary-level teachers, elementary principals, school librarians and other school personnel, initially in priority school districts. However, as was emphasized in the preface to this report, improving reading achievement and preventing reading difficulties are not only the concern of priority school districts—they should be of concern to all districts and to all Connecticut citizens. Panel members hope that this report will help to define “best practice” in reading for all teachers in Connecticut.

This report is only an initial step in ensuring that Connecticut teachers have the knowledge and skills needed to provide effective reading instruction to all children. Many other steps must follow. Detailed discussions of specific instructional activities, or of various instructional sequences that might be used in reaching a particular competency, were well beyond the scope of the report. Similarly, although the report addressed many broad issues in providing high-quality reading instruction, such as the need for effective preservice teacher education, for adequate human and material resources, and for collaboration between classroom teachers and a wide range of specialists, addressing all of these issues in detail was beyond the scope of the report. Clearly, however, all of these issues are important and warrant careful consideration.

What this report does provide is a blueprint for all stakeholders who have an interest in ensuring that every child is taught reading well. Schools of education should use the lists of children’s and teachers’ competencies to direct their preparation of teacher candidates; administrators and school districts should use the competencies as an aid in assessing instructional and professional development needs; and individual teachers should use the children’s competencies as a guide for reading-related proficiencies that are important to address in the classroom. Members of the Early Reading Success Panel hope that this report will be useful to everyone with a stake in the teaching of reading—and that it will help to form a foundation for high-quality reading instruction for all Connecticut children.

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Glossary

alphabetic principle: the idea that the sounds in spoken English words have a systematic relationship to the letters in printed words

automatic word identification: recognizing printed words instantly, without effort

basic print concepts: knowledge of fundamental conventions about print, e.g., that printed words on a page are separated by spaces and that words are read from left to right; print awareness

comprehension: understanding; oral-language comprehension means understanding what one has heard, whereas reading comprehension means understanding what one has read

decodable text: children's books and stories containing a high proportion of word patterns that children have learned how to decode (see **word decoding**)

dialect: a variant of a language characterized by differences in pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary, relative to the standard form of the language

emergent literacy: a range of literacy-related behaviors and activities typical of young (e.g., preschool and many kindergarten) children. These behaviors and activities include a strong interest in books and being read to; emergent reading (e.g., the child "reads" a familiar book from memory, but does not read in the conventional sense); and emergent writing (e.g., the child "writes" a message using scribbles, pictures or letter-like forms, but does not write in the conventional sense)

fluency: the aspect of reading that involves achieving speed and accuracy in recognizing words and comprehending text, and coordinating the two

frustration reading level: the level at which reading material is too difficult for children to read and comprehend

independent reading level: the level at which children can read and comprehend on their own, without the assistance of an adult

instructional reading level: the level at which children can read and comprehend with some adult assistance; the level at which they should be placed for instruction

invented spelling: children's use of their knowledge of letter-sound relationships, phonemic awareness and understanding of the alphabetic principle to spell unknown words, even if the resulting word is not actually spelled correctly; sometimes called phonetic spelling, temporary spelling or creative spelling

letter-sound correspondences: consistent relationships between printed letters and speech sounds, e.g., the printed letter m usually is associated with the sound /m/

morpheme: the smallest unit of meaning in a language, including not only words, but also inflectional endings (e.g., -ed at the end of a verb indicates that something happened in the past), prefixes and suffixes

morphology: the study of word formation in a language, including inflectional endings (e.g., -ed and -ing), derivation (e.g., national is derived from the word nation), and the formation of compounds (e.g., campsite is a compound of two separate words, camp and site)

on-line monitoring of comprehension: thinking about the meaning of what one is reading, and whether it makes sense, while one is in the actual process of reading ("on-line")

oral-language comprehension: see **comprehension**

phoneme: the smallest unit of speech sound in a language, e.g., the /m/, /a/ and /p/ in "map" are three English phonemes

phonemic awareness: an advanced form of phonological awareness (see **phonological awareness**) involving the understanding that spoken words can be broken down into individual phonemes (sounds), including the ability to identify the number of phonemes in a spoken word and the ability to blend individual phonemes into a recognizable word

phonics instruction: instruction that emphasizes letter-sound correspondences, spelling-sound correspondences and the alphabetic principle

phonological awareness: awareness of sounds in spoken words, including the ability to rhyme words, identify the number of syllables in spoken words, and identify words with the same initial or ending sounds

phonological sensitivity: see **phonological awareness**

scaffolding of instruction: providing a set of cues to children during instruction that are tailored to children's initial level of competence and that are gradually withdrawn as children acquire increasing skill

scaffolding questions: sequencing questions in a way that guides students toward the understanding of important points

sight-word knowledge: identification of printed words without reference to word-decoding strategies or structural analysis

spelling-sound correspondences: consistent relationships between sequences of letters in printed words and speech sounds, e.g., the letters igh usually say /i/ as in light

structural analysis: analysis of long words into their component parts such as prefixes, roots and suffixes

syntax: the order in which words are put together to form phrases and sentences

text: reading material involving words in sentences and paragraphs (as opposed to isolated words)

text structure: the basic organization of a text, which varies depending on the type of text (e.g., narratives are organized around a setting, characters and plot line, whereas expository or informational texts have a different text structure)

word decoding: the process of reading words, especially new or unfamiliar words, by using the alphabetic principle, e.g., by using synthetic blending strategies (“sounding out”) or by analogy with known words

word identification: reading of individual words; includes identifying words through word decoding, structural analysis or sight-word knowledge

word identification in context: reading in text; reading words in books, magazines, newspapers, etc.