

# A Mixed-Methods Study Determining New Teachers' Perceived Level of Preparedness in Primary Literacy Instruction

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**Abstract:** *This mixed-methods study explored a perceived change over time in the strength of teacher preparation in primary literacy, including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and assessment. A survey was completed by three categories of teachers – new, practiced, and veteran – who reflected upon their preparation and first-year teaching experiences.*

**Keywords:** *teacher preparation, primary literacy, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension*

## INTRODUCTION

Highly effective, knowledgeable, well-prepared teachers are what all students need and deserve in order to get the best education possible. Numerous researchers have shown teacher quality to be the leading factor in student success, of more consequence than funding levels, class sizes, and technology access (Fitzharris, Jones, & Crawford, 2008; Harris & Sass, 2008; Konstantopoulos & Sun, 2012; MET, 2010; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2013). Furthermore, primary literacy instruction is one of the most significant branches of a child's education. The primary years of kindergarten through third grade are critical to a child's lifelong educational development. Students who achieve reading proficiency by the end of third grade continue to have the greatest educational success through high school graduation and into college and a career (Early Warning, 2001; Gewertz, 2011; Hernandez, 2011). Conversely, students who are not proficient readers by the end of third grade will most likely continue to struggle for the rest of their academic careers, and are 4 to 13 times more likely to drop out of high school (Early Warning, 2010; Gewertz, 2011).

Teachers entering the profession are expected to be highly qualified, successful teachers, and those beginning their careers as primary teachers are required to immediately be competent, capable, strong literacy teachers (Bornfreund, 2012; International Reading Association [IRA], 2003a; Walsh, Glaser, & Wilcox, 2006). Unfortunately, many new teachers with full elementary certification enter the profession grossly underprepared to be highly effective primary literacy teachers (Bornfreund, 2012; Fitzharris et al., 2008; Greenberg, McKee, & Walsh, 2013; NCATE, 2013). This research sought to determine if past research and the need for more highly qualified teachers has had an impact on the level of preparation with which teachers feel they are entering the profession by asking the question, Are new teachers entering the profession feeling better prepared to teach literacy at the primary level now than in the past? The question was supported by three subquestions: In which components of primary literacy instruction do new teachers perceive themselves as strong, and in which components do they perceive themselves as weak? In which areas of primary literacy instruction did new

teachers feel better prepared by their preparation programs than in the past, and in which areas did they wish they had received greater preparation? and Has there been a change over time in what new teachers believe were the strengths and weaknesses of their preparation programs?

## METHOD

The research used a mixed-methods survey to explore the varying perceived levels of preparedness at which new primary teachers began their careers, which directly affected their efficacy in literacy instruction. The research analyzed the participant teachers' expressed university experiences, evaluated teachers' perceived levels of preparation in the four core components of literacy instruction (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and comprehension), and reported overall resulting perceptions of efficacy as new teachers of primary literacy.

The online survey was distributed to approximately 230 primary grade teachers throughout three districts in a western state. There were 74 respondents, a 32% response rate, which is in the normal 22%-59% response rate range for surveys of "busy people" (Anseel, Lievens, Schollaert, & Choragwicka, 2010; Sivo, Saunders, Chang, & Jiang, 2006). A Cronbach's alpha was run using SPSS (IBM Corp., 2011) to determine internal consistency and reliability of the Likert-scale survey items. The survey results were deemed reliable with an overall  $\alpha = 0.962$ .

## RESULTS

Teacher preparation in primary literacy has improved over time, as perceived by the participants in this survey. Survey respondents were divided into three groups: new teachers with 0-3 years of experience, practiced teachers with 4-10 years of experience, and veteran teachers with 11 or more years of experience. All teachers were asked about their preparation experiences in primary literacy instruction, both directly related to their preparation programs and as related to their first year teaching experiences. The Likert-scale items were analyzed utilizing the Kruskal-Wallis H in SPSS (IBM Corp., 2011; Lund Research Ltd., 2013; Tanner, 2012). The short answer items were coded to relate commonalities and deduce overarching themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

The Kruskal-Wallis H determined there to be 22 items with a statistically significant difference between at least two of the groups. After running a pairwise analysis using Dunn's (1964) procedure with a Bonferroni correction, 18 items remained statistically significant. Most of the statistically significant items showed the difference to be between the veteran and new teachers, with practiced teachers' responses falling in the middle.

The first section of the survey collected participant perceptions of the strength of their preparation programs, as successful primary literacy teachers possess a knowledge of content and pedagogy that can best be obtained through a comprehensive, highly effective preparation program (CAEP, 2013; Greenberg et al., 2013; NCATE, 2013). There were four statistically significant items which showed difference between veteran and new teachers, and one item which showed difference between practiced and new teachers. These statements focused on learning best practices in teaching reading, learning effective pedagogical techniques, spending adequate amounts of time collaborating or planning with cooperating teachers, having a comprehensive student teaching experience, and being prepared to teach under any curriculum or standards changes, such as the most recent change to Common Core State Standards (NGAC/CCSSO, 2010). The results of Section 1 indicate a general improvement over time in the overall perceived strength of sample population's various teacher preparation programs.

In the Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, and Fluency sections of the survey, the sample population showed a significant amount of increase over time in the strength of the preparation received in those three components of literacy, supported by both the quantitative and qualitative analyses. A significantly greater number of new teachers told of being taught the science of reading, research-based theories and pedagogical techniques, and the intricacies of the core building blocks of literacy. New teachers reported a greater number of courses that included time spent learning, practicing, role-playing, and researching the components of phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency. New teachers described a greater understanding of how these components related to literacy development in young children. In addition, new teachers recounted many more courses where fieldwork in those components was mandatory. Overall preparation, knowledge, and first-year teaching success in phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency showed significant growth from veteran to new teacher survey participants.

Comprehension is the fourth major component of literacy instruction. Although there was a general improvement over time indicated in the qualitative analysis, the Kruskal-Wallis H test revealed only one statistically significant Likert-scale item. There was a significant difference reported between veteran and practiced teachers, and between veteran and new teachers, regarding the amount of comprehension-related fieldwork opportunities they received as part of their preparation programs. Only 35% of veteran teachers agreed they received an adequate amount of fieldwork in their teacher preparation programs in preparation for teaching comprehension, as compared to 73% of practiced teachers and 75% of new teachers. This result highlighted the point that a degree of progress has been made with preparation programs providing more fieldwork opportunities for their preservice teachers.

The conclusion of the survey focused on overall feelings of preparedness in literacy. There were statistically significant differences between new and veteran teachers on three items. New teachers felt much more prepared with a strong foundation in the science of reading, prepared to effectively teach literacy, and prepared to determine appropriate interventions for struggling students. All groups were statistically similar in their beliefs that they would be good reading teachers. One teacher stated, "As a new teacher I think everyone feels like they can tackle the world, right before they realize how unprepared they are to teach and help children learn," and another wrote, "It was my confidence that got me through that first year!" Regardless of the strength of their preparation, the participating teachers reported their attitudes helped them become successful primary literacy teachers.

#### **IMPORTANCE TO THE FIELD**

This survey research has shed light on the great strides that have been made in teacher education on the part of universities in general, as reported by survey participants, to better prepare their preservice teachers to be skilled, competent, effective, primary literacy teachers. Education is an evolving practice. Teachers face new requirements every year, and teacher preparation programs must keep up so their graduates are ready to face the classroom. According to the results of this survey, improvements have been made in teaching the science of reading, and more preservice teachers possess a rudimentary understand of how their students' brains are working when learning to read. Yet a great percentage of teachers surveyed longed for even more knowledge in that area. Teachers similarly asked for greater development of background knowledge in phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency, including a greater focus on learning and developing pedagogical techniques. Participants also asked for more fieldwork opportunities to practice implementing their knowledge and skills in all four core elements of literacy, while working with an effective teacher mentor.

While improvements have been made over time, this research calls on universities to continue improving their programs. Teacher preparation programs need to focus more strongly on training their preservice teachers with in-depth knowledge of brain science and pedagogy in relation to primary literacy instruction, stipulating more targeted fieldwork, and providing greater mentoring experiences.

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