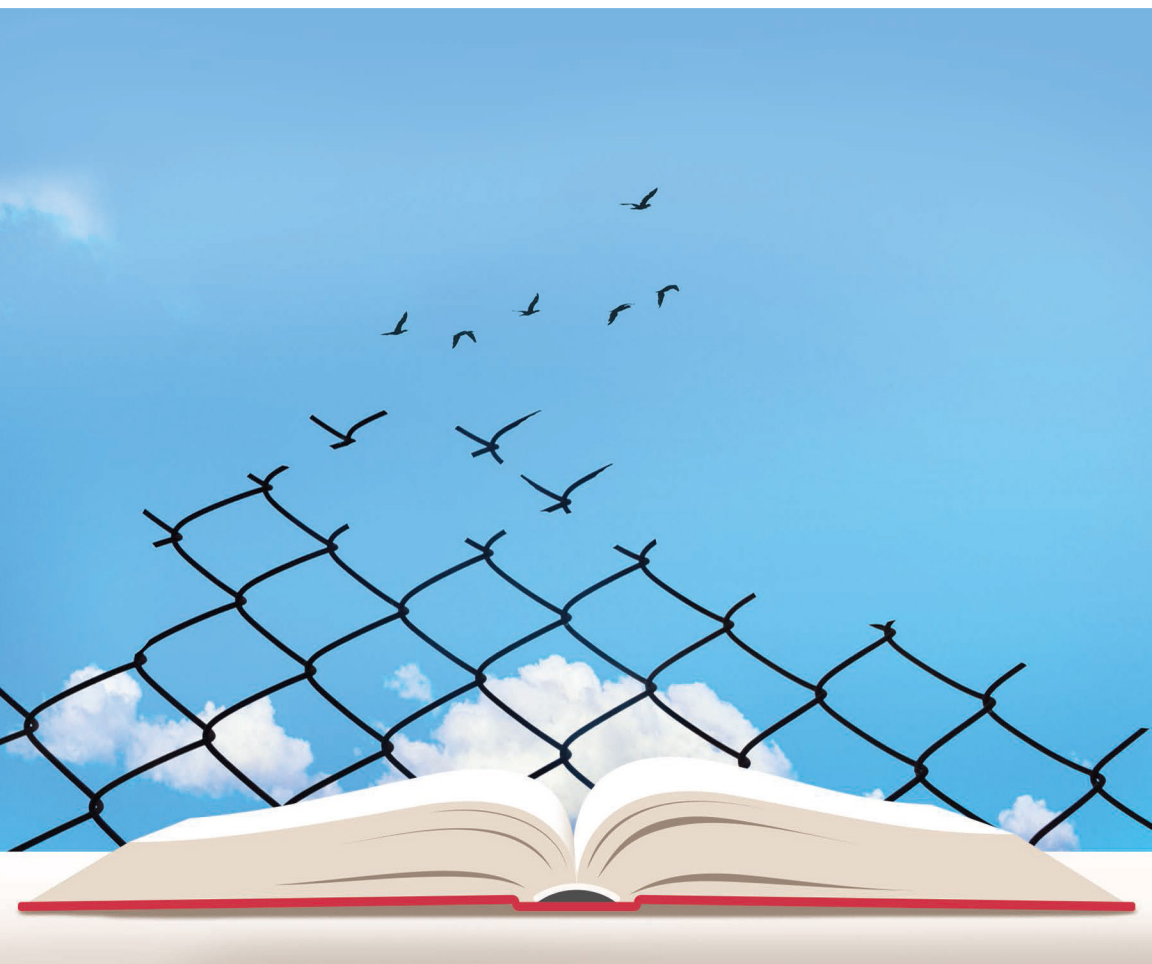


**The Forty-Third Yearbook:** A Double Peer-Reviewed Publication  
of the Association of Literacy Educators and Researchers

# Educate to Liberate



**Co-Editors:**

**Juan J. Araujo** Texas A&M University–Commerce

**Alexandra Babino** Texas Woman’s University

**Kathryn Dixon** Texas A&M University–Commerce

**Nedra Cossa** Georgia Southern University



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First, we wish to thank all the authors whose research and practice add perspective and nuance to what counts as literacy for whom; they also illustrate how we can more fully realize our power as literacy educators to educate and use literacy to liberate.

Additionally, we are grateful to the members of the Board of Directors who continually support the editorial team and the publication of the Yearbook, as well as Dr. Leslie Haas, the Publication Committee Chairperson.

Finally, we are thankful for the support of our respective universities. At Texas A&M University-Commerce, we are appreciative of the support of Interim Dean Dr. Raymond Green of the College of Education and Human Services, for providing support for this publication. We thank at Georgia Southern University, Dean Dr. Amy Heaston of the College of Education and Department Chair of Elementary and Special Education Dr. Yasar Bodu.

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From the authors to the reviewers, university and personal support, this publication underscores each person's contribution towards understanding and enacting an educate to liberate stance.

—Juan Araujo, Alexandra Babino, Kathryn Dixon, and Nedra Cossa



# INTRODUCTION

The theme of this year is *Educate to Liberate*. A reminder to faculty in the field that education and literacy extends beyond the content and courses we teach. As Freire puts it, “Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people—they manipulate them.” Instead, as literacy educators we should strive to work along with our students, to co-create with them, to learn from them. Freire reminds us too that “the (literacy) teacher is of course an artist...What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for students to become themselves.” Therefore, as literacy educators and researchers, it is our duty to provide access and opportunities for students of all socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds as they navigate their way in our classrooms.

All the articles within this 43<sup>rd</sup> Yearbook represent a portion of the sessions presented at the conference. After a peer-review process for conference acceptance, the ensuing articles underwent an additional two rounds of double-blind peer review before acceptance in the Yearbook. It is our sincere hope that the articles reflect the theme and embolden our practice to *Educate to Liberate*.

—JA, AB, KD, & NC



# PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

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## APPROACHING CURRENT CHALLENGES FACING THE LITERACY COMMUNITY

**Seth A. Parsons**  
George Mason University

**Seth Parsons** is a Professor in the College of Education and Human Development. He joined the faculty in the fall of 2008 and teaches courses in the Elementary Education, Literacy, and Research Methods program areas. His research interests include student literacy motivation and engagement, teachers' instructional adaptations, and teacher education. Before beginning his doctoral studies, which he completed in May 2008, he was a classroom teacher in North Carolina. Dr. Parsons is co-editor of *Journal of Literacy Research*, the flagship journal of the Literacy Research Association. He is past president of the Association of Literacy Educators and Researchers (ALER) and the Greater Washington Reading Council (GWRC). He was a member of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education's (AACTE) Clinical Practice Commission. Dr. Parsons and colleagues recently received AERA's Review of Research Award (2019) for their review of adaptive teaching that was published in *Review of Educational Research*.





*In 2018, he and his colleagues received the ATE Distinguished Research in Teacher Education Award for their longitudinal study of teachers' visions, which was published in Teaching and Teacher Education. He was previously selected as a 2014–2015 Emerging Leader by Phi Delta Kappa International and a 2015 Clinical Practice Fellow by the Association of Teacher Educators. In 2016, Dr. Parsons was recognized by George Mason University as a Teacher of Distinction, and in 2012, he received the Jerry Johns Promising Researcher Award from ALER.*

We currently live in challenging times as educators and literacy researchers. We are still experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic that upended schooling and daily life for multiple years. We have a growing population with shifting demographics (Irwin et al., 2021; Proctor & Chang-Bacon, 2020), which in itself a reason to celebrate. However, it is forcing educators to make major adjustments to our practice to meet the needs of a changing population, and change is hard. We are plagued with ongoing misinformation and bias in media reporting. And we, as literacy educators, face increasing expectations for student outcomes and more restrictive curricular mandates. Challenging times, indeed. In this address, I describe four major challenges facing the literacy community and three ideas for approaching these challenges.

## Challenges

The challenges presented below are certainly not *all* the challenges facing the field of literacy currently. However, they are certainly among the most salient and the most pressing.

### Poverty and Trauma

Childhood poverty is a shameful and persistent problem in the United States. In 2019, approximately 16% of children lived in families experiencing poverty (Irwin et al., 2021). In 2020 106,364 children experienced homelessness (Henry et al., 2021). Years of educational and psychological research has demonstrated the negative impacts of poverty and homelessness on students' educational achievement (Herbers et al., 2012; Phillips, 2016). As Maslow (1954) presented years ago, humans' basic needs (food, clothing, shelter, safety) must be met before people can focus on higher-order thinking and learning. The significance of Maslow's hierarchy of needs became even more apparent as COVID-19 began to impact education. On social media educators began to share the phrase "students

need to Maslow before they can Bloom” (Carpenter et al., 2020). This statement reflects the reality that so many additional students experienced deficiencies in their safety and belongingness needs, that the focus of education needed to recalibrate before it moved forward.

Indeed, researchers are coming to understand the impact of trauma on students’ educational progress (Morsy & Rothstein, 2019). Lee (2020), for example, recently explained that when students experience ongoing trauma, it has debilitating effects on cognition and learning. In the same vein as basic needs not being met, trauma impedes learning because more impactful emotions and feelings (i.e., fear, stress, fatigue, hunger) demand students’ attention. It is difficult to engage in a book on childhood adventures, for example, when you are worried about being evicted.

Trauma results from various sources such as low socioeconomic status as described above (e.g., poverty, homelessness, hunger), but it can also occur through abuse, loss, bullying, transience, and more. It is likely that most students have experienced some level of trauma because of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Duckworth et al., 2021). According to a Gallup poll in May 2020, 30% of parents noted their child was experiencing mental health or emotional challenges. Most schools were shut down for some time, and many schools moved to virtual instruction for over a year. This disruption to daily life and separation from same-age peers led to trauma for many children and youth, not to mention that school is one of the few places some children can go for food, shelter, and safety. Alarming, suicidal ideation among children and young adults increased during the disruption of typical schooling brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic (Office for Civil Rights, 2021).

It is important to note here that school has too often been a source of trauma for minority and other marginalized students. The impacts of institutional racism are traumatic for students. Tracking, for example, is a persistent practice in schools that harms students by sending powerful messages about their abilities and worth. And consider the cumulative impact of educators repeatedly demeaning and denigrating students’ lives, experiences, passions, and cultures. School should be a place for healing and growth, but for too many children and youth it can be harmful.

We cannot talk about improving literacy at scale if poverty and trauma are not a part of the conversation. As a society and as educators and researchers, we owe it to children and youth to do more to eliminate childhood poverty and to provide support for those dealing with or healing from trauma. Poverty, homelessness, and trauma contribute to the achievement and opportunity gaps

between students from minority and majority backgrounds, which is our next major challenge.

### **Opportunity Gaps**

For decades the educational community has been aware of performance gaps between White students and students of color. In 2019, 89% of White students graduated from high school within four years. In contrast, 82%, 80%, and 74% of Hispanic, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native students graduated from high school in the same timeframe (Irwin et al., 2021). Results of the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading assessment illuminate the literacy gaps among races (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). For fourth and eighth grade assessments, a higher proportion of White students (45%, 42%) scored proficient or above in reading as compared to Hispanic students (23%, 22%) and Black students (18%, 15%). The Associated Press found that 8.1% of White and 12.7% of Asian students were considered gifted compared with 4.5% of Hispanic and 3.5% of Black students (Calvan, 2021).

These performance disparities demonstrate opportunity gaps that privilege White students. Scholars have demonstrated that one cause of these gaps is the fact that reading assessments and the reading valued in schools align with middle class, White literacy practices (e.g., Smagorinsky et al., 2020). In discussing achievement gaps in literacy, Willis and colleagues (2021) shared:

To be clear: the 2019 NAEP reading results for twelfth grade suggests a downward trend for all students, and is especially dire for Black, Latinx, and Native American students who have made very little progress since 1992. There is little wonder why racial differences in reading performance persist: The research on which instruments are designed, is not informed by culturally, ethnically, linguistically, or racially inclusive research. (pp. 11–12)

Therefore, the language “opportunity gaps” rejects the deficit views embedded within “achievement gap” rhetoric and acknowledges the biased assessment, poor pedagogy, and debilitating grouping practices that often plague students of color (Milner, 2020; Skerrett, 2020; Turner et al., 2021).

Positively, the nation is currently experiencing heightened acknowledgement of and attention toward racial disparities in nearly all facets of life, including education (Willis et al., 2021). Unfortunately, such increased awareness of

and discussions about racial inequalities has brought increased pushback from some people. For example, schools, school boards, and even states across the nation are debating and putting forth policy to limit or prevent discussions about race, most typically under the peculiar focus on Critical Race Theory. Critical Race Theory is an academic theory for analyzing phenomena that foregrounds the longstanding and powerful role of racial disparities with the aim of addressing inequities (López et al., 2021). Opponents of increased discussion on race and racism have used Critical Race Theory as an umbrella term to cover topics such as racism, privilege, and inequities. These movements appear to be ignorant about what Critical Race Theory is and seem to be motivated by impeding progress toward racial equality.

Over time, schools, school systems, and policymakers have tried numerous approaches to closing the opportunity gap, implementing everything from busing to No Child Left Behind and Reading First and then charter schools with few advances. Attempts to address opportunity gaps often come in the form of restrictive or programmatic instruction. Take Reading First as an example. This initiative required schools and school systems that wanted federal funding to use a scientifically-based reading curriculum and only a handful of select programs was approved. These prescriptive programs focused on discrete word-level skills taught in rote ways. Thus, students who were struggling to learn to read received impoverished forms of instruction.

It is clear that inequitable opportunities for students perpetuate the opportunity gap in schools and some educators, policymakers, and people are resistant to conversations about race and actions promoting educational equity that may move to reduce the opportunity and achievement gaps that have plagued our schools for years.

## **The Science of Reading**

The debate about the best instructional method to teach reading persists today. Currently, there is much debate about “the science of reading.” The science of reading is a phrase used to describe instructional approaches that have been found to work in high-quality empirical research studies. An issue surrounding the science of reading is that some people, including journalist Emily Hanford, have taken a narrow view of what “high-quality empirical research” means and have focused almost exclusively on letter- and word-level instructional approaches, which do have a strong research base (Connelly et al., 2001; Ehri et al., 2001; Lonigan et al., 2008). That is, phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge are necessary for learning to read and should be explicitly taught (Ehri et al., 2001,

2020; Pearson et al., 2020). What is not clear in the research literature is how much for what students. Any preschool or primary grades educator can tell you that students vary widely in their knowledge of phonics, and that some students come to grasp letter-sound relationships quickly whereas others need more time and more instruction. Yet, programmatic approaches to teaching reading do not take these variations into account and provide letter- and word-level instruction to all students regardless of their current understanding.

Additionally, what is not being taught in early literacy when there is a singular focus on phonics and decoding? What about vocabulary learning, comprehension skills, background knowledge development? If students spend the literacy block working with discrete letters, sounds, and words, what message does it send students about what it means to be literate or to engage in literate behaviors? Indeed, students need explicit phonics and decoding instruction. However, they also need to engage with literacy in authentic ways. They need to be exposed to stories, nonfiction, and procedural text to learn about concepts of print and to learn that print carries meaning and that print can be used in myriad ways to accomplish many tasks. *Reading Research Quarterly* recently published two special issues on the science of reading that present various perspectives on the benefits and shortcomings of the science of reading. I strongly recommend that researchers and literacy leaders consult those issues. Several of the articles have shifted my thinking about the science of reading and the literacy methods courses I teach (most notably Cervetti et al., 2020; Duke & Cartwright, 2021).

I fully support the use of accumulation of scientific research (broadly defined) to guide literacy policy and practice, with the understanding that the science is never complete—it is always evolving as additional research is conducted with the changing populations of students we serve. Therefore, *all* of the science of reading should be considered not just the science of decoding words. There is much to the science of reading that is ignored by some of its most vocal advocates, who focus on one aspect of reading acquisition—decoding (e.g., Hanford, 2018). There is strong empirical evidence demonstrating that explicit phonics instruction for primary grades students is supportive for students' reading development (Cervetti et al., 2020; Petscher et al., 2020). However, we also have extensive research on the importance of background knowledge (Cabell & Hwang, 2020), vocabulary (Wright & Cervetti, 2017; Parsons & Bryan, 2016), motivation (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2018; Parsons et al., 2019), engagement (Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Parsons et al., 2018), culturally responsive instruction (Skerrett, 2020), discussion (Murphy et al., 2018), fluency (Kuhn et al., 2010; Young et al., 2019), metacognition (Veenman, 2015), textual dexterity (Aukerman & Schmidt, 2021), and more on students' reading. If we are going

to use the phrase science of reading, let's make sure we are including the entirety of that science.

These ongoing debates about the best instructional method and an over-emphasis on decoding along with an underemphasis on other important aspects of reading have led to inadequate instruction for the neediest student populations that fuel, rather than fix, the opportunity gap. A common manifestation of this problem is the adoption of an overly prescriptive reading program that emphasizes phonics and phonemic awareness in schools that serve students from underserved populations (Cummins, 2007). These students then miss out on more robust forms of literacy instruction that are provided to students from more privileged backgrounds, thereby ensuring the perpetuation of the opportunity gap. In an article in one of these special issues on the science of reading, my colleagues and I argued for supporting and empowering teachers to be thoughtfully adaptive in their literacy instruction as they teach the diverse students they serve (Vaughn et al., 2020). A concern that parallels more impoverished instruction for the neediest students is the varied preparedness of teachers working in different contexts.

## **Teacher Shortage and Teacher Preparedness**

Prognosticators have long warned of the teacher shortage that is currently facing the United States. Teachers from the Baby Boomer population are going to retire and the recruitment and retention of a new teaching force will not be able to replace these teachers, they warned (Aaronson & Meckel, 2009). And such warnings were accurate. The number of students entering teacher education programs has steadily declined over the years, most recently with the 2008 recession that froze teacher salaries and reduced or removed many teacher benefits (Moje et al., 2020). The Center for American Progress demonstrated that since 2010 enrollment in teacher education programs has dropped by a third (Partelow, 2019). This situation leads to numerous vacancies and emergency certification of underprepared teachers to fill the gaps. Not surprisingly, the schools with the largest numbers of underprepared teachers are those who serve students from underserved backgrounds. Therefore, students who face poverty and the trials and trauma that come with it end up with the least prepared teachers, further contributing to the opportunity gaps outlined above.

Teaching is a difficult profession. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic added to the difficulties teachers face, teachers with fewer than five years of experience left the profession at rates between 19% to 30%, with more than 7% of all teachers leaving the profession in a given year (Podolsky et al., 2016). The reasons

for teacher attrition include lack of preparation, scarcity of support for new hires, difficult working conditions, inadequate salary, availability of better career opportunities, and personal reasons (Podolsky et al., 2016). And teaching reading in particular is incredibly complex and difficult. To effectively teach reading, educators need deep knowledge about language, linguistics, reading processes, child development, culture, common reading difficulties, individual students, and more (Moje et al., 2020). This combination of poor teaching conditions, low salaries, poor benefits, low societal status, and job complexity undoubtedly contributes to the teacher shortage. It is difficult to recruit teachers into such a burdensome profession.

For the individuals who do choose to enter the teaching profession, we in teacher education programs need to ensure that they are prepared to effectively teach reading to all students. In Hikida et al.'s (2019) review of the literature on preservice teachers' reading instruction and experiences, they noted 14 out of 38 articles highlighted gaps in the reading-related knowledge of preservice teachers and 14 out of 38 articles described interventions designed to close these gaps. From their review, the authors determined that while there are gaps in preservice teachers' knowledge about reading instruction, it is important that researchers *critically* examine these gaps in knowledge, in addition to the many successes of preservice teacher programs, so the field can fully assess the state of reading instruction.

They noted that the way to improve knowledge about teaching reading is not by calling for radical reform (as the NCTQ does), but by engaging in more critical inquiry about the teaching of reading that avoids the deficit mindset approach to preservice teachers. We must give teacher candidates the deep knowledge needed to teach all students to read. Also, we must give teacher candidates the clinical experiences that allow them to enact this learning and experience the complexity of the classroom and the diversity of students in classrooms. Teacher candidates need extended opportunities to apply learning from coursework to the ecology of classrooms. This will transform stagnant book learning to dynamic applied understanding (i.e., situational cognitive flexibility).

## Recommendations

It is incumbent upon us, as literacy leaders, to approach and attempt to address these challenges. In this section, I outline ideas for helping to ameliorate these daunting challenges, and I specifically note areas where ALER as an organization can facilitate these efforts.

## **Advocacy**

One way that literacy leaders and ALER can approach the challenges facing the field is through advocacy. A colleague recently shared the stance of “standing for” rather than “pushing back.” This perspective resonated with me, and, therefore, I encourage literacy leaders and ALER to engage in self-reflection to identify the values that you hold as an individual and that we hold as an organization. The recommendations that follow represent my own self-reflection as an individual and as a leader in this organization, but I urge you do the same to develop a clear understanding of your values to support you in advocating for what aligns with your own positionality.

If we follow the logic of “Maslow before Bloom,” we know how important it is for educators and policymakers to focus on the whole child not just students’ cognition. Before we debate the role of explicit and systematic phonics instruction in kindergarten, we need to ensure that no kindergarteners are sitting in class hungry. We must advocate for better social policies for low-income families. A first step in this regard is universal preschool in the United States. Such a policy would create numerous jobs; it would provide free, high-quality childcare for countless people who otherwise would not have access to affordable and quality childcare; it would give parents more access to jobs; it would allow for widespread implementation of emergent literacy instruction; and it would provide our nation’s youngest people with positive social and educational experiences. The United States fairs very poorly when costs of childcare are compared among industrialized countries:

Most rich countries heavily subsidize childcare for disadvantaged groups. In 19 rich countries, a single parent of low earnings would pay less than 5 percent of their wage on childcare for two children full time. Still, in the United States, Cyprus and Slovakia, such a parent would need to spend between a third and a half of their salary. (Gromada & Richardson, 2021, p. 20).

Additionally, we need to advocate for more professional learning for preservice and inservice teachers in working with students who have experienced trauma. What do you have in your preservice programs or in your schools’ strategic plans regarding trauma-informed education? Likewise, we need to advocate for more counselors in schools to provide support for teachers and students. And counselors need their job descriptions to focus on supporting the mental health of students and teachers. All too often, in my experience, counselors are given tasks



that are detached from this central job of the position. Given the amount of stress and trauma all students have experienced over the last two years, it is vital that educators and counselors in schools are knowledgeable about and skilled to provide trauma-informed teaching practices. Supporting students' mental health is a prerequisite to providing optimal literacy instruction.

Literacy leaders and ALER need to advocate for logical reading curricula and policies. It seems administrators' and policymakers' impulse is to adopt a program to enhance teachers' instruction—and typically the program moves toward more restricted instruction. And historically, such restrictive instructional mandates have not produced the desired results of enhanced literacy learning (Gamse et al., 2008; Willis et al., 2021). A much better approach would be to provide time and high-quality professional development for teachers to engage in lifelong learning. We know that the teacher is the most important in-school factor in students' achievement (Hanushek, 2011). As teachers continually increase their knowledge and enhance their craft, they can improve the instruction they provide for the students they teach.

Highly effective teachers have deep knowledge of content, pedagogy, and their students and they enact this knowledge differentially to teach their specific students. A packaged program cannot accomplish this goal. Instead of pouring money into programs, let's invest in teachers and their ongoing learning. Providing teachers with learning resources, instructional resources, time, and autonomy will do more to support the effectiveness of their literacy instruction than any scripted program or workshop. In short, let's advocate for teachers and give them the time and support they need to optimally do their job.

One specific area where teachers can continue to improve is in providing culturally relevant literacy pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1995) presented culturally relevant pedagogy as instruction for students of color that promote academic achievement (i.e., succeeding in school), cultural competence (i.e., retaining their cultural identity), and sociocritical consciousness (i.e., critiquing norms and values that “produce and maintain social inequities”) (p. 162). Turner and colleagues (2021) recently presented four principles for enacting culturally relevant literacy instruction:

1. Build caring relationships with students, families, and communities.
2. Foster learning that sustains students' cultural and linguistic knowledge.
3. Provide access to school literacy by leveraging students' cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge.
4. Cultivate students' sociopolitical consciousness.

These principles are based upon an asset-oriented approach to literacy instruction for students of color. An important avenue for implementing an asset-oriented approach is to increase the representation of oppressed populations (students of color, non-native English speakers, LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities, etc.). Indeed, scholars have found that a lack of representation in texts read for school decreases students' willingness to engage in school-based literacy (Kirkland, 2011). Therefore, it is important that students have access to multicultural texts that provide "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" to enhance their motivation to read and to further their own worldviews (Bishop, 1990; Milner, 2020).

Similarly, let's advocate for instruction informed by a comprehensive science of reading, not just the science of decoding words. In addition to the overwhelming evidence supporting the explicit teaching of phonics to primary grades students (Ehri, 2020), let's remember the strong evidence for including read-alouds (Foorman et al., 2016), repeated readings (National Reading Panel, 2000), strategy instruction (Dole et al, 1996; Guthrie et al., 2004), motivating and engaging practices (Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Parsons et al., 2018), culturally responsive literacy instruction (Skerrett, 2020), background knowledge (Cabell & Hwang, 2021), and more in the learning-to-read process.

As we advocate for teachers, we also need to advocate for the teaching profession. Teachers are highly educated professionals who fill a vitally important role in our nation's democracy and economy. Educating the next generation of students is arguably one of the most important jobs one could have. Yet, teacher compensation in the United States does not reflect this importance. As articulated above, we are facing a teacher shortage, and the poor working conditions of educators is a contributor to this shortage. We, as literacy leaders, must advocate for better working conditions, including higher pay, if we truly want to enhance the recruitment and retention of teachers. The two concrete recommendations presented (more time for and autonomy in professional development embedded into contract hours and higher pay) are both policy-level changes—policies that we can advocate for at school district, state, and national levels.

So how do we engage in advocacy? There are internal means of advocacy and external means of advocacy. Internal advocacy is embedding advocacy in your day-to-day work. Examples include the following:

- Leading a book club in your program or with your grade level team.
- Presenting current and comprehensive content in the literacy courses you teach.

- Challenging misinformed ideas that emerge in day-to-day conversations.

External advocacy is reaching out to policymakers to effect change. Examples include:

- Writing an op-ed to your local newspaper.
- Writing your local and national representatives.
- Meeting with school district leaders and school boards.

These various means of advocacy can support more informed and more effective approaches to teaching literacy. And while these tasks are not in our job descriptions and are unlikely to support existing reward structures in our positions, they have the potential to impact the quality of literacy teaching and learning taking place in our schools.

## Teacher Education

One task that *is* in many of our job descriptions is educating future teachers. Robust teacher education is another means for us (literacy leaders and ALER) to address the many challenges facing the field of literacy. Teacher education, generally, and reading teacher education, specifically, has a history of being attacked by critics (Drake et al., 2021; Levine, 2006). Indeed, teachers and teacher education programs are often the whipping boy for many of society's ills. Above, I described the debilitating impact of poverty and trauma on students' focus, cognition, and learning. Yet, teachers are blamed for students' poor reading achievement, and teacher education programs are blamed for inadequately preparing teachers to teach reading.

I am not suggesting that teacher education programs are completely undeserving of critique. The quality of teacher education programs varies tremendously, and in some cases the criticism is completely valid. Nonetheless, many of us in this room work in teacher education programs throughout the United States, so we have the ability to improve our work in this area. The field of teacher education has made progress in understanding how best to prepare teachers to enter the profession. Current recommendations for teacher education programs emphasize clinically-rich preparation where teacher candidates, from very early in the program, spend much time in K-12 schools (AACTE, 2018). This recommendation includes carefully planned and mutually beneficial school-university

partnerships and site-based teacher education courses (Johnson et al., in press; Parker et al., 2020). Related to reading teacher preparation in particular, this approach facilitates opportunities for hands-on experience assessing students, providing individual tutoring for struggling readers, mentorship from expert teachers and literacy coaches, and extensive experience with small-group and whole-class instruction (Hoffman et al., 2016; Massey, 2003).

It is important that these clinical experiences take place in diverse schools. As described in detail above, student demographics are changing. Therefore, students and teachers have different cultures, life experiences, values, goals, worldviews, etc. Teacher education programs need to prepare teachers to provide anti-racist, culturally relevant pedagogies as described above (Lee, 2020; Skerrett, 2020; Turner et al., 2021).

These rich and extended clinical experiences need to complement literacy methods courses where students develop deep knowledge of reading and writing processes and effective pedagogy. These courses should be informed by the comprehensive science of reading and the science of teaching reading. Teacher candidates need to understand the importance of and the development of phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, background knowledge, culturally responsive pedagogy, comprehension, motivation, engagement, etc. And then they need knowledge of how to design instruction that teaches all these components to students in a differentiated manner. A major problem with instruction described by many science of reading advocates and many curricula informed by the science of reading is that there is no differentiated instruction when there is adherence to a program. Students are different and develop at different paces and need differentiated instruction. This does not mean that instruction cannot be systematic or structured; it just means that it cannot be uniform. For this reason, I try to teach future and novice teachers *principles* of effective instruction (Parsons & Vaughn, 2021) that can be applied thoughtfully based upon the students they serve.

For new teachers to be able to provide literacy instruction that is informed by the whole science of reading in a differentiated manner, they need deep knowledge and extended field-based experiences in diverse contexts with diverse populations.

## Collaboration

Collaboration is another means of addressing the big challenges we face in literacy today. We cannot engage in advocacy, innovative teacher education, and research of consequence in silos. Literacy leaders need to collaborate together to

design and implement strategic, coordinated, and multifaceted advocacy efforts. Social media offers a platform for collaboration via Facebook Groups, Twitter hashtags, etc. Many educational groups exist to support educators in advocacy. ALER's very own Legislative and Social Issues committee engages in such information sharing.

Likewise, there are many opportunities to collaborate with other teacher educators to design robust, cutting-edge teacher preparation programs. I was drawn to ALER because of its teacher education division. The National Association for Professional Development Schools is another association I support. This organization is committed to school-university partnerships in teacher education. This organization brings together school-based teacher educators, school principals, university faculty, deans, and teacher candidates to explore clinically-based teacher education in partnerships. NAPDS provides numerous resources for exploring the development and sustainment of school-university partnerships.

Finally, literacy scholars can collaborate on scholarship. Research with the best chance to inform policy and practice is research conducted at a large scale. Yet, funding for large scale literacy research is limited such that all education scholars are competing for a small pot of money. At the same time, federal funding tends to privilege particular paradigms of scholarship over others. I fully support literacy scholars in pursuing external funding for their research. However, if such efforts are unsuccessful, I urge you to continue to design large scale research and use your professional networks to bring it to fruition.

An example of this sort of project comes from the Teacher Education Research Study Group at Literacy Research Association. Like many study groups, they met annually at the LRA conference to discuss current research and ideas about reading teacher education. This group took their collaboration a step further and designed a research agenda where they outlined a series of studies led by different members of the group and used their collective "power" to collect and analyze national data. Using this approach, this group has been incredibly productive in publishing research of consequence (e.g., Lenski et al., 2013; Myers et al., 2016; Scales et al., 2018, 2019). We all cannot get federal grants to do large scale research, but with collaboration and hard work, we can do large-scale research that impacts policy and practice.

## **Conclusion**

The field of literacy currently faces many challenges. However, I remain hopeful as we consider how to approach these challenges because of the literacy research community. ALER members are an intelligent, collaborative, and hardworking

bunch. The sessions at this conference demonstrate the excellent work being done in reading, writing, technology, teacher education, professional development, reading clinics, college literacy, adult literacy, and more. ALER members are committed to equity in literacy research, teaching, and learning, and they support progress and advancement through rigorous empirical research. These are good foundations from which to operate.

In reviewing the challenges and recommendations I presented in this address, I see an opportunity for ALER to be a leader in the efforts to address these challenges and enact these recommendations. I “challenge” the organization to use the new Division structure, the existing committees, ALER’s social media, and the annual meeting to intentionally approach the daunting issues facing the field of literacy today.

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## BETTY STURTEVANT AWARD

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# CREATING ENGAGEMENT AND EMPATHY THROUGH MULTICULTURAL NONFICTION READ-ALOUDS WITH KINDERGARTENERS

**Megan Quinn**

Columbus Academy

**Hannah Chai**

Wright State University

### **Abstract**

*The United States continues to become more diverse in our ever-changing world, and an important goal for students is to develop cultural awareness and understanding towards differences. One way to develop empathy and understanding in the classroom is through multicultural nonfiction read-alouds. This six-week teacher-research study focused on kindergarten students' comprehension and understanding of vocabulary words through the use of repeated read-alouds of multicultural nonfiction texts. The findings showed that comprehension and vocabulary development increased after the second reading, but more importantly, there was an increase in empathy and compassion towards others that was developmentally age appropriate. The kindergartners' perceptions of the inequalities fueled a strong sense of right and wrong as they actively engaged in discussions on topics surrounding segregation, gender inequities, and the overall mistreatment of others. By creating opportunities for young children to learn about culture and social justice, there is hope for our ever-increasing diverse society.*

*Keywords:* Repeated Reading, Cultural Understanding and Empathy, Vocabulary and Comprehension

## Introduction

Over the last 50 years, the United States has had an influx of nearly 59 million immigrants, resulting in a heterogeneous mixture of peoples (Cohn & Caumont, 2016). Similarly, the cultural makeup in K-12 classrooms reflects this diversity. As the United States continues to become more diverse, issues surrounding empathy and understanding of other cultures becomes more paramount. In our ever-changing world, an important goal is for students to develop cultural awareness and understanding towards differences, i.e., empathy. Empathy, in the form of understanding and acceptance of others, may create stronger individuals and relationships (Noddings, 2003). As such, instructional practices need to include cultural representation, along with acquiring content knowledge. Cultural representation may be achieved by incorporating multicultural texts that can provide a broad range of perspectives and experiences (Osorio, 2018; Suh & Hinton, 2015). Multicultural nonfiction children's literature may provide a beginning step towards expanding student's knowledge and understanding of diverse experiences and increasing the use of multicultural texts can provide a pathway towards culturally relevant instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1992; Morrell & Morrell, 2012; Osorio, 2018; Suh & Hinton, 2015). This study examined the influences of multicultural nonfiction texts on kindergartners' comprehension, vocabulary, and cultural understanding. The cultural awareness of the kindergartners was explored through repeated read-alouds of multicultural nonfiction texts. First, the texts, i.e., nonfiction picture books, were carefully selected to represent a variety of cultural experiences and diversities. These texts were purposeful in expanding the kindergartners' cultural knowledge and understanding. Second, comprehension and vocabulary assessments were utilized to document student's learning and growth. The young children were provided with rich and meaningful experiences through discussion and dialogue with their peers and the teacher-researcher as they navigated through the multicultural nonfiction texts.

## Literature Review

Multicultural nonfiction texts may provide a doorway for teachers to begin discussions surrounding race, class, gender, cultural affiliations, etc. (Morrell & Morrell, 2012; Osorio, 2018). Using such diverse texts in the classroom can increase knowledge and understanding through vicarious experience and exposure to the different perspectives (McCoy, 2017). Increasing cultural representation in

multicultural literature may encourage a celebration of the differences by allowing individuals to read about the experience of others (Ladson-Billings, 1992; 1995; Morrell & Morrell, 2012; Suh & Hinton, 2015). Culturally relevant instruction may provide a way for students to start thinking about the world around them, to begin understanding *others*, and the struggles with oppression and/ or discrimination (Lopez, 2011; Morrell & Morrell, 2012). Supporting students to become more culturally aware and empathetic to the experiences of others is an important goal, and this approach may help to increase engagement, academic achievement, and support critical consciousness (McCoy, 2017; Suh & Hinton, 2015). Students are also encouraged to make personal connections, which can lead to deeper insights and more meaningful understanding of content (Morrow et al., 2009; Wiseman, 2012). While cultural understanding and empathy can be built at any age, incorporating culturally relevant instruction through repeated read-alouds can open a world of experiences and perspectives for young learners (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

### **Read-Alouds of Multicultural Nonfiction Texts Support Respect for Others**

Culturally relevant instruction, through the use of multicultural nonfiction texts, can celebrate differences, empower students to think critically, and establish a foundation of understanding and respecting others (Ladson-Billings, 1995). For young children, read-alouds of multicultural nonfiction texts are a way to engage students to listen to and respond to a story. Read-alouds have the power to create a safe and positive classroom community, because the expectation for understanding and respectfulness is established as a part of classroom norms (Noddings, 2003; Osorio, 2018). In a read-aloud, students are encouraged to respectfully dialogue, discuss, and share their opinions (Willis, 2002). Students can learn vicariously from one another through dialogue and discussion. As students participate in culturally relevant instruction, students can develop respect for the lived experiences of others (Morrell & Morrell, 2012; Robinson, 2013; Suh & Hinton, 2015). Read-alouds can not only increase awareness and understanding, but also deepen learning through comprehension and vocabulary (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

### **Multicultural Nonfiction Read-Alouds Support Comprehension and Vocabulary**

The power of multicultural nonfiction read-alouds has been evidenced by stronger class discussions and stronger engagement with the text (Ehret, 2019). Teacher research has shown that read-alouds can improve comprehension skills

and develop a more positive attitude towards reading (Ehret, 2019; Wiseman, 2012). Read-alouds can improve comprehension and vocabulary knowledge through repeated exposure to texts (Morrow et al., 2009). Vocabulary knowledge has been examined through a think-aloud process with first grade students, and the results showed that repetition enabled stronger vocabulary knowledge and contextual use of words (Baker et al., 2013). In essence, when texts are repeated and discussed, there were more opportunities to *hear and use* vocabulary words in a variety of contexts. As such, listening to and discussing text through read-alouds can support comprehension and vocabulary, as well as student's deep, critical connections with the text (Baker et al., 2013; Horst et al., 2011; Wiseman, 2012).

### **The Importance of Multicultural Nonfiction Texts**

Read-alouds may be used with both fiction and nonfiction texts. While fiction tends to be more popular with young readers, multicultural nonfiction texts can serve as an important tool in supporting cultural awareness and advancing contextual understanding (Ness, 2011; Osorio, 2018). Teachers identified that nonfiction texts were important because of the *realness* of the text (Ness, 2011). The teachers noted that students were more engaged, had more enthusiasm, and were more willing to participate in activities centered around nonfiction texts because they perceived that nonfiction texts were *real books* with real photographs, and factual information instead of made up stories (Kuhn et al., 2015). Furthermore, these books, categorized as informational, provided powerful opportunities for students to experience the human condition (Osorio, 2018).

### **The Many Benefits of Read-Alouds**

Nonfiction texts can build up knowledge, support literacy skills, and increase motivation (Kuhn et al., 2015; Ness, 2011). Read-alouds can support reading comprehension, vocabulary learning, and deepen cultural understanding (Baker et al., 2013; Wiseman, 2012). Multicultural nonfiction texts provide a window into the experiences of others related to race, gender, society determined social roles, etc. (Osorio, 2018; Panofsky, 2003). Cultural representation through multicultural nonfiction texts can provide opportunities for students to connect with the experiences and cultural perspectives of others (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Morrell & Morrell, 2012; Suh & Hinton, 2015). Early exposures and connections can provide critical opportunities and exposures that young children may not otherwise have. This study sought to examine the influences of the multicultural nonfiction texts on kindergartners' learning and growth as empathetic human beings.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study employs sociocultural theory that emphasizes how cultural beliefs and attitudes can impact student learning (Tracey & Morrow, 2017). Understanding the people, culture, and experiences surrounding the lived experiences of the students may be an important factor in teaching and learning from a sociocultural perspective. Within classrooms, teachers can build on students' prior knowledge and experiences by developing culturally relevant instruction through nonfiction texts (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Exploring and sharing the lived experiences of others can help students grow to be more culturally competent and accepting (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Morrell & Morrell, 2012). Read-alouds of multicultural nonfiction texts can enable students to understand social roles, such as race, class, gender, disability, cultural and ethnic affiliations, just to name a few (Panofsky, 2003). By learning about others from a culturally relevant instruction standpoint, students are potentially increasing their cultural awareness and becoming empathetic of the lived experiences of others (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Morrell & Morrell, 2012).

## **Methodology**

### **Context and Participants**

This mixed methods study took place at a private independent school in a suburban region in the Midwest. The school was divided into 3 sections; Lower School, Middle School, and Upper School with a total student population of approximately 1,017 students. The racial profile of the student body consisted of 75% White, 15% Asian/Pacific Islander, 7% Black, 3% Hispanic, <1% Hawaiian Native, <1% American Indian/Alaska Native, and <1% of two or more races. The study took place in a kindergarten classroom, and while all 18 students were invited to participate, 17 kindergartners were consented to participate in this teacher-research study. From the participants, three children, Leah, Beth, and Sam, were selected as focal students based on their reading readiness (high, middle, and low, respectively). These three focal students were chosen as a way to represent a variety of reading abilities and cultural backgrounds within this typical kindergarten classroom.

#### ***Focal Student: Leah***

Leah was an African American kindergartener and was chosen as a focal student because of her strong reading readiness skills. She was a proficient reader who demonstrated strong comprehension skills. She possessed the ability to remember detailed information from texts that were read. As the study continued, Leah would stand up for herself or others and became passionately involved in issues of equity.



***Focal Student: Beth***

Beth was a White kindergarten student and was chosen for the focal group, because she was in the middle regarding her reading readiness skills. Her reading skills improved over the course of the study. Beth had a profound sense of right and wrong, which allowed for insightful comments in the discussions about the various multicultural nonfiction texts.

***Focal Student: Sam***

Sam was a White kindergarten student and was chosen for the focal group, because he lacked word knowledge and decoding skills. However, because this study involved read-alouds of multicultural nonfiction texts, it allowed his memory and comprehension skills to shine. Sam was deeply empathetic for a kindergartener, which allowed him to make deep connections to the various people in the multicultural nonfiction texts.

**Data Tools and Collection**

The data tools for this mixed-methods study consisted of surveys, weekly questionnaires, and student interviews. These data tools provided a way to examine the influences of the multicultural nonfiction texts on kindergarteners' comprehension, vocabulary, and cultural perceptions. There were two readings conducted each week- in the first reading, the students' listened and focused on comprehending the story. The second reading not only involved comprehension, but also questions and reactions related to the human experience that the text invoked. Students were encouraged to share their thoughts and experiences, as well as the social implications.

***Multicultural Nonfiction Texts***

The following multicultural nonfiction texts were selected and used: *The Girl Who Thought in Pictures: The Story of Dr. Temple Grandin* (2017), *Hidden Figures: The True Story of Four Black Women and the Space Race* (2018), *Shark Lady: The True Story of How Eugenie Clark Became the Ocean's Most Fearless Scientist* (2017), *Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight for Desegregation* (2014), and *Little Melba and Her Big Trombone* (2014). All of these texts were specifically chosen because they represented a wide array of different experiences and perspectives (Osorio, 2018). These texts exposed the kindergartners to topics such as women in science, Autism, and racial struggles and triumphs. These texts led to conversations regarding segregation, racism, and the mistreatment of others

***Reading Interest and Attitude Survey: Pre-/Post-Survey***

A Reading Interest and Attitude Survey (RIAS) was used at the beginning and end of the study and served to gauge the kindergartners' attitudes towards reading and how they felt about themselves as readers. Additionally, the survey asked the kindergartners to identify the topics that interested them, leading to preferences. The RIAS was read aloud to the kindergartners in small groups and they were asked to color or circle the emoticons that best reflected how they felt about each statement.

***Focal Group Interviews***

Semi-structured group interviews were conducted with the three focal students at the end of each week. These 10–15-minute audio-recorded interviews provided an opportunity for the kindergartners to share their insights and thoughts regarding the readings and topics. While the interviews were driven by the content and text, the conversations were fluid and open. Guiding questions on the topic of the text were asked each week in the interviews, for example: “What would you do if...?” and “How would you feel if...?” These questions elicited critical and meaningful responses and connections to the text.

***Weekly Quizzes***

In addition to the qualitative data, there was a need to assess student's language growth, as such, weekly quizzes were orally given over student's comprehension and vocabulary. There was a range of 6–8 vocabulary questions and 10–12 comprehension questions per oral quiz. The multiple-choice quizzes were conducted twice each week, after the first and the second reading for each text. While the weekly quizzes were structured similarly from week-to-week, the questions were specific to each text. Questions such as “What was that ‘thing’ with her brain?” in reference to Dr. Temple Grandin's Autism diagnosis, and “Segregation was happening during the time of Hidden Figures. What does segregation mean?” Quizzes were conducted in small groups, and each question with choices were read aloud and the vocabulary words were given in context.

**Procedure**

Table 1 shows the timeline of the multicultural nonfiction text and activities that served as the data tools for this teacher-research study.

The RIAS served as a pre-survey that provided insights into the students' reading interests and feelings towards reading. Throughout a five-week period, students were engaged in repeated read-alouds of multicultural nonfiction texts. All students participated in two weekly quizzes for each book, to document the

growth in comprehension and vocabulary. At the end of each week, the focal students met for an audio-recorded semi-structured interview where the details of the books were discussed, as well as the social implications. At the very end of the study, the students participated in the RIAS again as a post-survey.

## Findings

### RIAS Pre-and Post-Survey Results

The RIAS was conducted during the first week and last week of the study. It served as a pre-/post-survey regarding students' interests towards reading topics

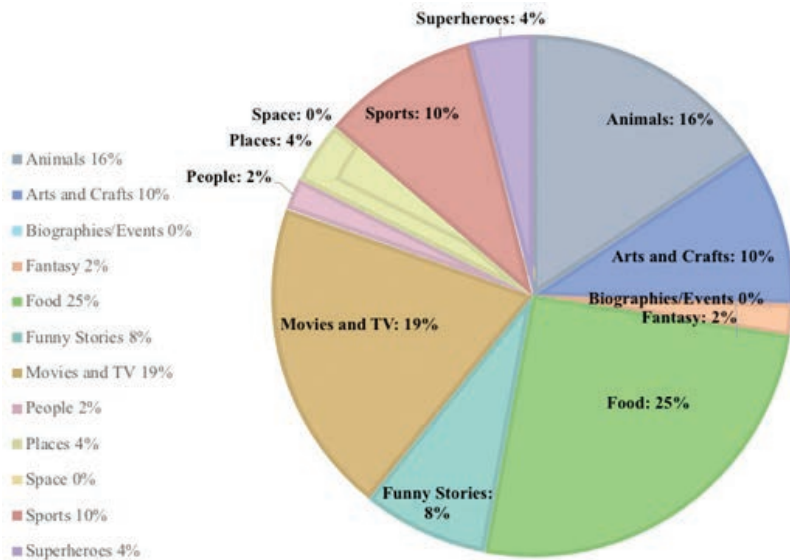
**TABLE 1.**  
**Multicultural Nonfiction Text and Activities Timeline**

| Week | Book  | Day 1       | Day 2                                      | Day 3     | Day 4                                      | Day 5   |
|------|---|-------------|--|-----------|--|---|
| 1    | No book   | Explanation | RIAS<br>Pre-Survey:<br>Student<br>Interest |           | RIAS<br>Pre-Survey:<br>Student<br>Attitude |   |
| 2    | <i>The Girl Who Thought in Pictures: The Story of Dr. Temple Grandin</i>                          | Reading 1   | Quiz 1                                     | Reading 2 | Quiz 2                                     | Focal Group Interview   |
| 3    | <i>Hidden Figures: The True Story of Four Black Women and the Space Race</i>                      | Reading 1   | Quiz 1                                     | Reading 2 | Quiz 2                                     | Focal Group Interview   |
| 4    | <i>Little Melba and Her Big Trombone</i>  | Reading 1   | Quiz 1                                     | Reading 2 | Quiz 2                                     | Focal Group Interview   |
| 5    | <i>Shark Lady: The True Story of How Eugenie Clark Became the Ocean's Most Fearless Scientist</i> | Reading 1   | Quiz 1                                     | Reading 2 | Quiz 2                                     | Focal Group Interview   |
| 6    | <i>Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight for Desegregation</i>            | Reading 1   | Quiz 1                                     | Reading 2 | Quiz 2                                     | Focus Group Interview<br>RIAS Post-Survey:<br>Student Interest and Attitude |

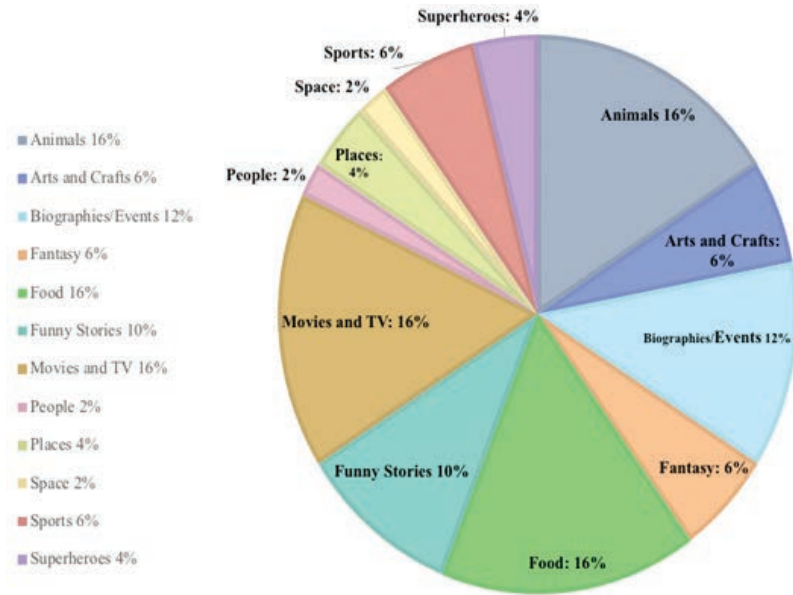
and their preferences and attitudes towards those same reading topics by the end of the study. Figure 1 shows the RIAS pre-survey data and Figure 2 shows the post-survey data regarding the reading topics. While some of the reading topics could be either nonfiction or fiction, for the purposes of this study, we identified a distinction between people (as fiction stories) and biographies and events (as true stories and historical events).

The RIAS pre-survey data (Figure 1) showed that the top three topics of interest were: food (25%), movies and TV (19%), and animals (16%). In contrast, the biographies/events category was not chosen by any of the kindergartners. On the RIAS post-survey (Figure 2), the three most popular choices were identical to the pre-survey; however, the most significant shift was in the interest towards biographies/events. A significant increase from 0% to 12% interest by the kindergartners. The RIAS pre-/post-survey also showed a change in the attitudes of the kindergartners. Figure 3 and 4 show how students' reading attitudes shifted regarding several common reading practices: reading at home, reading at school, reading by myself, reading with a buddy, and when someone reads to me.

The results from the RIAS pre- to post-survey results showed an overall shift towards a more positive feeling and attitude toward read-alouds. RIAS pre-survey identified that the majority of the kindergartners felt that reading at



**Figure 1.** RIAS Pre-Survey Results



**Figure 2.** RIAS Post-Survey Results

school was “just okay.” Only four students reported “love” for reading at school, while two reported that they “don’t like” reading at school. The post-survey results showed that after the six weeks, majority of students reported “love” for reading at school, leaving seven students reporting “just okay” and two students reporting that they “don’t like it.” While there was a positive shift in the attitudes towards reading, the same two students who identified that they did not enjoy reading on the pre-survey were the same two students who reported that they still did not enjoy reading at school after the six weeks.

The most significant shift in perception occurred when the kindergartners were asked their attitude towards someone reading to them. The pre-survey results showed that nine students reported “love it” towards read-alouds. Five students reported “just okay,” and three students responded with “don’t like it” towards read-alouds. After engaging the students in multicultural nonfiction repeated-read alouds, the post-survey results showed an increase to 13 students reporting “love it,” towards read-alouds, leaving three students with “just okay” and one student that reported they “don’t like it.” While there was an overall rise in reading enjoyment, the study also found that this reading enjoyment correlated with improvement in reading performance and confidence in reading via weekly comprehension and vocabulary quizzes.

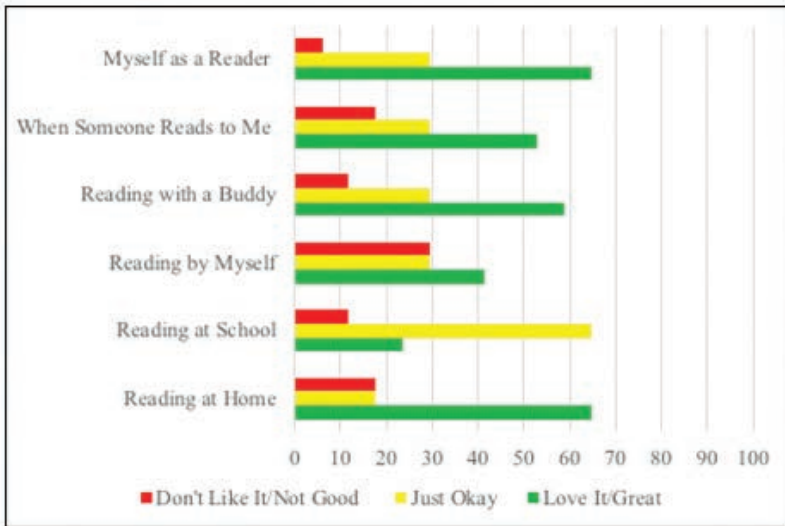


Figure 3. RIAS Pre-Survey Results

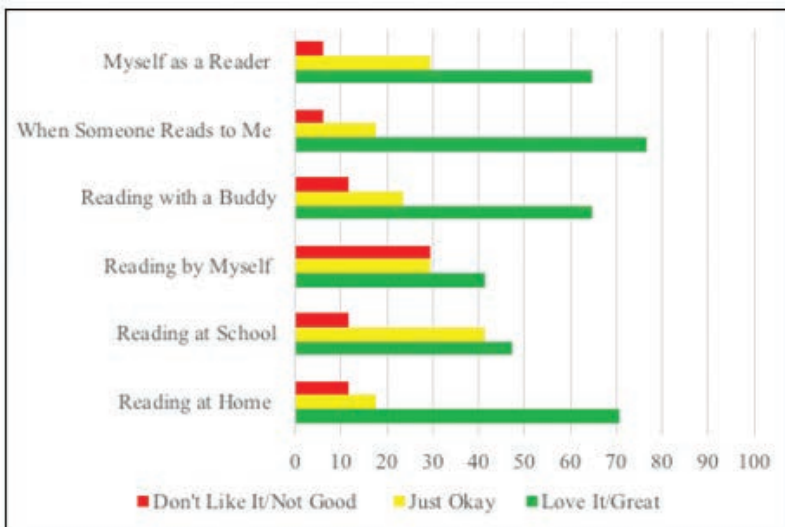
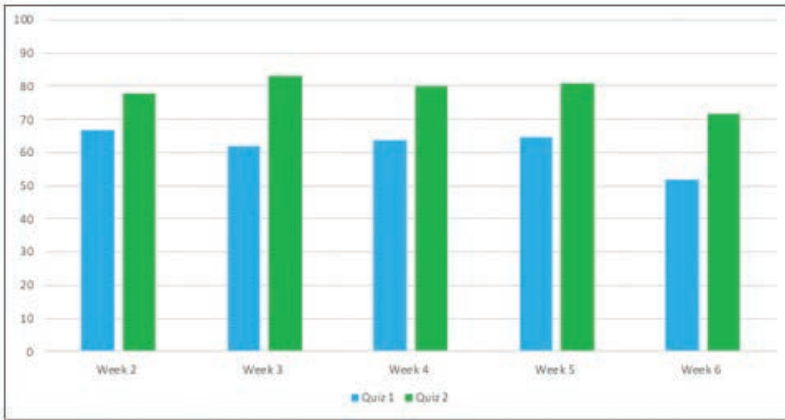


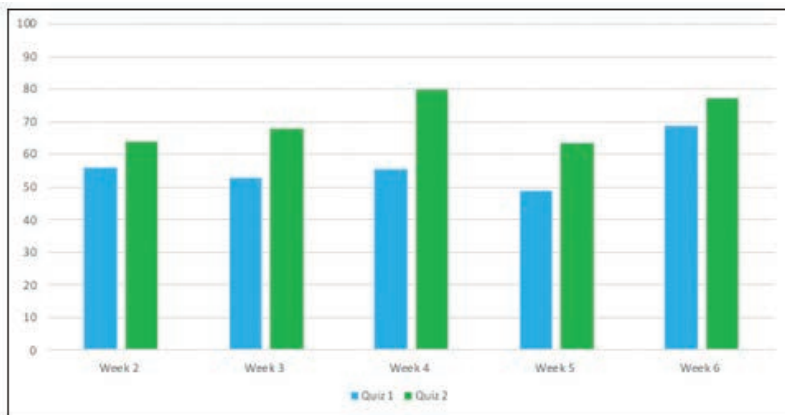
Figure 4. RIAS Post-Survey Results

## Weekly Quiz Results

During weeks two through six, kindergartners participated in repeated read-alouds of the multicultural nonfiction texts. Each book was read aloud twice, and a corresponding quiz was given after each reading. The quizzes varied based on the text and consisted of vocabulary and comprehension questions. In addition to having the students recall specific details of the story, they also reacted and explained ideas regarding the human experience via these weekly quizzes. The weekly comprehension averages can be seen in Figures 5 and 6 below. The weekly comprehension averages can be seen in Figures 5 and 6 below. The



**Figure 5.** Weekly Quizzes: Average Comprehension Results



**Figure 6.** Weekly Quizzes: Average Vocabulary

data is displayed in percentages to present the average scores on both parts of the assessment from week to week.

## Results

Figure 5 shows that the average comprehension scores increased from first reading to second reading throughout the five weeks. During week 2, the smallest improvement gains can be seen, however, it is important to note that this was the first set of quizzes, and the kindergarteners may have been acclimating. In contrast, week 3 showed the greatest growth gains from quiz 1 to quiz 2. In the second comprehension check in week 3 over the book *Hidden Figures*, the kindergarten students demonstrated approximately 83.1% comprehension of the text. Throughout each week, the read-aloud texts increased with difficulty, and the last book, *Separate is Never Equal*, was the lengthiest text, on the complex subject of segregation and equality. The week 6, quiz 1 data showed 51.9% comprehension after the first reading, however after the second reading, comprehension increased to 71.8%. This was an increase of 19.9%, and prior to week 6, the most significant improvement was seen in Week 3, with an increase of 21.1%, which coincidentally was also about segregation and equality. The overall results of the comprehension quizzes showed that the kindergarten students improved their recall and attention to details skills.

In addition to comprehension, the students also showed improvement in vocabulary knowledge throughout the study. Six to eight vocabulary words were chosen from the texts, and in small groups, the words were read aloud and a sentence related to the context of the story. The students were then given four developmentally appropriate definitions and asked to select the meaning that best explained the vocabulary word. The kindergarten students demonstrated significant improvement in vocabulary knowledge from quiz 1 to quiz 2 from week to week. Much like the small gains in comprehension in week 2, the lowest vocabulary improvement occurred in week 2. Interestingly, week 6 on *Separate is Never Equal*, also showed the smallest vocabulary increase from quiz 1 to quiz 2, however began with the highest starting point of vocabulary knowledge in quiz 1. Perhaps because of the similar nature in topics on segregation and inequality with previous weeks. The most significant increase between the two quizzes occurred in week 4, with a 24.5% improvement on *Little Melba and Her Big Trombone*. Words like “mesmerizing” described the musician, and “segregation” and “cruel” described the experiences that the characters encountered. Throughout the study, the kindergarten students showed a steady increase in vocabulary knowledge and comprehension of the topics as shown in Figures 5 and 6.



### **Student Responses to Vocabulary Question: Segregation**

One of the major themes within the multicultural nonfiction read-alouds was that of segregation. The kindergarten students were exposed to the topic of segregation and prejudice during weeks 3, 4, and 6 (see Table 1). The vocabulary weekly quizzes contained the word segregation as one of the vocabulary words in each of these three weeks. Throughout the study, the students discussed the concept of segregation and inequality. Because this concept was developmentally complex for the kindergarten students, they began in Week 3 by learning how to say the word and discussing it in a developmentally appropriate way. In a focal group interview, Sam stated, “It keeps people apart,” and continued by acknowledging that it would not feel good to be apart. The students also utilized the illustrations in the texts, “I looked at her pictures and I saw her face and she looked mad.” Beth, another student in the class, made a personal connection and said, “If I was separated, then I couldn’t be with my old neighbors because they are African American and I would feel sad.” Because the students were kindergartners, this type of talk was developmentally appropriate, and as the weeks continued, the students’ understanding of this complex idea bloomed as their vocabulary increased.

As the student progressed, the kindergarten students demonstrated a deeper understanding regarding the issue of segregation and inequality. The kindergartners expressed that they were saddened by our country’s history with segregation. Beth stated in Week 3, “They [*Hidden Figures*] changed the world because if it was still like that then Jake couldn’t be with his dad because his mom has white skin and his dad has dark skin.” After the reading of *Separate is Never Equal*, Leah stated, “They were doing the wrong choice, to tell them to go to the Mexican school because they weren’t born in Mexico” and Sam enthusiastically expressed, “They were being mean. I would be like ‘Hey, they deserve to be in this pool’... Even though it doesn’t affect me, I would say that!” When this text was read in Week 6, the kindergarten students appeared to be more confident in discussing segregation, but also in understanding the impact and how it affected people in their daily lives. Beth explained, “Some have dark skin, and some are boys and some are girls, and some have short hair and some have long hair... People come in different shapes and sizes. And sometimes they are even part brown and part light.” “You can learn about them and learn about their life. And it’s good that they kept trying and trying.” Leah finished up by stating that the people in the stories did not give up and that people should not give up. Throughout the readings, the kindergartners showed an empathetic connection with the people in the stories they were reading. Not only defining the word segregation, but the students gained a deeper level of understanding regarding

the hidden meaning and implications surrounding the mistreatment of others. The kindergarten students displayed the ability to dive deeply into the topics regarding segregation and inequality at a developmentally age-appropriate level. They in turn demonstrated understanding and empathy for others.

## Discussion

The focus of this study was to explore how multicultural nonfiction read-alouds might affect the vocabulary and comprehension for kindergarten students, and how cultural representation in multicultural literature may potentially affect kindergartners' cultural knowledge and perceptions of equity. The two major themes that arose were repeated read-alouds of multicultural nonfiction texts fostered engagement and learning, which led to deeper understanding of inequities.

### **Repeated Read-Alouds Fostered Engagement and Learning**

The results of the study showed that repeated read-alouds of the multicultural nonfiction texts can support engagement and learning. The first to the second reading enabled a sense of familiarity with the text, and students were able to focus on other important issues brought up because they had heard the story via the first reading. The data showed that there was an increase in students' reading comprehension and vocabulary (see Figure 5 and Figure 6), which supports prior research on the importance of repeated read-alouds and exposure to texts as a way to increase vocabulary development and knowledge (Horst et al., 2011; Leung, 2008), and comprehension skills and self-perceptions (Ehret, 2019; Wiseman, 2012). The kindergarten students not only demonstrated their knowledge and understanding via the discussion and interviews, they also showed their ability to make personally meaningful connections to the read-alouds. The study found that the kindergartners came to value multicultural nonfiction texts, and demonstrated understanding and empathy. Sam stated, "It is information and not just made-up stories." While culture and lived experiences were the main focus of the selected texts, the students were very interested in learning vicariously through the multicultural nonfiction texts. Leah said that it was important to read such books because, "you can learn about them and their life." Sam made personal connections when he explained, "They were treated bad, and if I was alive back then, I would be treated well. But I would go on Martin Luther King's side!" While empathetic, he also showed an incredible sense of self-awareness regarding his own white privilege and recognized that he may not have been mistreated

because of his skin tone, however, his sense of injustice guided his decision to take a stand regarding the rights of others. This study found that the kindergarten students in this study had a positive attitude and enthusiasm toward multicultural nonfiction texts, but furthermore, developed and demonstrated deep compassion and empathy (Kuhn et al., 2015).

### **Multicultural Nonfiction Texts Leads to Deeper Understanding of Inequities**

“I would feel sad because everyone should be treated the same,” was a common consensus reached by the kindergarten students. The students recognized that inequity was not just something in the past, but that inequality and disrespect existed today. Leah acknowledged that the country we live in now was still not perfect. While connecting with the past, she passionately stated, “No, we still have work to do!” The students recognized the deeper meaning and harsher reality for the people who lived in the past via the read-alouds, but they also understood that such inequities still had not “been fixed”. Culturally relevant instruction has the power to inspire social change and empower students (Ladson-Billings, 1992). As a result, culturally relevant teaching can increase engagement, academic achievement, and create critical consciousness (McCoy, 2017). The kindergarten students were not only able to correctly define segregation, but more importantly, demonstrated the ability to talk about segregation and issues of equity in a deep and profound manner. Comments such as, “It means keeping people apart”, “Being different is not bad”, and “Two wrongs don’t make a right” demonstrated that the kindergartners understood beyond simple comprehension. Exploring issues of segregation enabled the kindergartners to think more deeply about the world around them, and the issues surrounding discrimination and inequity (Lopez, 2011). Throughout the study, the children demonstrated understanding regarding the need for equality, and this compassion continued far after the end of the study as the school year progressed.

### **Limitation and Conclusion**

This study found that repeated read-alouds of multicultural nonfiction texts supported the kindergarten students’ development of compassion and empathy, as well as their reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. However, just like any study, there were limitations. The first is that this study took place within one context- within one particular class of kindergarten students, but, as Stake (1995) asserted, “Cases seldom exist alone. If there is one, there surely are more somewhere” (p. 72). While this study took place in one mid-western

kindergarten classroom, the group of students showed that young children had a lot to say regarding issues of discrimination and inequity. Their insights led to deep understanding and compassion regarding the experiences of others. Undoubtedly, we believe that there are other children who would greatly benefit from being provided similar opportunities. As such, we advocate that teachers provide such opportunities for young children.

Second, this study utilized one instructional practice, that of repeated read-alouds. We believed that this strategy was effective with the kindergarten students because of the age of the participants and the nature of the multicultural non-fiction texts; however, we recognize that this is only one strategy. The repeated read-alouds was one way to support our kindergarten students, and we hope that this study raises awareness that young students need to be provided with multiple exposures to text in developmentally appropriate ways. In turn, we advocate that teachers provide age-appropriate strategies, such as read-alouds, that foster and support critical thinking for all students.

And finally, the topics of the multicultural nonfiction texts that were selected for this study may have appeared to be *too difficult* for kindergarten students to comprehend and discuss; however, we note that the texts were specifically chosen because of the human experiences that were portrayed (see Works Cited for the full list). We believe that providing students with exposure to the cultural experiences of others not only supported critical knowledge, but also expanded the kindergartener's understanding of the lived experiences of others. We are not advocating for a particular method, strategy, or ideology; instead, we believe that students, even those in kindergarten, can and should develop an awareness and respect for differences. We strongly believe that reading opens the world of experiences and important life-lessons, and educators should not shy away from facilitating discussions surrounding culture and discrimination. This study hopefully demonstrated that uncomfortable or challenging topics can be approached in developmentally appropriate ways. Young children *are* capable of understanding and critically examining issues of equity and injustice. If students at a young age are provided with a strong foundation for cultural competence and empathy, we believe that a stronger society of empathetic and culturally minded people may be fostered. It is our fervent hope that our society moves in this direction.

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# DISSERTATION WINNER

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## MOTIVATION TO READ IN THE MIDDLE GRADES

**Leslie Roberts**

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### **Abstract**

*This study explored the reading motivations of sixth-grade students. Three purposes were established for this study; to examine the ways that students in the middle grades are motivated to read; create a valid and reliable instrument to measure reading motivation with middle-grade students; and to design and implement an instructional model that would facilitate reading motivation using peer-to-peer discussion of books. A multiphase mixed method design was selected to explore, measure, and address reading motivation for students in sixth grade. This study was conducted in three phases; an exploratory qualitative phase; a quantitative instrument design phase, and a design-based case study phase. At the conclusion of this study, a retrospective analysis revealed four theoretical assertions: (a) Choice is important; (b) Peer-to-peer collaboration is influential; (c) Time and value are related; and (d) Self-concept is complicated.*

*Keywords:* Literacy, middle grades, adolescent, reading, motivation

### **Introduction**

Research suggests that students' motivation to read is central to their overall success with reading (Morgan & Fuchs, 2007; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). However, research also asserts that the motivation for students to read decreases with age (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Ivey & Broadus, 2001; McKenna et al., 1995; Wigfield et al., 1997). As students get older, their opportunity to interact



with peers or adults about their reading also decreases – whether by students’ choice or incidental missed chances (Baker & Wigfield, 1999). These missed opportunities for discussion among peers who share similar reading interests could influence middle-grade students’ overall motivation to read.

## Background/Statement of the Problem

Recent research focused on reading motivation resulted in the Motivation to Read Profile- Fiction/Nonfiction (MRP- F/NF) that measured students’ ( $n = 1,104$ ) motivation to read fiction and nonfiction texts (Malloy et al., 2017; Parsons et al., 2018). Figures 1 and 2 depict the motivation results for fiction and nonfiction for boys and girls in grades 3–6. Results suggest that reading motivation declined for boys and girls between fifth and sixth grade for fiction and nonfiction texts, which prompts a deeper look at the motivation in the middle grades, specifically sixth grade.

This noticeable decline in reading motivation for sixth-grade students resulted in three problem statements. First, research gaps remain concerning how students in the middle grades describe what motivates them to read. Furthermore, few instruments are specifically designed to measure middle-grade students’ motivation to read and focus on opportunities to interact about what they read. Finally, a gap in knowledge exists from a researcher, practitioner, and

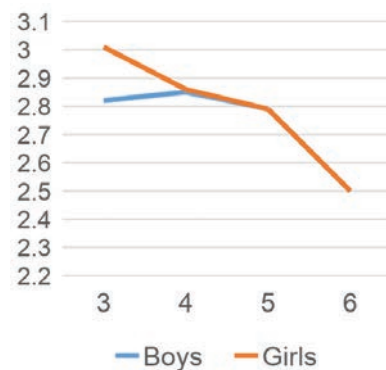
**Figure 1:**

Overall motivation results of fiction texts (boys and girls combined).



**Figure 2:**

Overall motivation results of nonfiction texts.



**Figures 1 and 2** Motivation for reading fiction and nonfiction with boys and girls ( $n = 1,104$ ).

design perspective regarding how instructional models of book clubs can support the peer-to-peer discussion of books as a socially motivating factor, addressing the decline in interaction noted by Baker and Wigfield (1999).

These gaps in knowledge led to the following three research questions:

1. How do sixth-grade students describe their motivations for reading?
2. How can middle-grade students' motivation to read be reliably and validly measured?
3. How can online and face-to-face book clubs be refined to support the reading motivation of sixth-grade students?

## Literature Review

Students' academic success strongly correlates to their reading proficiency (Bozack & Salvaggio, 2013; Morgan & Fuchs, 2007; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). Students who experience continued success with reading and feel confident in their reading abilities demonstrate increased motivation, effort, and perseverance with reading than their peers (Curwood, 2013; Schunk et al., 2012). Therefore, reading is essential to achievement, and motivation is vital to reading, as reflected by a significant body of research over the past few decades.

Research also asserts that the motivation for a student to read decreases with age (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; McKenna et al., 1995; Parsons et al., 2018; Wigfield et al., 1997). Students are generally more disengaged from reading activities in middle school than in elementary school (Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Parsons et al., 2018) and can develop negative attitudes towards reading (McKenna et al., 1995). Prior studies indicate that these negative attitudes tend to manifest around the sixth grade (Malloy et al., 2017; Marinak et al., 2017). Therefore, this research aims to understand the reading motivations of sixth-grade students and explore an instructional model to influence the motivation to read in the middle grade.

## Theoretical Underpinnings

Reading motivation aligns with expectancy-value theory (EVT), which suggests that expectations for success, task values, and beliefs contribute to motivation to participate in a task or activity (Eccles et al., 1983; Eccles et al., 1993). Specifically related to reading, EVT defines the connection of one's self-concept as a reader and the value held for reading and that an "individuals' expectancies for success and the value they have for succeeding are important determinants of their motivation" (Wigfield, 1994, pp. 49–50).

Student-led discussion is especially significant in Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory, which posits that students have the opportunity to learn from social interactions with others. As he states, "[l]earning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 88). Vygotsky suggests that learning is a social phenomenon and that students' learning and overall development are interrelated (p. 84). Furthermore, student-led discussion allows students to learn from one another's cultural and background knowledge. As Vygotsky states, "thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them" (1986, p. 218). Therefore, middle-grade students' overall literacy development depends on their ability to participate in the various social communities they inhabit (Casey, 2009; Ryan & Patrick, 2001).

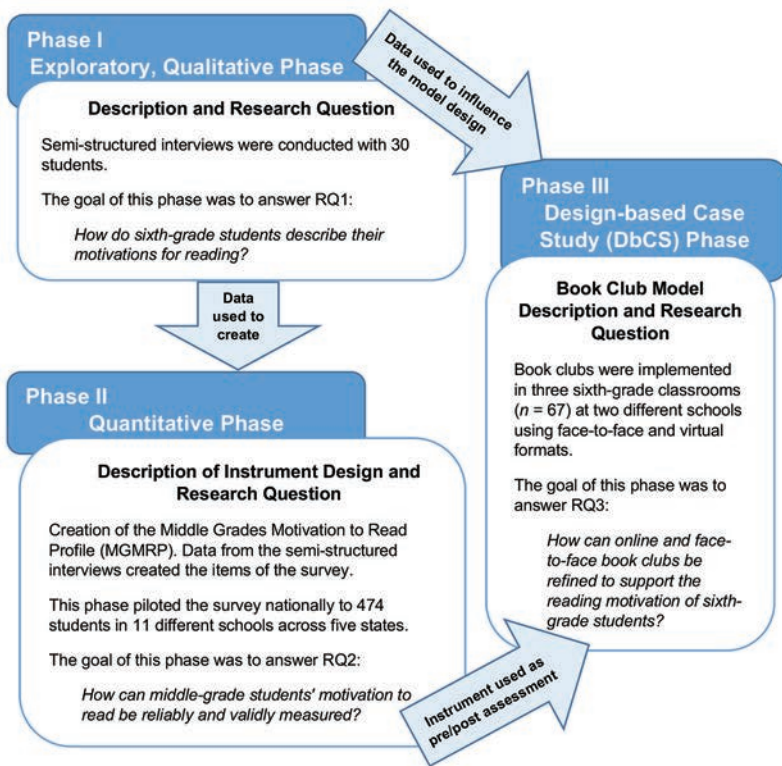
The use of book clubs to initiate peer discussion in groups closely mirrors the tenets of *communities of practice*, which Lave & Wenger (1991) describe as "a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (1991, p. 98) that promote thoughtful discussion and the creation of new knowledge among its members. There is also a transfer of learning within the community through members creating and sharing new knowledge. When participating in book clubs and other communities of practice, students can create and refine their identity as members of the group (Lave & Wegner, 1991; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000).

## Methodology

A multiphase mixed method design was used for this study as it examines a problem or topic of interest through several qualitative and quantitative research phases. These phases are sequential and build on data discovered in earlier phases to address a central topic, theme, or problem more holistically (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). These phases include Phase I: an exploratory qualitative phase; Phase II: a quantitative instrument design/validation phase; and; Phase III: a design-based case study phase. Figure 3 depicts the three stages of this multiphase design.

### Phase I: Exploratory, Qualitative

Phase I was an exploratory, qualitative study of sixth-grade students' motivation to read. This phase focused on the initial research question: *How do sixth-grade students describe their motivations for reading?* In order to investigate the various causes of declining reading motivation in middle-grade students, the researcher conducted interviews with thirty sixth-grade students.



**Figure 3** Multiphas Mixed Methods Design. This figure illustrates the various phases within a multiphase mixed methods design. Each phase includes the phase design, a brief description of the method, the corresponding research question, and the interrelatedness of each phase. Adapted from Creswell & Plano Clark (2011).

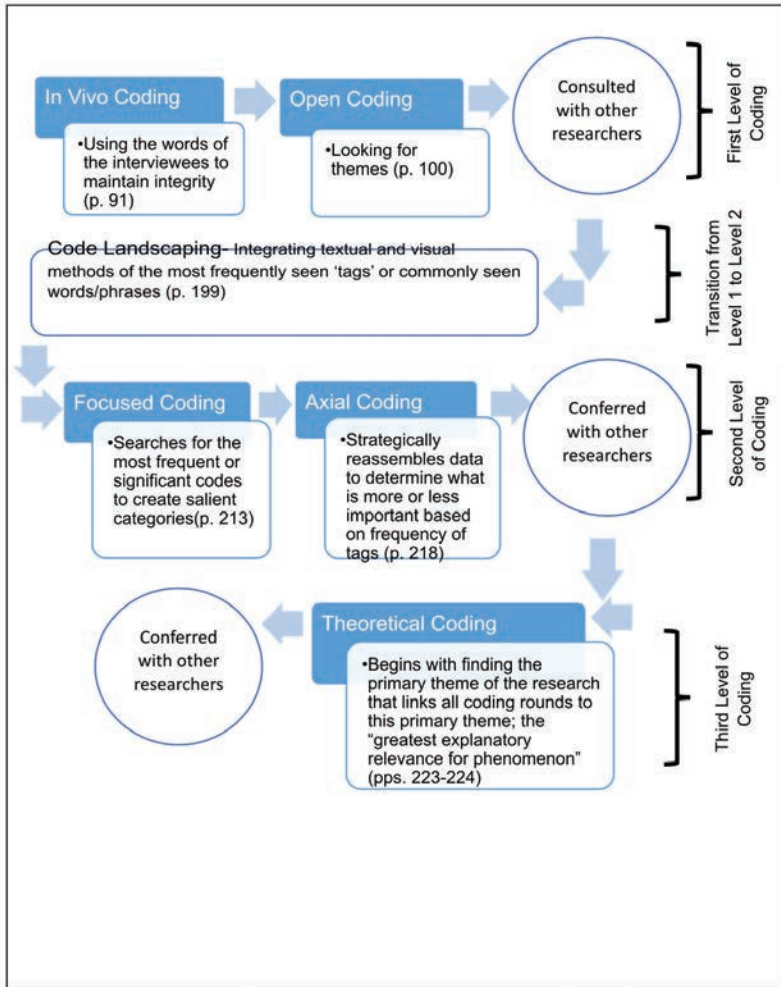
### *The Context of Phase I*

The participants for Phase I were recruited at a 6th-8th grade middle school in the Southeastern United States using convenience sampling methods (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). Thirty students from two sixth-grade ELA classrooms (11 boys and 19 girls) were interviewed during the students' ELA class period.

### *Procedures and Data Collection Process of Phase I*

The researcher interviewed students over three weeks at the convenience of the teacher. Most of the questions used in the interview were adapted from the

Motivation to Read Profile (Gambrell et al., 1996) and were based on expectancy-value theory (EVT), which focuses on the constructs of *self-concept* and *value*. Additional questions address the construct, *discussion of reading* with others and were based on the item analysis findings from the MRP - F/NF (Marinak et al., 2017). *General interest questions* concerning students reading habits were also included. Phase I interviews were transcribed, analyzed, and coded using a



**Figure 4** Phase I Multi-levelled Coding Scheme. Adapted from Saldana (2013).

multi-leveled coding scheme. Each of the three levels of coding was evaluated for consistency with fellow literacy researchers to increase the trustworthiness of the findings. Figure 4 depicts the coding scheme used to analyze students' interview responses. These interviews' analysis helped inform the survey development in Phase II. Additionally, the thematic understandings gained from these interviews facilitated the initial construction of the instructional model used in Phase III.

## Phase II: Survey Development and Field Testing

Phase II was a quantitative study that sought to answer the second research question: *How can middle-grade students' reading motivation be reliably and validly measured?* This phase addressed the need for a motivation instrument, the Middle Grades Motivation to Read Profile (MGMRP), specifically developed for use with students in the middle grades that measure motivation to read and includes a factor for discussion of reading.

### *The Context of Phase II*

In order to include participants that represented middle school students across the United States, this study used a combination of volunteer and snowball

**TABLE 1**  
**MGMRP Field Testing Participants: Overview of Participating Schools**

| State            | Number of Students |         |         | School Characteristics |            |         |
|------------------|--------------------|---------|---------|------------------------|------------|---------|
|                  | Grade 6            | Grade 7 | Grade 8 | Locale                 | Grade Span | Type    |
| Colorado         | 39                 | 0       | 0       | City                   | 6-12       | Public  |
| Florida 1        | 0                  | 36      | 5       | Suburban               | 6-8        | Public  |
| Florida 2        | 70                 | 0       | 0       | City                   | K-8        | Public  |
| Florida 3        | 20                 | 33      | 30      | City                   | PK-8       | Private |
| Florida 4        | 18                 | 13      | 10      | Suburban               | PK-8       | Private |
| Georgia          | 8                  | 0       | 0       | Suburban               | 6-8        | Public  |
| North Carolina   | 0                  | 0       | 34      | Rural                  | K-12       | Charter |
| South Carolina 1 | 87                 | 0       | 0       | Rural                  | 6-8        | Public  |
| South Carolina 2 | 24                 | 0       | 0       | Rural                  | PK-6       | Public  |
| South Carolina 3 | 15                 | 15      | 17      | Rural                  | 6-12       | Charter |
| Total            | 281                | 97      | 96      |                        |            |         |

sampling techniques (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). The researcher used snowball sampling by inviting teacher participants to share the survey with other teachers thereby allowing participants to recruit other participants. A total of 474 student participants across five states completed the survey to determine the validity and reliability of the instrument. Table 1 depicts the distribution of the student participants.

## **Phase II Item Development**

Themes from the Phase I interviews informed the development of items included in the MGMRP. The constructs of *self-concept as a reader* (students' personal beliefs about themselves as readers and their reading habits) and *values of reading* (the degree to which students value the task of reading) reflected the expectancy-value frame of the interviews. The third construct, *discussion of reading*, was confirmed in the student interviews as a thematic category. These three constructs served as the basic frame for the survey construction.

The results of the Level III analysis from Phase I generated an item pool, which utilized a variety of response structures on the MGMRP, such as Likert-like scaling, multiple-choice, and continua. Each survey item was rewritten in 3–4 different formats and sent to fellow literacy researchers to select the wording format for each item they believed was the clearest. Participants completed the survey through Qualtrics (<https://www.qualtrics.com/>). Data were analyzed and descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations by item and constructs were determined. Reliability using Cronbach's alpha (1951) was conducted to determine the consistency of items with constructs. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to verify factor structures.

The MGMRP will fill a gap in the scope of previous reading motivation measurement instruments by focusing on students in the middle grades and the effect of discussion as a potential motivating factor. The MGMRP was grounded in the qualitative data gathered in Phase I and served as a pre/post-measure in Phase III.

## **Phase III: Design-Based Case Study (DbCS)**

Phase III of the multiphase design used a Design-based Case Study (DbCS) approach (Deaton & Malloy, 2017) that employed repeated implementation and systematic refinement of an instructional model toward the pedagogical goal: increased reading motivation. DbCS merges the practicality and innovation of design-based research (DBR) with the attention to the protocol in data collection of case studies (CS) (Deaton & Malloy, 2017; Reinking & Bradley, 2008).

This study noted model refinements within and across three cycles (book club cycles 1, 2, and 3), two platforms (face-to-face and virtual), and three classrooms.

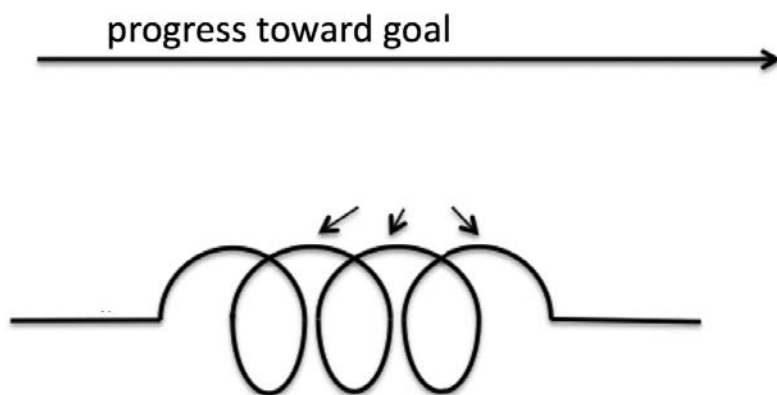
Like case study research, DbCS involves in-depth data collection of various data sources through multiple units of analysis (Creswell, 2007) and triangulation across the data set (Stake, 2005). This phase addressed the final research question: *How can online and face-to-face book clubs be refined to support the reading motivation of sixth-grade students?* by implementing a book club in both face-to-face and virtual meetings to foster student-led discussion. Figure 5 is an overview of the DbCS approach from the beginning to the end of a study.

### ***The Context of Phase III***

A book club model was implemented in three sixth grade classrooms ( $n = 67$ ) at two schools located in the southeastern United States throughout an academic semester. Although all 76 students in the three classrooms participated in the book clubs, only the data for the 67 students who returned permission forms were retained.

### ***Procedures and Data Collection Process of Phase III***

Throughout a semester, the book clubs occurred in three cycles of 4–5 week intervals where students worked in small groups according to book choice. For this study, the students in the three selected classrooms participated in face-to-face (F2F) and virtual book club (VBC) settings using district-issued Chromebooks in the classroom. It was an objective for students to have opportunities to interact on both platforms throughout the study. Students' Chromebooks had access



**Figure 5** Overview of Design-based Case Study timeline. Adapted from Deaton and Malloy (2017).



to the digital platform Edmodo, where the VBCs took place. Book clubs took place daily for about 15–20 minutes; students were either participating in discussion F2F or virtually or participating in independent reading. Students had the opportunity to have both discussion and reading time in class. On the days the students met for discussion, the researcher observed and collected field notes. At the end of each week, the researcher met with teachers to assess the progress of the book club model, identify factors that enhanced or inhibited progress toward the pedagogical goal, and note and address any problems that may have surfaced during the week. Three cycles of the book club took place; Table 2 outlines the context and three cycles in this phase.

The instructional model refined during design-based research focuses on achieving a desired pedagogical goal while documenting the model's adaptations to achieve this goal (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). Therefore, the instructional model generally begins with only a few essential elements so that only those refinements necessary for each classroom context are added. Table 3 lists the initial essential elements that constituted the initial prototype of the book club model.

**TABLE 2**  
**Cycles of the Book Club Model**

|                                       | O'Connell Middle School<br><i>n</i> = 52 students |  |                                    |  | Shylo Elementary School<br><i>n</i> = 24 students |  |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|------------------------------------|--|---|--|
|                                       | Ms. Peterson<br><i>n</i> = 27 students            |  | Ms. Lane<br><i>n</i> = 25 students |  | Ms. James<br><i>n</i> = 24 students               |  |
| Cycle 1<br>(MGMRP<br>Pre-assessment)  | VBCs<br><i>n</i> = 8<br>students                  | F2Fs<br><i>n</i> = 19<br>students;<br>5 groups | VBCs<br><i>n</i> = 11<br>students  | F2Fs<br><i>n</i> = 14<br>students;<br>4 groups | VBCs<br><i>n</i> = 12<br>students                 | F2Fs<br><i>n</i> = 12<br>students;<br>3 groups |
| Cycle 2                               | VBCs<br><i>n</i> = 11<br>students                 | F2Fs<br><i>n</i> = 9<br>students;<br>3 groups  | VBCs<br><i>n</i> = 13<br>students  | F2Fs<br><i>n</i> = 12<br>students;<br>4 groups | VBCs<br><i>n</i> = 11<br>students                 | F2Fs<br><i>n</i> = 12<br>students;<br>3 groups |
| Cycle 3<br>(MGMRP<br>Post-assessment) | N/A   |  | N/A                                |  | F2Fs<br><i>n</i> = 23<br>students;<br>7 groups    |  |

*Note.* The teachers at O'Connell Middle School could not participate in the third book club cycle due to time constraints from statewide testing and end-of-the-year procedures. Therefore, they missed completing the MGMRP post-assessment.

Adaptations to these elements, which occur whenever inhibiting factors are determined, can refine this initial prototype of the instructional model as the microcycles and units of analysis proceed. Enhancing elements, or instructional practices that seem to refine the model toward the pedagogical goal of engaged reading, were noted during weekly meetings and maintained in future iterations. Documenting these enhancing and inhibiting factors is vital during

**TABLE 3**  
**Essential elements of the initial book club model prototype**

| Element   | Function   | Frequency of Use                               |
|---|--|--|
| Read the book                                   | Students must have a designated time in class to read their books.   | 15-20 minutes;<br>3 days per week              |
| Decide pacing                                   | Students must collaboratively decide on the pacing of their book throughout the book club cycle. This pacing will help keep students on track for reading and discussion so that students' discussion is around the same part of the book. Pacing is essential for VBCs who do not meet in person. Initially, students were given a blank calendar to help decide on pacing. Students could have also used their school-issued agenda or a calendar on Edmodo. | Beginning of the book club cycle               |
| Sticky notes for writing                        | All students must use sticky notes while reading their book so they have something to bring to the discussion, whether F2F or while typing responses on the VBC. Sticky notes can include thoughts or questions on particular parts in the book or reminders of enjoyable parts students would like to discuss.  | Every day as needed during the book club cycle |
| Meeting with your group at the appropriate time | Students must have a designated time during class to meet in their book club groups for discussion. This designated time allows students to meet F2F or log on to Edmodo and complete posts through the VBC.   | 15-20 minutes;<br>2 days per week              |
| Writing a book recommendation                   | As the book club concluded, students wrote an individual recommendation of the book posted on a website. Students from all three classes were able to read the reviews.  | At the conclusion of each cycle.               |

*Note.* The teachers at O'Connell Middle School could not participate in the third book club cycle due to time constraints from statewide testing and end-of-the-year procedures. Therefore, they missed completing the MGMRP post-assessment.

data collection, as are the adaptations of the model and the effectiveness of the adaptations in ameliorating inhibiting factors.

## Findings

### Phase I: Exploratory, Qualitative

Phase I, an exploratory, qualitative study, addressed the initial research question; *How do sixth-grade students describe their motivations for reading?* Each interview

**TABLE 4**  
**Phase I Themes from Interview Data**

---

#### **Social Reading Depends on Others' Participation**

- Students would enjoy sharing reading with peers (Ivey, 1999). However, students' participation is dependent upon their peers' participation. This could indicate students' concern about how others view them (Ryan & Patrick, 2001).
- "Yeah, that would be fun cause we never really get the chance to talk about books during class" [S29\_3/15/17\_Interview].

#### **Time for Reading is Limited**

- Students do not have 'set' time in class to read. Rigor has increased; class reading time has decreased.
- "Yes, we usually get some free time [in class to read] but everyone plays on their tablets so it's loud and I can't read that much" [S23\_3/15/17\_Interview].

#### **Ability Does Not Equal Enjoyment**

- Students are aware of their abilities as a reader. Students are clear on what they think makes someone a good reader or not a good reader.
- "Yes. I'm a good reader in my head, just not out loud" [S6\_3/9/17\_Interview].

#### **Choice is Important**

- Most students valued choice (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001) and expressed a desire to choose what they read, when they read, and how they were assessed on their reading.
- "[Reading would be more enjoyable if we could] read our own books in school and fully understand them" [S21\_3/15/17\_Interview].

#### **I am Aware of my Friends as Readers**

- Students know if their friends are readers or not. Students whose friends do not enjoy reading did not necessarily *hate* to read but would prefer other activities instead.
  - "I don't think they like reading as much. Most of them are athletes like me, so they go outside and play more" [S19\_3/20/17\_Interview].
- 

*Note.* The text in bold are the themes; the first bulleted text is the researcher-generated rationales, and the second bulleted text is students' interview responses.

in Phase I was recorded and transcribed, which resulted in 198 pages of typed transcriptions, or approximately 6.5 hours of interview recordings.

Level 3 of the coding process (Theoretical coding) details the primary themes and links all coding rounds to these primary themes. The five categories created during Axial coding in Level 2 were rephrased to create five themes that answer the initial research question; *How do sixth-grade students describe their motivations for reading?* The researcher noted that saturation occurred due to the eventual repetitive nature of students' interview responses during coding and analysis. Table 4 depicts the five themes that arose during Phase I data analysis.

## Phase II: The Motivation to Read Profile (Middle Grades)

### *Descriptive Statistics*

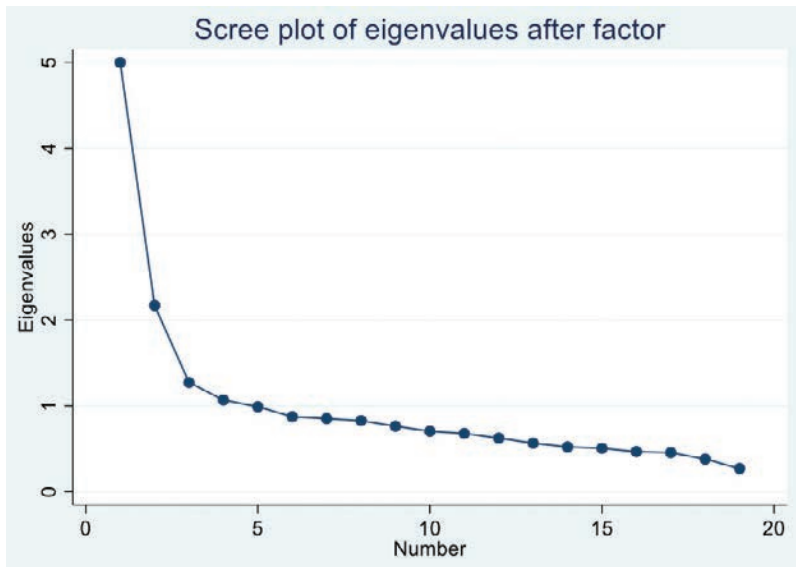
An analysis was conducted on the 25 individual survey items. A total of 474 participants were in the study, with 205 males (43%), 262 females (55%), and 7 participants who chose not to disclose their gender (2%). A descriptive analysis of the item responses indicates a mean range across items of 1.9–3.9, with standard deviations ranging from 1.04–1.54. Whole-scale reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha (1951) revealed whole-scale reliability of  $\alpha = .796$ . To increase the reliability of the final measure for the survey, six items were deleted (items 10, 13, 23, 24, and 25), which resulted in an  $\alpha$  of .823 for 19 items. These 19 items were included in the exploratory factor analysis.

### *Exploratory Factor Analysis*

An exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the 19 reliable items of the MGMRP. Using an oblique rotation, this factor analysis resulted in four constructs, which accounted for 50.1% of the variance. Factor loadings for each construct ranged from .41 to .78 (Factor 1); .51 to .69 (Factor 2); and .47 to .70 (Factor 3). There were no negative Eigenvalues, as evidenced in the scree plot in Figure 6.

As the fourth factor in the analysis included only one item, item 22 (I'm very particular about what I read; I'm sometimes particular about what I read; I'll read anything), the researcher decided to include only the first three factors for scale reliability factors as there must be more than 1 item for scale analysis.

**Scale reliability.** A test of scale reliability for the 18 items for the three factors was conducted. Each of the three factors was assessed individually, revealing a Cronbach's (1951) alpha of 0.80 for the *Personal Reading Value* factor (7 items), an  $\alpha$  of 0.78 for the *Social Text Response* construct (8 items), and an  $\alpha$  of 0.42 for



**Figure 6** Eigenvalues for Four Factor Analysis

the *Self-Concept* construct (3 items). All 18 items supported in the factor analysis revealed a Cronbach's alpha of  $\alpha = 0.83$ .

Further reliability testing generated a Cronbach's alpha of  $\alpha = .83$  for the 18-item MGMRP pre/post instrument for Phase III. Table 5 depicts the three factors, their items, and a unifying descriptor for the construct titles: Personal Reading Value, Social Text Response, and Self-Concept. The scale reliabilities are included as Cronbach alphas.

### Phase III: Design-Based Case Study (DbCS)

#### *Refining the Instructional Model/Adaptations for all Students*

The continuous collection of data and iterative analysis of field notes, audio recordings, Edmodo transcripts, and student artifacts helped refine the instructional model by identifying the inhibiting and enhancing factors that affected the progress towards the pedagogical goal. Although these adaptations were implemented for all four subunits (three face-to-face classrooms and virtual book club format), the need for these adaptations varied from context to context. Table 6 depicts the complete list of inhibiting and enhancing factors, adaptations, and their impact on the model.

**TABLE 5**  
**EFA Factor Loadings: MGMRP**

| Rotation Method                       |         | Oblique | Uniqueness |
|---------------------------------------|---------|---------|------------|
| Variance Accounted for after Rotation |         | 50.1%   |            |
| Item Loadings                         |         |         |            |
| Factor 1                              |         |         |            |
| Personal Reading Value                | Item 1  | 0.66    | 0.54       |
| $\alpha = .80$                        | Item 4  | 0.83    | 0.30       |
|                                       | Item 6  | 0.56    | 0.61       |
|                                       | Item 7  | 0.69    | 0.44       |
|                                       | Item 8  | 0.55    | 0.58       |
|                                       | Item 18 | 0.78    | 0.32       |
|                                       | Item 20 | 0.41    | 0.69       |
| Factor 2                              | Item 3  | 0.64    | 0.58       |
| Social Text Response                  | Item 5  | 0.60    | 0.43       |
| $\alpha = .78$                        | Item 9  | 0.53    | 0.50       |
|                                       | Item 11 | 0.69    | 0.49       |
|                                       | Item 12 | 0.52    | 0.57       |
|                                       | Item 15 | 0.53    | 0.49       |
|                                       | Item 16 | 0.66    | 0.50       |
|                                       | Item 17 | 0.51    | 0.61       |
| Factor 3                              | Item 2  | 0.70    | 0.45       |
| Self-Concept                          | Item 19 | 0.47    | 0.54       |
| $\alpha = .42$                        | Item 21 | 0.61    | 0.43       |

### ***Measuring Progress***

The pedagogical goal, increased reading motivation, was assessed through quantitative and qualitative assessments. Quantitative data included the pre/post scores of the MGMRP of students in Ms. James' classroom. Qualitative data include post-instruction interviews with students in all three classrooms.

### ***MGMRP: Independent-Samples T-Test***

Out of the three participating subunits, Ms. James' classroom was the only one that had pre-and post- MGMRP scores as both Ms. Peterson and Ms. Lane opted out of the third book club iteration due to end-of-year scheduling restraints. After Ms. James' students completed the MGMRP post-assessment,

**TABLE 6**  
**Adaptations to the Book Club Model**

|         | <b>Adaptations</b><br><i>What was changed?</i>                                | <b>Justification</b><br><i>Why was this changed?</i>   | <b>Findings</b><br><i>How this affected the model</i>  | <b>Implications</b><br><i>Use in the following cycle (S)</i> |
|---------|---|--|--|--|
| Cycle 1 | *Created bookmarks with discussion topics                                     | Teachers were initially concerned that there were no text-based questions for students to answer during the discussion         | Students used the bookmarks when they were stuck during the discussion   | Continued use in the following cycles                        |
|         | *Created a Wix website for students' book recommendations                     | Data from Phase I indicated that students would like book recommendations from their friends                                   | Students at O'Connell Middle School used the Wix website to create their book recommendations. Students at Shylo Elementary were unable to use the Wix website           | Continued and modified use during the following cycles       |
|         | Created calendars for students to keep track of reading and discussion topics | "I'm on '42 days ago' Wait, did you read past this? Page 43? I'm on 35? Then I can't talk." (Last Kids on Earth_ F2F_2/1/2018) | Students often used their calendar to know what they were supposed to read and discuss each day  | Continued use in the following cycles                        |
|         | Decreased the amount of time (per cycle) from 5 weeks to 4 weeks              | "I finished the book the first week of getting it. Me too." (Fever Code_ VBC_2/15/2018 - 2/22/2018)                            | Students would have a shorter cycle for the second and book club third iterations. However, students were rushed during the second iteration, so this was modified again | Modified during the following cycles                         |

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|         |   |  |   |  |
|---------|---|--|---|--|
| Cycle 2 | *Created a Google website for students' book recommendations      | Students at Shylo Elementary who were unable to use the Wix website were able to use the Google website to create their book recommendations | In order for students to add their recommendations to the Google site, they were given access to edit the website and edited portions that were not supposed to be edited | Continued and modified use during the following cycles |
|         | *Increased the amount of time (per cycle) from 4 weeks to 5 weeks | This time of the year began student-standardized testing, so students were unable to devote time to book club discussions in class           | Students needed more time to complete their books and discussions   | Continued use in the following cycle                   |
| Cycle 3 | *Shifted all groups to face-to-face discussion                    | Students from O'Connell Middle were unable to participate in Cycle 3   | All students from Shylo Elementary participated in a face-to-face discussion format   |  |

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an independent-samples t-test was conducted. This assessment was selected using a paired sample t-test because individual student data were anonymized in the Qualtrics platform. The independent-samples t-test compared the means of the pre-and post-assessment for one classroom.

Because the data set presented unequal sample sizes between the MGMRP pre ( $n = 24$ ) and post ( $n = 16$ ) assessments in Ms. James' class, an independent-samples t-test was conducted using Levene's Test for Equality of Variances. Figure 7 illustrates the descriptive statistics for the pre-and post- MGMRP assessment with Ms. James' students.

Findings indicate there was no significant difference in the MGMRP pre-assessment scores ( $M = 69.17$ ,  $SD = 12.94$ ) and post-assessment scores ( $M = 70.99$ ,  $SD = 14.37$ ) conditions;  $t(38) = -.417$ ,  $p = .679$ . However, the difference in sample size likely affects the overall p-value. Although these results suggest no significant difference between the MGMRP pre-and post-assessment scores with Ms. James' students, there was a slight increase in the overall mean score ( $M = 69.17$ ) and ( $M = 70.99$ ).



|       | Time | N  | Mean    | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|-------|------|----|---------|----------------|-----------------|
| Total | Pre  | 24 | 69.1667 | 12.93635       | 2.64062         |
|       | Post | 16 | 70.9875 | 14.37098       | 3.59275         |

**Figure 7** Descriptive Statistics for the Pre- and Post- MGMRP Assessment for Ms. James' Students.

### ***Student Post-Instruction Interviews***

Post-instruction interviews with students were conducted with 20% of permissioned student participants ( $n = 14$ ). The three teachers recommended a few students to complete interviews with the researcher to represent each subunit in the analysis. Five students from Miss Peterson's class, three from Miss Lane's class, and six from Miss James' class were interviewed. Each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded using a two-level coding process of Open and Focused Coding. Codes were analyzed using a constant comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1965; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Analysis of the post-instruction interviews with students revealed three main themes emerged from the focused coding and included (a) *significance of choice*, which was also an enhancing factor of the instructional model (47% of the responses); (b) *value of students' participation* (30% of the responses), which supports the unexpected outcome of students' preference of face-to-face discussions to the online discussions; and, (c) *importance of peer-to-peer discussion* (23% of the responses).

## **Discussion**

This multiphase mixed-method study aimed to understand and examine the reading motivation of sixth-grade students and students in the middle grades. More specifically, this study sought to (a) give voice to sixth-grade students regarding their reading preferences and how those preferences influence their motivation to read; (b) create a motivational survey that reliably and validly measures the reading motivation of students in the middle grades; and, (c) conduct and effectively refine a book club model using both face-to-face and virtual meeting groups with the goal of increased reading motivation.

## Theoretical Assertions

At the conclusion of this study, data from all three phases were analyzed using a cross-phase retrospective analysis, which allowed the researcher to "...analyze this comprehensive data set systematically while simultaneously documenting the grounds for particular inferences" (Gravemeijer & Cobb, 2006, p. 38). Additionally, the retrospective analysis of all data "...scrutinizes, and...looks for patterns that may explain the progress of students" (Gravemeijer & Cobb, 2006, p. 44). A cross-phase analysis (Stake, 2005) revealed four pedagogical assertions. These four assertions include: (a) Choice is important; (b) Peer-to-peer collaboration is influential; (c) Time and value are related; (d) Self-concept is complicated. Figure 10 lists the four pedagogical assertions generated from this study and the data leading to those assertions.

### *Choice is Important*

Results suggested that students would value books more if they were able to find a book they could 'get into' or even read some of their favorite books in class. One



**Figure 10** Four Pedagogical Assertions from the Multiphase Mixed Methods Study.

student stated, “[Reading would be more enjoyable if we could] read our own books in school and fully understand them” [S21\_3/15/17\_Interview].

### ***Peer-to-Peer Collaboration is Influential***

A person’s literacy reflects their forms of social interaction and, ultimately, their identity (Bartlett, 2007; Black, 2006; Gee, 1996, Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; McCarthy & Moje, 2002; Moje, 2000). Literacy is a social practice (Bakhtin, 1981; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1984). Likewise, the texts that adolescent students encounter cannot be separated from the social influences of their peers (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016).

### ***Time and Value are Related***

The student interviews suggest that students in the middle grades feel they would participate more in reading if they had independent time during school, considering that their time after school is generally limited. Likewise, the more time students devote to reading during school, the more their value of reading would likely increase.

### ***Self-Concept is Complicated***

Although many students consider themselves good readers, students’ reasoning for what makes someone a good reader varies. Factors about what makes one a good reader include perceptions of fluency, comprehension levels, testing ability, difficulty of the text, number of books read, and length of books read. One student responded, “I’m a good reader in my head, just not out loud” [S6\_3/9/17\_Interview].

## **Conclusion**

The findings indicate that students’ values and self-concepts as readers are influenced by the amount of time and offering of choice with reading. Their opportunities for collaboration and discussion positively influence students’ reading motivation, but in a format suited to their choice. Providing opportunities for students to participate in authentic reading experiences could positively influence middle-grade students’ motivation to read. These opportunities should allow students to select texts that appeal to them, discuss topics that interest them, and openly and honestly review and recommend texts to others.

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## MASTERS WINNER

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# NAVIGATING THE GAP BETWEEN SCRIPTED WRITING CURRICULA AND TEACHER EFFICACY: AN INQUIRY INTO TEACHERS' IMPLEMENTATION OF UNITS OF STUDY CURRICULUM

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### **Abstract**

*ESSA's focus on evidence-based practices has increased districts' reliance on prepackaged literacy curriculum. One program, Lucy Calkins' Units of Study, provides scripted lessons designed to ensure high quality writing instruction. Yet research shows that teachers feel most effective when purposefully combining methods based on their understandings of students' needs. This article discusses one school's experiences with scripted writing curriculum and its impact on teachers' freedom to enact practices born of their own professional understandings. These findings are relevant to district administrators as they consider adoption of new curricula and ways to communicate with and support teachers during implementation.*

*Keywords:* Self-efficacy, teacher efficacy, scripted curriculum, writing instruction, Units of Study, Lucy Calkins



Since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 linked federal monies to student performance on standardized tests, schools have faced increased pressure to provide high quality writing instruction. Unfortunately, many teachers attend teacher education programs that do not require courses focused on how to teach writing (Cutler & Graham, 2008; DeFauw, 2020; Hodges et al., 2019). Consequently, many teachers do not provide adequate time for students to write (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Graham, et al., 2012). This has led to underdeveloped literacy skills becoming “the number one reason why students are retained, assigned to special education, given long-term remedial services and why they fail to graduate from high school” (Schmoker, 2007, p. 488).

To combat the gap between student need and teacher preparation, districts increasingly turn to prepackaged curricula, designed to dictate what the teacher should do—and in some cases precisely what the teacher should say. Research is unclear about the impact of these programs. Scripted programs may sacrifice the key strategies needed for meaningful learning by focusing on subskills which are easily memorized and tested (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

This exploration of teachers’ experiences implementing the Lucy Calkins Units of Study (UOS) curriculum provides insight on the possible benefits and limitations of scripted materials, as well as approaches to support school personnel in its implementation.

## Theoretical Framework

Teacher efficacy is a “specific case of self-efficacy ... directed toward the teacher as an agent of student achievement” (Ross & Bruce, 2007, p. 50). Guskey and Passaro (1994) further defined teacher efficacy as “the teacher’s belief or conviction that they can influence how well students learn, even those who may be difficult or unmotivated” (p. 628). It is vital to note that self-efficacy is not a measure of how effective teachers are; self-efficacy refers to teachers’ perceptions of their own efficacy. Teacher self-efficacy is positively correlated with higher rates of student achievement (Goddard et al., 2004; Ross & Bruce, 2007).

The self-efficacy beliefs of teachers are important in studying curriculum implementation because, as Bandura (1986) noted, “People regulate their level and distribution of effort in accordance with the effects they expect their actions to have. As a result, their behavior is better predicted from their beliefs than from the actual consequences of their actions” (p. 129).

## Methodology

This study employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the personal and situational factors that affected teachers as they made sense of

their experience implementing a district-wide mandated adoption of the UOS writing program. The purpose of IPA is to emphasize the similarities and differences in the way a small, homogenous sample of participants experiences one particular event (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

The school site in this study was selected based on the school's likelihood to provide variety in teacher experiences while implementing the curriculum. From this site, participants were recruited from a prospect pool that included 12 third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers. The number of participants was limited to six teachers, in order to allow for the inductive logic of IPA, for well-developed themes to emerge, and to provide opportunities for cross-case analysis (Creswell, 2013). Table 1 highlights the participants' training and experience.

This study employed a semi-structured interview protocol, whereby the researcher modified initial questions and followed up as necessary based on participants' responses. This approach provided an in-depth view of how participants understood and experienced the implementation of the scripted writing curriculum. Interviews were audio recorded to allow for transcription and analysis. Through member checking and debriefing (Creswell, 2013), participants provided feedback on preliminary analysis to correct any discrepancies between their statements and the researcher's interpretation and to maintain the participants' voice and agency.

**TABLE 1**  
**Participant teaching experience**

| Pseudonym | Grade level | Years at current grade level | Years teaching | Highest degree obtained   |
|-----------|-------------|------------------------------|----------------|---|
| Julia     | 3           | 2                            | 20             | Bachelor's  |
| Melinda   | 3           | 4                            | 11             | Bachelor's<br>Language Arts minor,<br>Computer Science<br>certificate |
| Lexi      | 4           | 5                            | 16             | Master's<br>National Writing Project<br>Fellow                        |
| Tim       | 4           | 14                           | 23             | Bachelor's  |
| Rachel    | 5           | 7                            | 22             | Master's<br>Kindergarten,<br>Math, Social Studies<br>Endorsements     |
| Abby      | 5           | 2                            | 25             | Master's<br>Reading Endorsement                                       |

## Findings

While each participant's experience with UOS was unique, an analysis of the themes that emerged from their collective experiences provided an understanding of (a) the changes in participants' instructional philosophies and practices, and (b) the compromises participants made to balance time constraints and student needs with district mandates. These understandings answered the primary research question, how did elementary teachers at Oak Creek Elementary School (pseudonym) experience the required implementation of scripted writing materials in their classrooms?

The themes that emerged from an iterative analysis of participants' interviews are presented in Table 2 and discussed in the remainder of this section.

**TABLE 2**  
**Themes Related to the Research Question**

| Theme number | Theme   | Codes   |
|--------------|---|---|
| 1            | The narrative nature of the UOS materials was difficult to navigate.  | Materials, Preparation, Discomfort  |
| 2            | Teachers needed more training to support effective implementation.  | Training, Modelling, Implementation, Preparation  |
| 3            | Communications from the district regarding expectations for implementation were unclear and inconsistent.           | Purpose, Reasons For Adoption, Implementation, Adaptation, Climate, Fidelity, Discomfort  |
| 4            | Collaboration within and across grade levels would have positively contributed to implementation.                   | Modelling, Collaboration Vs Isolation, Implementation, Adaptation, Climate, Experience  |
| 5            | Competing demands on limited instructional time created stress for teachers and negatively affected implementation. | Time Constraints, Standardized Testing, Cohesion Vs Fragmentation, Implementation, Avoidance, Discomfort, Accountability, Scope And Sequence              |
| 6            | The district's directives hindered teachers' use of professional knowledge to meet students' needs.                 | Collaborative Writing, Student Needs, Student Engagement, Directives, Ownership, Adaptation, Fidelity, Accountability, Creativity, Experience, Hands Tied |
| 7            | UOS curriculum affected teachers' senses of self-efficacy.  | Self As Writer, Self-Efficacy, Ownership, Avoidance, Discomfort, Experience   |

### **Difficulty with the narrative nature of the UOS materials**

The teachers unanimously cited the UOS layout as inhibiting their ability to use the program effectively. Their major concern was that the UOS materials did not follow the format teachers had come to expect from their experiences with teachers' manuals. Rather than an easy-to-use guide, the UOS materials provided narrative description of how Lucy Calkins would teach the lesson. Both Julia and Lexi noted that the curriculum is "not user-friendly." Lexi expressed the difficulty she had in using UOS to guide instruction:

I had to read it and then go back and annotate it, since it wasn't my lesson. I don't have to do that for math. I can pick up the math manual and I can read that in 15 to 20 minutes tops and be ready to go and in the middle of the lesson I can glance down and be able to find my place and in the writing lesson, it was harder to do that.

Rachel also felt that the narrative nature of the materials hindered its use: "I think things are embedded and intertwined within the lesson, while the basal probably pulls things out a little bit more."

Teachers described spending hours getting familiar with the layout of the lessons, only to have to review them again prior to teaching. Rachel attributed the level of preparation to lesson plans that were "very detailed, very time-consuming to read." Julia also cited the complexity of the materials and stated that she "just can't think that anybody would think this would be a really good teacher's manual," suggesting that "maybe [Calkins] never intended for these to be a teacher's manual; she meant for them to be novel studies or book studies the teachers took part in, either in schools or at the college level."

### **The need for more training to support effective implementation**

All participants expressed frustration with the lack of training provided by the district during the initial implementation of UOS. The district informed teachers of the adoption at the end of the school year and provided materials for teachers to review over their summer break. As Rachel explained, "expecting me to read, plan, and be prepared to do this without too much training was difficult."

Select teachers, including three study participants, attended an in-person training with Calkins. Tim said the school administration "took one person from each grade level, went to some training, and then they were supposed to spread their knowledge to us." The district provided a brief training once school was

in session, but none of the teachers were aware of any effort to address program continuity with new teachers. As Abby stated, “I don’t think there’s going to be any more professional development [regarding UOS]. ... We don’t get professional development like we used to. It’s very quick, get it done, it’s over, move on to the next thing.”

For Julia, the district-provided training was too little, too late. She transferred to Oak Creek as the school began its second year using UOS and Julia said her introduction to the curriculum was entering her classroom to find “the books, the teacher’s manuals, were in my room.” It was only after Julia had already been teaching with the UOS materials that the district held a meeting for teachers new to the district.

Melinda experienced UOS implementation in two different districts. While Oak Creek expected teachers to fully implement the curriculum during the first year, Melinda’s prior district used a phased approach:

We watched some of the teachers pilot it and then the teachers went through the manuals and pinpointed some items. We spent that first semester watching other people do things and our goal was to get one unit done that year.

Lexi suggested that a phased implementation might have been helpful at Oak Creek, but even before starting with the units, “I would have some training in general about a writer’s workshop and how a writer’s workshop works.”

### **Unclear expectations from district**

Per interview data, real disparities existed between participants’ understandings of the district’s stance on how the program should be implemented. Melinda felt pressure to “read all the stuff every night and do it like [Calkins] did.” That pressure caused Melinda to feel “very scared and nervous” and wonder, “How am I going to memorize all of these things?” Upon later reflection, Melinda wondered whether some of the stress teachers felt was due to unclear communication from the district. After attending the in-person workshops with Calkins, Melinda concluded:

Some people felt like you’ve got to do a new lesson every day, and you don’t.... [Calkins] really stresses, you have to do what is good, best for your kids and if you don’t get to Bend 3, it’s okay. That was a

hard part for people because they felt like, well I have to get through the entire book.

Rachel stated that the message from the district was that teachers were “not really supposed to supplement or do anything beyond what is in the book.” Rachel tried to implement the materials with fidelity, but grew frustrated because she wasn’t sure the lessons were the best for her students. In discussing how she has adapted the materials to meet the needs of her students, Rachel seemed unsure whether adapting the materials went against the district’s directives: “Sometimes we hear that it’s okay to do that and other times it’s like no, you can’t stray.” Rachel felt that despite her adaptations, she still implemented the materials with fidelity because “even though I might stray from her words I don’t stray from the presented curriculum.”

The lack of communication between district administrators and teachers may have been partially due to teachers’ concerns that they would get in trouble for asking questions. Lexi described feeling shamed by administration for her concern that the materials required “a big time commitment every night to read these lessons.” The administration’s response was, according to Lexi, “You are professionals and this is not above the expectations of what should be expected for professionals.”

Assessment was another area where teachers noted the district’s inconsistent messaging. As Abby explained, a speaker at the district’s inservice told teachers not to worry about the grading. This caused a great amount of stress for Abby, who felt that grading was “something we needed to all talk about.” Lexi agreed that communication about grading expectations was lacking. She found it “hard to take a rubric score and put it as a percentage in the grade book” and felt that more guidance from the district would have helped teachers translate UOS assessments into report card grades.

### **Collaboration would have aided implementation**

Several participants described a school-wide shift away from collaboration following the introduction of the UOS materials. Lexi described how the district’s approach to implementing UOS reduced collaboration at Oak Creek:

There were definitely some people that wanted to help. They wanted to talk about it, but it seemed like they were more worried about what administration would say. It seemed like people were afraid

for them to find out if they were doing something that wasn't Lucy Calkins.

The lack of collaboration left some teachers feeling isolated, specifically Tim and Rachel, both of whom mentioned feeling as if they were "on an island." Tim felt collaboration across grade levels would have developed a deeper understanding of the program's scope and sequence, describing the need for "interaction between grade levels of what's being taught so you're consistent all the way through."

Julia said the district could have structured collaboration early in the adoption to give teachers more support during implementation. Abby added that teachers would have benefited from continuing collaboration as they implemented the materials in their own classrooms:

If we would have had release time to talk together as groups to say this is what's happening, this is how the kids are reacting, this is what worked, this is how I tweaked this, it would have been so much more helpful.

Melinda suggested that part of the reason teachers at Oak Creek did not seek out collaboration on their own was fear of being judged:

I think that [UOS] is intimidating and I think that people kind of hid a little bit because they were trying to figure this out and I think there's an element of, I thought I was a good writing teacher and maybe I'm not and I am a little embarrassed.

Eventually Melinda built trust with her grade-level team. As they began to discuss the UOS materials, Melinda said she found "better collaboration, it's more meaningful" than the collaboration in her former district.

### **Competing demands on limited instructional time**

Each participant cited time constraints as impeding their ability to effectively implement UOS. While all participants felt that too many demands on instructional time prohibited dedicating the required number of minutes to UOS, a few pointed out issues within UOS that created undesirable effects on student engagement or on their own ability to prepare and teach the materials.

**General demands on instruction time.** While all participants valued writing instruction, each cited competing requirements as impeding their ability

to provide instruction, especially when asked to follow a writing curriculum as complex as UOS. Tim summed it up, “It’s overwhelming. There’s almost way more than can actually fit in a day.”

Of primary concern was the time student spent taking standardized tests. Abby shared, “We’ve had a lot of testing at the beginning of the school year here, so I felt very interrupted.” She stated that UOS required “consistency of being able to do it every day,” but consistency was impossible when “some of these tests take different kids different times, so I have kids doing all sorts of things and there’s no continuity.” Julia also indicated that UOS was “put to the side” in favor of testing and other commitments: “To be completely honest, as the year went on, I still taught writing, but I didn’t follow the Lucy Calkins lessons, because ... things get so busy with the holidays and testing and you don’t have time.”

According to Tim, the district also mandated the use of Edmentum and its component Study Island, which are computer-based learning tools intended to provide students with online independent practice and assessment in language arts, math, social studies, and science. Tim said the addition of computer instruction along with UOS was too much:

There are so many other things they want us to do. I mean they’ve introduced things this year. They want us to spend 20 minutes on Edmentum. We need to spend so many minutes in Study Island, and that’s not even in teaching, that’s just on the Chromebooks.

***Issues within the UOS curriculum.*** Time constraints related to the UOS materials were also cited as negatively affecting the curriculum implementation. The primary concern among participants was the large amount of preparation required to teach a UOS lesson. Julia felt the program’s supplementary materials, which the district declared required reading, were a burden: “I’m up to my eyeballs with things to do—I don’t have time to read two extra books right now when I’m trying to read through a 10-page lesson before I teach it the next day.” Participants cited spending between 40 minutes and two hours preparing to teach one UOS lesson. Abby found the time commitment to be completely overwhelming: “I couldn’t go to church. I couldn’t attend family gatherings. It took a lot of time to understand it and prepare.”

Participants also indicated that they spent substantially more time grading writing than they had in the past because of the UOS guidelines. Even though the district gave them a release day for grading, Abby said when she taught UOS for middle school at a previous district she “had 150 kids and I might have gotten 30 papers graded and the rest of it was on my time.”



Abby said one of the effects of the extra grading was that several middle school language arts teachers left the previous district: “If you look across the subject areas, [the grading] wasn’t equitable. You couldn’t do it.”

Another issue was the amount of time required to teach using UOS. When the district introduced the curriculum, Rachel knew teachers would experience problems finding enough time to implement the program with fidelity:

We were supposed to do it I believe four days a week, for 40 minutes minimum, which is very difficult in the elementary school when you’re also told that you have to do X amount of time on reading every day, and X amount of time on math every day.

Rachel summed up the frustration, saying teachers were “feeling pulled in every direction, and you pull a rubber band long enough, a rubber band breaks.”

### **District’s directives hindered teachers’ use of professional knowledge**

Participants valued freedom to use their professional knowledge to adapt instruction to meet students’ needs, but felt that the district’s mandates prohibited them from varying from the prescriptive nature of UOS. Rachel felt that using the UOS materials to the exclusion of everything else was counterintuitive: “Why would you not let [teachers] take the best of many programs, put it together and let them be creative with various programs to help the students be successful in writing?”

Each participant adapted the materials in some way, despite believing that such adaption would incur disapproval from district administrators. The amount of adaptation varied from Abby, who said, “Calkins drives [instruction], but I certainly haven’t thrown away everything I learned about writing,” to Rachel, who said, “I have my own binder with my own writings or student examples or sentences, and sticky notes, and things to help me so that the lesson is more mine than [Calkins’s].” Teachers stated a variety of reasons for adapting the materials, including the method of implementation, students’ differing abilities and interests, and their own purposes for teaching writing.

The curriculum was implemented simultaneously across all grade levels. As a result, students missed out on foundational elements of the program that would have been taught in previous grades. Abby said this lack of foundation made the curriculum “very difficult” for the students:

They did their best to try to meet expectations, but it's always "They're going to catch up, we're going to implement this now and by the time these kids get to sixth grade they'll know what they're doing." But we are actually operating in those gaps where they don't know it.

Rachel concurred, stating that simultaneous implementation meant students at the upper grades were not ready for the materials. She said she understood "the stretch" but felt that the students "needed to have started in third grade because that's where our kids [were] at that time. I think we were expecting too much, too soon."

Participants also felt that UOS could not support students' specific needs. Julia called this "a great hypocrisy in education," adding, "You can't be stuck to a calendar that you have to follow and still truly differentiate to meet the needs of your kids."

Participants also adapted UOS when it did not address their own purposes for teaching writing. All participants felt it was important that students enjoyed writing. Julia said the directive to follow UOS affected the school climate because teachers were "upset and felt that the things that they knew were valuable for kids, or that kids looked forward to every year because they remember when their brother did it, and now they didn't get to do that." While Julia acknowledged that some of those activities may not have been "necessarily a super standards-packed lesson," she asserted that her students were "still kids and they should still have fun."

Participants felt the need to adapt UOS when they felt it did not prepare students to write for purposes other than school. Julia expressed this adamantly:

If my kids are not writing complete sentences, we're going to learn how to write complete sentences. I'm sorry if that's not the exact lesson of Calkins, but they need to be able to speak and write in complete sentences for everything they do in life, from a job interview to a discussion with a colleague to tenth grade math. It's something they have to do and it would be a disservice to them if I didn't make sure they could do that.

Overall, participants wished that administrators recognized the need to adapt instruction to meet students' needs and not insisted UOS be followed as written. As Rachel stated, "I don't think there's one program out there that addresses

every single skill that a student may need. There's always some supplementation needed." Abby felt that having a writing curriculum to teach strategies was important, but students needed to apply those strategies in ways that made sense for them.

### **The Units of Study curriculum affected teachers' senses of self-efficacy**

Participants proved to be reflective practitioners who connected student learning to their own efforts as teachers. In discussing self-efficacy throughout the interviews participants were encouraged to compare how effective they felt before, during, and after implementing UOS. Overall, participant indicated that they felt an initial drop in self-efficacy as they attempted to reconcile the new materials with their previous methods of teaching writing.

Most participants felt a greater sense of self-efficacy after using the curriculum for four years. Abby said the program "expanded our toolbox" and that the students' "writing got so much more powerful. It wasn't just a piece; [students] were invested in it." As evidenced by Lexi's statement that she "made a big impact on [students] when we did writing," Lexi had a strong sense of self-efficacy prior to the adoption of the program. Lexi gauged her efficacy before UOS as an eight on a 10-point scale. Unlike Abby, Lexi felt a temporary drop in self-efficacy as the district implemented UOS, explaining that she was "always kind of down on myself.... I mean I felt like I was still a good teacher, but maybe a six or seven [on a 10-point scale]." Lexi stated that once she "found balance" between UOS and her own style of teaching, she "felt good about that." Julia also attributed a rise in self-efficacy to such balance. She described writing instruction as having always been her weakest area and said she felt even less effective during the first year of using UOS. Julia recognized the transactional process that occurred when she gained familiarity with the materials:

As I use it more and become more familiar with it that it is helping me to be more effective, but also as I'm using it and becoming more familiar with it, I'm also tweaking it to what I need it to be much more.

Melinda indicated that sometimes efficacy is about changing the definition of learning: "We're changing the idea of what writing is and we want to be more student-driven rather than teacher-driven." This theme was evident in Melinda's discussion of her self-efficacy. Before the district adopted UOS, Melinda says she "never once doubted myself. I had good evaluations, I was in a comfortable

place.” Reflecting back, Melinda said she was “definitely not” an effective teacher. Before UOS Melinda defined conferences as “teacher swoops in, helps [students] fix all the mistakes and that’s not what a conference is at all.” Before UOS she doubted “a kid said more than five words at the conference.” Melinda’s new approach is “definitely student led. I am there to write notes so that I can make mini-lessons or make sure that they have the tools they need to be successful.” She stated that the shift in responsibility for the writing helped her be more effective in making “the student not just a person sitting in my class but someone who is here ready to learn and participating and be active in their learning.”

Although most participants indicated feeling increased self-efficacy compared to before the UOS curriculum, Rachel and Tim stood out as exceptions. Rachel stated that “I still feel like I was a better writing teacher prior to the program.” She attributed her efficacy to her own abilities, “part of it was me.” She had her own “toolbox” and “could read a piece of their writing and give feedback and know how to stretch them.” Similarly, UOS did not increase Tim’s sense of self-efficacy. He admitted that he “always struggled at writing, so it’s always been something that’s been difficult for me to teach.” He noted a drop in his efficacy during the initial year of the adoption: “As we went through that year [students] would come out weaker, rather than stronger, because [teaching writing] would be what I would avoid.” Although Tim felt that “once we were using my narratives I became more effective,” he said overall his self-efficacy is at the same level it was before UOS. Like Rachel, Tim felt that the district’s mandates to use only UOS affected his ability to teach effectively: “I had this wide range of materials to use and now I just have [UOS].” Tim also felt that he “could be more effective with better training.”

## **Implications for Practice**

While the focus of this study was on the UOS curriculum, the data provides important information for districts as they consider processes for implementing any new curricula. Some of the difficulties faced by this study’s participants were due to the district’s adoption timeline. Rather than simultaneously adopting the curriculum at all levels, a phased adoption would allow students to build the requisite skills to succeed as they advance grade levels. Goldsmith et al. (2000) cautioned that such grade-by-grade implementation means that students who are in the initial cohort will progress through the system as perpetual guinea pigs, as each successive teacher uses the material for the first time. This can be partially counteracted by inviting the teachers who participate in the earliest phases of adoption to serve as mentors for those who come after. Teachers could

also partner for looping, where the previous grade-level teacher co-teaches with next grade level.

By far the largest concern participants raised was lack of training before and during the implementation. Teachers need time to digest complex curricula, especially when the curriculum requires a shift in teaching philosophy. Districts need to consider how to support teachers throughout the adoption. While disseminating information is a necessary part of introducing new curriculum to teachers, trainings should not be one sided. Overview sessions should share the program's philosophy, scope and sequence, and unit structure. Following this overview session, teachers should review the materials at their leisure and return for follow-up sessions that focus on teacher-determined topics.

Participants indicated collaboration impacts to their ability to enact new curriculum. Professional learning communities (PLCs) could be established to engage teachers with program's philosophical underpinnings. Whereas Julia, as a new teacher in the district, had those materials thrust at her after the school year was already underway, a better model would be to use those materials as the basis for PLC topics during the year prior to implementation. Providing opportunities for teachers to discuss materials and share their concerns in a low-risk environment once implementation is underway would allow teachers to support one another as they begin to use the materials. As Julia's experience illustrates, new teachers need as much time to process the material as was given to teachers during the initial implementation. One suggestion would be to pair new teachers with grade-level peers, who would co-teach, model best practices, and provide feedback as the new teacher gradually takes the lead.

Participants struggled to reconcile district mandates with student needs. While districts must make large-scale decisions about curriculum, administrators would be wise to respect teachers' professional expertise. Mandates to maintain a standardized pace or follow a script verbatim do not take into account individual student needs, other demands on instructional time, nor the teachers' professional knowledge. Teachers must be encouraged to adapt pace to ensure student proficiency, which may require combining or excluding lessons that target skills the students already possess or spending extra time on areas where students struggle. Districts must consider how the new curriculum fits within the existing framework and offer strategies for fitting new demands into an already overcrowded day. Finally, teachers must be encouraged to internalize aspects of new curricula to inform their instructional decision making, rather than blindly following scripted curricula.

As districts consider curricular adoptions, it is important to consider the historical context of reform initiatives. In this study, participants suffered from

reform fatigue due to a barrage of changes that lacked continuity of support. Participants expressed the desire to improve their practice through materials that would help them further their expertise. Their resistance to UOS stemmed from the district's previous failures to support sustained change and the current failure to explain how this change was important. Open discussions comparing new materials to current practice and exploration of how new materials can dovetail with and build upon past practices would facilitate teachers' acceptance.

## Directions for Future Research

While this study was able to identify several factors that impeded the effective implementation of UOS within the study context, it would be helpful to compare these findings to a school that has experienced a more successful implementation. Such a study could identify specific strategies that teachers found helpful and make recommendations to districts considering adopting the program. It would also be beneficial to take a deeper look into the challenges teachers face during the first year of implementation. Furthermore, researchers need to explore the tension between prescriptive curricula and teacher autonomy.

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# TRENDS AND ISSUES IN LITERACY: A 25-YEAR ANALYSIS OF THE WHAT'S HOT IN LITERACY SURVEY

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## **Abstract**

*For a quarter of a century the annual What's Hot, What's Not in Literacy Survey has interviewed literacy leaders to identify the literacy topics at the center of current attention. In this article the 25 years of longitudinal survey data are analyzed to identify the topics that were: (a) deemed the "hottest" and "coldest", (b) received the most attention while being featured on the survey, and (c) ranked "should be hot" most frequently across the survey's history. Findings indicate that the "hottest" topics were assessment and accountability, English language learners, and adolescent literacy, while the "coldest" topic was motivation and reader engagement. Topics receiving the highest amounts of attention while being featured on the survey were the science of teaching reading and dyslexia. Most rated topics for "should be hot" were English language learners, adolescent literacy, comprehension, and struggling readers. Historical context for each of these topics is offered.*

*Keywords:* Adolescent literacy, assessment, comprehension, dyslexia, English language learners, literacy issues, literacy trends, motivation, science of teaching reading



For 25 years the annual *What's Hot, What's Not in Literacy Survey* has highlighted the issues and trends receiving the most attention in the field. Although the survey's creator, Dr. Jack Cassidy, has invited various literacy researchers to co-author the survey with him throughout the survey's history, the methodology has always remained the same. Each year a diverse group of 25 literacy leaders form a purposive sampling (Krueger & Casey, 2014)—although 22 literacy leaders were used for the first survey in 1997 (Cassidy & Wenrich, 1997). The literacy leaders have always been chosen from various geographic areas in the United States, Canada, and outside North America. The percentage of literacy leaders from any geographic area has corresponded to the percentage of members from the International Literacy Association (ILA) and Association of Literacy Educators and Researchers (ALER) in those areas. The literacy leaders come from various age groups, ethnicities, literacy expertise, and job categories (e.g., literacy researchers, school administrators, K-12 educators, and university professors). The literacy leaders selected have also been leaders in various organizations of literacy professionals (e.g., ILA and ALER) and have held national or international perspectives on literacy.

The topics listed on the first survey in 1997 (Cassidy & Wenrich, 1997) were chosen by “consulting professional journals and conference programs, articles in popular media, and more generic education publications” (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2000/2001, p. 1). Each year since, the list of topics on the survey have been updated by asking the previous year's respondents to suggest additions, deletions, and overall revisions. The number of topics featured on the annual survey have always been approximately 30 items.

The survey data has always been collected through individual interviews with each literacy leader. The interviews consist of each topic on the survey being read aloud by a member of the research team. The literacy expert then replies by stating whether the given topic is the center of current attention (i.e., hot or not hot) and whether the topic should be receiving attention for that given year (i.e., should be hot or should not be hot). A common misconception over the past 25 years has been that “hot” means the same as “important”; in fact, it has never meant this.

The interview data has always been tallied to identify consensus among the literacy leaders. Three levels are used to report the findings: (a) “extremely hot” or “extremely cold” (100% consensus), (b) “very hot” or “very cold” (75% consensus), and (c) “hot” or “cold” (50% consensus). Items are identified as “should be hot” or “should not be hot” if at least 50% of the respondents agree. It should be noted that “should be hot” and “should not be hot” was added to

the 2000 survey (Cassidy & Cassidy, 1999/2000, p. 28) and it has remained a permanent feature since.

Growing from a 500-word column in *Reading Today* (Cassidy & Wenrich, 1997) to being a much lengthier (approximately 6,500 words) annual publication in the increasingly research-focused journal, *Literacy Research and Instruction* (a publication of ALER), the *What's Hot in Literacy* survey has gathered 25 years of longitudinal data. In this article, the longitudinal data for the *What's Hot, What's Not in Literacy Survey* is analyzed to identify the topics that were: (a) deemed the “hottest” and “coldest” across 25 years of survey data, (b) received the most attention while being featured on the survey, and (c) ranked “should be hot” most frequently across the survey’s history. Additionally, historical context for the featured topics is offered.

### **Analysis of the Data**

Analysis of the longitudinal data began by entering all 25 years of survey data (i.e., 80 topics and their rankings) into a database. Items were given an annual point value based on the original ranking for that given year. A ranking of “hot” or “not hot” received one point, a ranking of “very hot” or “cold” received two points, and a ranking of “extremely hot” or “extremely cold” received three points. These annual points were totaled for each item, giving an overall point total across the 25-year history of the survey for each item ever listed on the survey form. In this article, these scores are referred to as overall “hot” or “cold” scores. Such scores identified the “hottest” and “coldest” topics across the survey’s 25-year history.

Next, the research team recognized that not all 80 items were featured on each of the 25 annual surveys. Therefore, the team of researchers decided to identify the topics that received the highest amounts of attention while being featured on the survey. This was accomplished by dividing the overall “hot” and “cold” scores of each item by the total number of years that item was featured on the survey. In this article, such scores are referred to as “intensity scores” because they indicate the intensity of the attention being paid to each item during the time that it was featured on the annual survey. For example, the topic of “comprehension (online/offline)” had an overall “hot” score of 24 and was featured on the survey all of the 25 years. When dividing 24 by 25, the “intensity score” was a .96

Lastly, the research team identified the topics most highly ranked “should be hot” across the survey’s history. Although items are identified as “should be hot” or “should not be hot” if at least 50% of the respondents agree, they are reported in the annual survey as reaching 50%, 75%, or 100% consensus among

the literacy leaders. Items were given a point value based on the original consensus for that given year. The following points were applied: one point for 50% consensus, two points for 75% consensus, and three points for 100% consensus. These annual points were totaled for each item, giving an overall point total for each item featured across the survey's history. These point totals are referred to as overall "should be hot" and overall "should not be hot" scores.

## The Findings

Findings of all three analyses are listed in Appendix A. The overall "hot" scores ranged between 0 to 36. Three topics received overall "hot" scores over 30; falling in the top 3% of the 80 items ever featured on the survey. These topics, in ranked order, included the following: (a) *assessment and accountability* (with an overall "hot" score of 36), (b) *English language learners* (with an overall "hot" score of 32), and (c) *adolescent literacy* (with an overall "hot" score of 30). Two of these items, *English language learners* (with overall "should be hot" score of 59) and *adolescent literacy* (with overall "should be hot" score of 56) were also the most highly ranked "should be hot" items across the survey's history; as was *comprehension (online/offline)* (with overall "should be hot" score of 59) and *struggling readers* (with overall "should be hot" score of 51).

Two topics stood out when examining the data for topics that received the highest amounts of attention while being featured on the survey. These topics were the *Science of Teaching Reading* (with an intensity score of 2.5) and *dyslexia* (with an intensity score of 2). Finally, one topic stood out as the "coldest"—*motivation and reader engagement* (with an overall "cold" score of 32). In the following sections, each of these topics are explored further through a historical lens and a discussion of the associated research.

## The Hottest Topics

### Assessment and Accountability

The topics of *assessment and accountability*, *high-stakes assessment*, and *high-stakes assessment/CCSS* were all featured during different years of the survey and were combined for this study's analysis of longitudinal data. For the purpose of this article, this combination of topics is being referred to as the larger label of *assessment and accountability*. The decision to combine these topics into one was made because previous publications summarizing the results of the *What's Hot in Literacy Survey* drew attention to the use of high-stakes assessments within accountability models. For example, in 2000/2001 Cassidy and Cassidy wrote

“[h]igh-stakes assessment is very much related to state/provincial/national assessment but focuses on those assessments in which the results cause important decisions to be made about a student, school, or school district” (p. 18). The current research team agreed that these three topics represented the idea of *assessment and accountability* during the years that they were featured on the *What’s Hot in Literacy survey*.

The topics being labeled as *assessment and accountability* were featured on the *What’s Hot in Literacy Survey* for 23 out of 25 years of the survey. Receiving the highest overall “hot” score of 36 points, the topic has certainly been the center of much attention. Although the topic of *assessment and accountability* is the hottest topic over the last 25 years, literacy panelists did not always feel that the topic “should be hot”. In the analysis of longitudinal data, the topic received an overall “should be hot” score of 5 and an overall “should not be hot” score of 21. Furthermore, those that ranked the topic as “should be hot” did not always do so because they thought it enforced best practice. Illustrating this in the 2009 publication, Cassidy and Cassidy share that “...one of the literacy leaders stated that although he was not an advocate of high-stakes assessment, he believed that the topic ‘should be hot’ because more research was needed on the effects of high-stakes assessment” (p. 9). In the 2004 publication, Cassidy and Cassidy explain that this attention had two distinct sides as “[c]ritics believe that no one test should be used alone to make such decisions. Advocates believe that such assessments enforce greater accountability among all the educational stakeholders” (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2003/2004, p. 4).

Legislation played a key role in shining the spotlight on the topic of *assessment and accountability*. In the 2004 *What’s Hot in Literacy Survey*, Cassidy and Cassidy (2003/2004) explain that “New federal legislation in the United States has resulted in such assessments becoming mandatory” (p. 4). High-stakes tests were created to (a) ensure that students are progressing towards grade level curricular objectives, (b) promote systematic data collection and comparable achievement information, and (c) evaluate the achievement gap between majority and minority populations (Ortlieb, 2012). In order to enhance literacy teaching and learning though, high-stakes assessments must: (a) inform curricular planning through data as a starting point to achieve specific curricular goals and outcomes; (b) identify students’ strengths and areas for improvement in language and literacy learning; (c) engage teachers, specialists/coaches, and administrators in considerations of differentiated literacy planning and instruction; and (d) collaborate with school communities/families/stakeholders to understand and support students through the testing process and associated learning opportunities (Ortlieb, 2012). Nonetheless, the topic of accountability has taken many

forms—from teacher evaluations being linked to students’ standardized test score average, to student retention (holding students back in a grade level), which has been proven to be counterproductive and have a negative effect on achievement (Hattie, 2009).

## English Language Learners

English language learners (ELLs), also included on the survey as English as a Second Language and emergent multilingual learners, was one of four topics featured on the *What’s Hot in Literacy Survey* for all 25 years: the other three being comprehension (online/offline), phonemic awareness and phonics, and word knowledge/vocabulary. ELLs are the second “hottest” topic in the survey’s 25-year history, with it being “hot” or “very hot” each year except the survey years of 2000 (Cassidy & Cassidy, 1999/2000) and 2001 (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2000/2001). The topic had an “overall hot” score of 32. Not only were ELLs receiving a large amount of attention over the last quarter of a century, but experts consistently ranked the topic as “should be hot”. In fact, the topic reached an overall “should be hot” score of 59 causing a tie with the topic of comprehension (online/offline) for most highly ranked “should be hot” item across the survey’s history.

Over the survey’s history, many events have been credited for drawing attention to the topic of ELLs. In the 2005 publication, Cassidy and Cassidy (2004/2005) write “[t]he formation of the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth, chaired by Timothy Shanahan, undoubtedly contributed to the attention that this topic is receiving” (p. 9). The work completed by the panel included a “review of almost 2000 documents. In addition, two public outreach meetings were held in order to gather information from the education community and other stakeholders... [and] other information sessions were held in conjunction with national conferences of professional organizations” (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2021, para. 2). In 2006 the panel published its report titled, *Developing Literacy in Second-Language Learners*. The publication was edited by Diane August and Timothy Shanahan, and the executive summary (August & Shanahan, 2006) lists the major findings of the report as the following: (a) instruction in the reading components identified by the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) has clear benefits for ELLs; (b) instruction for ELLs needs to include more than the five key reading components, it should also include oral proficiency; (c) skills in the first language can facilitate literacy development in English; (d) individual differences contribute to literacy development in English; (e) most assessments poorly assess individual strengths and weaknesses; and (f) home language experiences can have a positive impact on

literacy achievement. This work continues to impact the literacy field and is even included within some state teacher preparation standards, such as the Science of Teaching Reading Standards in Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2020).

Later, the 2019 survey (Cassidy et al., 2019) credited predictions made from the 2013 U.S. Census Bureau data for drawing attention to the topic of ELLs. Cassidy and colleagues (2019) wrote, “[a]lthough the United States has always been a multilingual nation, there has been an increase in the number of individuals (five years old or older) who speak languages other than English at home” (p. 8). Referring to the data of the U.S. Census Bureau (2013), Cassidy et al. (2019) share that the data “reports a 158.2 percent increase between the years of 1980 and 2010. These growing numbers give reason to expect [future] increases...” (p. 8). Most recently, the 2020 Census confirmed a more diverse population, with the population identifying as “white” decreasing by 8.6% since 2010 (United States Census Bureau, 2021). Such findings give reason to expect an even more diverse population by the next Census.

Considering all of the annual *What's Hot in Literacy* survey publications, the most developed discussions exploring ELLs are found in the 2017 (Cassidy et al., 2017) and 2019 (Cassidy et al., 2019) publications. In 2017, Cassidy and colleagues asked “why has more progress not been made?” (p. 317). That same question was repeated in the 2019 publication (Cassidy et al., 2019). Answers to this question for both years focused on many reasons, one being the “box problem” (Domínguez & Gutiérrez, 2015, p. 130), or “the tendency of thinking about [ELLs] as one large homogenous group that conflates distinct groups of people with varied backgrounds who bring different skills and resources into the classroom” (Cassidy et al., 2017, p. 317). Furthermore, “fitting all English learners into one ‘box’ makes it difficult to develop teaching practices that account for students’ literacy strengths, unique linguistic repertoires, histories, and interests” (Cassidy et al., 2017, p. 317). Acting upon the “box problem”, specifically the problem of overlooking students’ unique linguistic repertoires, in the 2021 publication Cassidy et al., (2021) share that, “many of the participants for this year mentioned that the phrase *English language learners* holds a high concentration on teaching the English language to speakers of other languages” (p. 10) and then explains that the term *cultural and linguistic diversity in literacy* “shifts the literacy field into being more culturally competent by discussing the dynamic complexities of all speakers’ communicative repertoires, ways of leveraging students’ cultural capital within the classroom, and uses of all languages as resources for learning” (Cassidy et al., 2021, p. 10). Such conversations highlight that each reader has dimensions that make them unique, and one-size-fits all programs continue to promulgate the “box problem”.

## Adolescent Literacy

Reaching an “overall hot score” of 30 and an overall “should be hot” score of 56, adolescent literacy had the third highest overall “hot” score and overall “should be hot” score. The topic joined the list in 2001 and was ranked “hot” or “very hot” each year until the 2021 survey (Cassidy et al., 2021) when the topic was ranked as “not hot” for the first time since being featured on the survey. Attention toward the topic peaked in 2007 when it was ranked as “extremely hot”. Additionally, from 2003 to 2017 (except for the year of 2011) the literacy experts agreed with 100% consensus that the topic of adolescent literacy “should be hot”.

Over the last quarter of a century, the annual *What's Hot in Literacy* publications have noted that legislation and other factors played key roles in the topic's increased attention. In the 2006 publication, Cassidy and Cassidy (2005/2006) wrote, “the Bush legislation also contributed to the increased attention... [as] part of the No Child Left Behind legislation, millions of dollars have been proposed for a High School Initiative, and money has actually been allocated for a striving readers program” (p. 9). Four years later in the 2010 publication, Cassidy and Cassidy (2010) connected these efforts to explain why struggling/striving readers (grades 4 and above) were then a “very hot” topic. Other contributors to the topic's increased attention mentioned over the years have included the following:

- “funding being provided from private sources such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation” (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2005/2006, p. 9)
- “the excessive high school dropout rate in the United States, coupled with some discouraging scores by U.S. adolescents on international assessments of literacy” (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2009, p. 9)
- advocacy efforts of the Alliance for Excellent Education, including the organization's 2004 report *Reading Next- A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York* (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2010)
- Carnegie Corporation of New York's five-year study that examined the literacy skills of students in grades 4 through 12 titled, *A Time to Act: An Agenda for Advancing Adolescent Literacy for College and Career Success* (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2010)
- the Common Core State Standards and a strong focus on career readiness (Cassidy & Grote-Garcia, 2013)
- “the impact of social media, multimodal texts, and emerging technologies on literacy identities” (Cassidy et al., 2018, p. 5)

Since its introduction on the *What's Hot in Literacy* survey in 2001, the topic of *adolescent literacy* has been a mainstay as a hot topic—that is until the survey year of 2021 (Cassidy et al., 2021). Cassidy and colleagues (2021) explain that “[i]t is not so much that adolescent literacy isn’t ‘hot’, it is just that it is losing steam as a stand alone topic” (p. 11). Furthermore, they partially contribute this diversion of attention to “the renewed focus on early literacy skills, the science of teaching reading (in the early years), and related systematic and vertically aligned programming” (Cassidy et al., 2021, p. 11). It appears that the intensive focus on the science of teaching reading is doing more than placing a narrow focus on phonics instruction, it also seems to be pulling focus away from topics connected to upper grades such as adolescent literacy.

### Science of Teaching Reading

The science of teaching reading (STR) was ranked “very hot” in 2020 (Cassidy et al., 2020) and “extremely hot” in 2021 (Cassidy et al., 2021). In the analysis of longitudinal data, the STR reached an “intensity” score of 2.5, which was the highest of all 80 topics listed—indicating the large amounts of attention given to the topic during the two years it has been featured on the list. Additionally, the literacy experts interviewed during those two years believed that the topic “should be hot”, but the ranking was not unanimous, and it included some hesitation (Cassidy et al., 2021). Specifically, Cassidy et al. (2021) share that “[f]ourteen of the twenty-five participants (56%) agreed that the topic ‘should be hot’—leaving 44% of the participants stating that the STR should not be the center of current attention” (p. 5). The previous year, responses were slightly different with fifteen of the 25 participants (60%) agreeing that the topic “should be hot” (Cassidy et al., 2020). Illustrating the hesitation with ranking the topic, it is explained in the 2021 publication that,

[d]uring the interviews, participants with either viewpoint expressed difficulty with this ranking [of ‘should be hot’ or ‘should not be hot’] making statements similar to the following: “of course we should be paying attention to literacy research; however, the way STR is currently being framed and acted upon should NOT be our current focus”. (Cassidy et al., 2021, p. 5)

As illustrated by the hesitation expressed by some of the 2021 participants (Cassidy et al., 2021), the STR has faced some backlash for ignoring the full body of research establishing how best to teach reading and instead referencing a



single approach to reading instruction (i.e., phonics instruction) (Calkins, 2020; David et al., 2020; National Education Policy Center and Education Deans for Justice and Equity, 2020). Other concerns surrounding the STR include, but are not limited to the following: (a) the selection and design of instructional practices solely on the basis of basic research (Shanahan, 2020), (b) the silencing of teacher educator voices rather than inviting them to collectively explore possibilities for reimagining teacher preparation (Hoffman et al., 2020), and (c) the growing number of U.S. states requiring educators (including professors) to attend professional development using Moat’s commercial LETRS program despite the fact that the Institute of Education Sciences found the program to have almost no effects on educators or student achievement (Garet et al., 2008). These concerns seem to point to one overall theme—when it comes to the STR, it seems that the full body of research and those who are familiar with that research are not always consulted.

Over the last 25 years, the annual survey has identified several patterns among the “hottest” topics. One of these patterns is that a single topic can influence the entire list. For example, the 2004 survey (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2003/2004) noted that the National Reading Panel laid the groundwork for President Bush’s reading initiatives within the No Child Left Behind legislation and influenced the “hottest” topics of that year (i.e., comprehension, direct instruction, early intervention, fluency, high-stakes assessment, phonemic awareness, phonics, and scientific evidence-based reading research and instruction). That pattern began to wane by the 2009 survey (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2009). Likewise, the 2015 survey (Cassidy & Grote-Garcia, 2014) noted another pattern by stating,

[o]ne of the unintended consequences of the laser-like focus on CCSS [Common Core State Standards] is the seeming lack of attention on students who have literacy difficulties. Topics related to providing support for problem readers and writers are decidedly ‘not hot’ (e.g. early intervention; literacy coaches/reading coaches/reading specialists; motivation/engagement; RTI/differentiated instruction; and struggling readers, grades 4 and above). (p. 11–12)

The CCSS and related topics continued to be hot through 2017 (Cassidy et al., 2017). Following CCSS, the focus was placed on reading difficulties and eventually the STR. And the STR seems to be the topic influencing the 2020 (Cassidy et al., 2020) and 2021 (Cassidy et al., 2021) lists. Topics such as dyslexia, phonics/phonemic awareness, struggling readers, and teacher preparation have all been ranked “hot” or “very hot” during those two survey years. With the STR having

the highest “intensity” score (i.e., 2.5), it is likely that our schools and teacher preparation programs will continue to see its impact for some time.

## Dyslexia

Like the STR, dyslexia was also featured on the survey in 2020 (Cassidy et al., 2020) and 2021 (Cassidy et al., 2021). The topic was ranked as “very hot” for both years. Furthermore, in 2020 dyslexia was ranked as “should be hot” while in 2021 the topic was downgraded to “should not be hot”. An explanation of this change of ranking partly resides within the concern that dyslexia is “changing literacy instruction for all students in some states” (Cassidy et al., 2021, p. 6), when in reality (according to Elliott, 2020) “dyslexia prevalence figures [range] from as low as 4–8% to as high as 17–21%” (Cassidy et al., 2021, p. 6). Reflecting upon dyslexia’s “intensity” for two years, the longitudinal data indicated that the topic had an “intensity” score of 2—the second highest in the survey’s 25-year history.

The *What’s Hot in Literacy* survey not only gages the attention being given to topics each year, but it also provides a brief overview of that attention by discussing the associated products produced (e.g., publications, podcast, and presentations). In 2020, the *What’s Hot in Literacy* publication (Cassidy et al., 2020) discussed some changes in the field of dyslexia, specifically with state legislation. For example, referring to the work of Duffort (2020), Cassidy and colleagues (2020) shared that “[c]oncerns were raised about a lack of access to screening and phonics instruction resulting in corrective actions being required through state legislative action” (p. 6). Furthermore, “[s]ome states like Vermont and Ohio have required that teachers undergo professional development related to identifying and evaluating students with learning disabilities as well as how to teach children with dyslexia how to read” (Cassidy et al., 2020, p. 6). Although the 2020 publication reported changes to some states’ legislation, Morin (2021) shares on the website of *Understood* (<https://www.understood.org>) that even a year later, some states still do not have any legislation concerning dyslexia. Furthermore, Morin shares that legislation varies among states as far as requirements of teacher education programs, funding for K-12 dyslexia programs, as well as state dyslexia handbooks and procedures.

Both the 2020 and 2021 publications stressed the importance of individualized instruction. While emphasizing the words of Ortlieb and Schatz (2020), Cassidy and colleagues (2020) stated that, “all children, including those who have been diagnosed with dyslexia, require instructional plans that are tailored to their needs, strengths, and other affective domains to ensure optimal literacy development and lifelong learning” (p. 6). Furthermore, “[n]o two learners are the same despite having synonymous labels, nor should these labels define

people's lives (Vedder, 1993); skill sets vary as much as one's interest, motivation, and attitude toward literacy experiences" (Cassidy et al., 2020, p. 6). A focus on individual students continued into the 2021 publication (Cassidy et al., 2021) with the concern that "one definition of dyslexia does not exist" (p. 6), yet students identified with "dyslexia" are often instructed with similar methods. Elliot (2020) was used to illustrate this concern. In the publication entitled, *It's Time to be Scientific about Dyslexia*, Elliot highlights various understandings and uses of the term "dyslexia" by explaining that the term is used differently among populations—ranging from word-level reading difficulties to a neurodiverse disorder that expands past reading difficulties. Those same concerns are explored further in the Literacy Research Association's report titled, *An Examination of Dyslexia Research and Instruction* (Johnston & Scanlon, 2020).

The 2021 *What's Hot in Literacy* publication also explored the adverse effects varying definitions have had on advancements in assessment, identification, and instruction; as well as establishing prevalence percentages and conducting research with fidelity. Furthermore, the publication shared that "[b]ecause of the variability in definition, and the associated consequences of not having one agreed upon definition of dyslexia, some literacy leaders suggest that we retire the term and start looking more closely at individual readers." (Cassidy et al., 2021, p. 7). *Based on the discussions of the last two years, further clarification is needed for the definition of dyslexia so advancements can be made in identification, instruction, teacher preparation, teacher training, and legislation across states.*

## Should Be Hot Topics

### Comprehension

Over the history of the survey, literacy experts most highly ranked the following four topics as "should be hot": comprehension (online/offline) (with an overall "should be hot" score of 59), ELL (with an overall "should be hot" score of 59), adolescent literacy (with an overall "should be hot" score of 56), and struggling readers (with an overall "should be hot" score of 51). Although comprehension was ranked as "should be hot" for all 25 years, and it tied with ELLs as the most highly ranked "should be hot" topic, comprehension was featured as "not hot" or "cold" during the survey years of 1997–2002, as well as the survey years 2017 and 2018.

Following the 1997–2002 "not hot" or "cold" period, comprehension was first ranked as "hot" during the survey year of 2003 (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2002/2003). At the time, Cassidy and Cassidy (2002/2003) suggested that "[p]erhaps the attention being given to *adolescent literacy* has also contributed to the

increased focus on *comprehension*” (p. 18). Cassidy and Loveless (2011) further discuss the increased attention and explain that,

[d]uring the decade from 2000 to 2009 the dropout rate did decline and more states began implementing various high stakes assessments to supposedly guarantee that the individual state’s rigorous standards were met. Obviously, comprehension of texts became a main focus and less attention was paid to sub-skill instruction. (p. 18)

Many initiatives were also credited for drawing attention toward the topic of comprehension. For example, Cassidy and colleagues (2019) share that,

The Reading for Understanding initiative, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences (2010–2017) examined reading comprehension in pre-K through grade 12 students. Key outcomes include the confirmation of different components to the reading process (i.e., decoding, comprehension), that comprehension does not emerge as a clear construct until third grade, and that difficulties in comprehension are primarily linked to multiple skill domains, illuminating the need for far-reaching literacy instruction that encompasses both word reading skills and comprehension skills to promote reading for meaning making. (p. 9)

Moreover, a number of more recent state initiatives like the Read by Grade 3 (RBG2) Assembly Bill 289 in Nevada (State of Nevada Department of Education, 2012) and the Read to Succeed legislation in South Carolina (South Carolina Department of Education, 2021) have prioritized both teacher training in explicit reading comprehension methods and strategies and the literacy skill development of K-12 youth in preparation for college, careers, and citizenship. These comprehensive systems of support serve as a multifaceted approach to address the current needs related to reading comprehension in print and digital domains.

## **Struggling Readers**

The topic of struggling readers, with an overall “should be hot” score of 51, was the fourth most highly ranked “should be hot” topic in the history of the *What’s Hot in Literacy survey*. First introduced to the survey in 2002 (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2001/2002), the topic has switched among not receiving much attention during

the survey years of 2002–2004 and 2014–2017 and receiving large amounts of attention during the survey years of 2005–2012 and 2018–2021. However, literacy experts over the last 25 years have always ranked the topic as “should be hot” and many times with 100% consensus.

A repeated discussion over the last 25 years has been “what term is most appropriate to refer to those who experience difficulties in reading and writing” (Cassidy et al., 2018, p. 6). Cassidy and colleagues (2018) report that “terms such as struggling readers, striving readers, and at-risk learners have prevailed as some of the most popular in the last few decades” (p. 6). A large portion of this debate rest in the fact that the “term of ‘struggling readers’ to some indicates an ongoing deficit view and labeling, while to others presents a frame for considering specific types of literacy instruction/interventions most suited to those needing to improve in relation to their peers” (Cassidy et al., 2018, p. 10). Out of interest to see which term is most often used, our research team entered the following combinations of terms into the Google search engine and our library databases: “striving reader”, “striving readers”, “struggling reader”, and “struggling readers”. The term “struggling reader(s)” always returned more results, sometimes as much as 93% more in the library database search and 57% more in the Google search—indicating that the term “struggling reader(s)” continues to be used more often to describe students experiencing difficulties with reading.

Why did the topic of struggling readers flip between receiving large amounts of attention, and less amounts of attention over the last 25 years? In a special publication celebrating the first 20 years of the *What’s Hot in Literacy* survey, Cassidy and colleagues (2016) share that “[i]n the 1990s...there was an intense focus on struggling readers. Among the topics, which focused specifically on struggling readers, were Reading Recovery and volunteer tutoring” (Cassidy et al., 2016, p. 91). Furthermore, “the focus was on literacy skills for students who were experiencing reading difficulty or who might be at risk of developing difficulties by providing supplemental and/or customized assistance to contribute to their improvement” (Cassidy et al., 2016, p. 91). Other topics over the years have included early intervention, Response to Intervention (RTI), as well as literacy coaches and reading specialists. Also drawing large amounts of attention to the topic of struggling readers was the No Child Left Behind legislation, which was extended to older students and allocated money to the Striving Readers program (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2007).

The topic of struggling readers received less attention when the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were a hot topic (Cassidy et al., 2018). Cassidy and colleagues (2016) wrote that “[w]hile raising standards across most states is noteworthy, the major problem is that the focus on CCSS has diverted attention

from one of the traditional concerns of literacy professionals—specifically programs and strategies for the struggling readers” (Cassidy et al., 2016, p. 91). Most recently, the 2021 survey identified the topic of struggling readers as “hot” (Cassidy et al., 2021). This recent attention is likely connected to the high focus on the STR and dyslexia, which happen to be the hottest topics of 2020 (Cassidy et al., 2020) and 2021 (Cassidy et al., 2021).

## Coldest Topic

### Motivation and Reader Engagement

Along with documenting topics receiving large amounts of attention, the survey has also documented the topics receiving less attention. The overall “cold” scores ranged between 0 to 32, with *motivation and reader engagement* being the “coldest” topic over the last 25 years. The topic also had an overall “should be hot” score of 36 and was only ranked “hot” in 1997 (Cassidy & Wenrich, 1997) and 1998 (Cassidy & Wenrich, 1998); then was removed from the survey form and not featured again until the survey year of 2005 (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2004/2005). Although the topic has been featured on the survey each year since its return in 2005, the topic has consistently been ranked as “not hot” or “cold”; yet literacy experts have ranked the topic as “should be hot” each of these years.

Citing such studies as Morrow and Sharkey (1993), Sweet and Guthrie (1996), as well as Wigfield and McCann (1996/1997), Cassidy and colleagues (2016) share that “[t]he 1990s was an era of renewed interest in the role of motivation and engagement for literacy success” (p. 97). Contributing to the brief attention given to the topic was “The National Reading Research Center, a consortium of universities led by Donna Alvermann at the University of Georgia and John Guthrie at the University of Maryland, [which] produced a number of studies emphasizing the importance of motivation” (Cassidy et al., 2016, p. 97). Overall, although research has established that motivation and reader engagement are indeed an important focus (Martinez, 2011; Schiefele et al., 2012), the topic has not received considerable attention.

What are the current discussions centered on reader *motivation and engagement* addressing? Referring to the work of Barton and Hamilton (2005), Aukerman and Schuldt (2021) center their discussion of *motivation and engagement* around the belief that reading instruction,

should foster literate individuals who have the capacity and will to understand and act on their worlds with and against text, in ways that vary according to their contexts and communities. Further,

reading instruction should foster readers who relish text, dive into literate activity with passion, and value themselves as readers. (S85)

When reading instruction is visualized in this way, teaching decoding skills just is not enough to build strong, motivated, and engaged readers. Exploring the topic of *motivation and engagement* in an era heavily focused on the science of teaching reading, Aukerman and Schuldt (2021) further share that, “[STR] is a term that has been used variously, but its use within research, policy, and the press has tended to share one important commonality: an intensive focus on assessed reading proficiency as the primary goal of reading instruction” (p. S85). They continue “this focus directs attention toward a problematically narrow slice of reading” (p. S85), and “obscures other considerations for fostering students as readers that are profoundly important, too” (p. S85)—one of these considerations is nurturing important literate dispositions that include reading engagement, motivation, and self-efficacy.

How can reader motivation and engagement be addressed in the classroom? Offering text choice, as well as access to texts that are relevant to students’ lives and interests are highly recommended strategies (Fisher & Frey, 2018; Ivey & Johnston, 2013). Other proven strategies are fostering positive relationships among members of the school community which center around texts (Guthrie, 2011; Tatum, 2008), providing social opportunities to discuss text with peers (Jones, 2020), and connecting texts to real-world tasks or activities within the content areas (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004).

With reader motivation and engagement being positively associated with students’ assessed comprehension (Becker et. al., 2010; Guthrie et al., 2007), it is no surprise that the topic reached an overall “should be hot” score of 36. However, what is surprising is that the topic is the “coldest” in the history of the *What’s Hot in Literacy* survey. With current attention being driven toward a narrow definition of STR, it doesn’t appear that the topic of *motivation and engagement* will see an increase in attention in the next few years.

## Final Thoughts

In 1997, the first *What’s Hot in Literacy* survey began with the following statement: “Topics receiving attention in reading research and practice are constantly changing. Some are hot; some are not. What do some of the leaders in the field of literacy education feel are the current hot topics? What topics aren’t hot?”

(Cassidy & Wenrich, 1997, p. 34). These questions have consistently guided the annual publication over the last quarter of a century. Now with 25 years of longitudinal data, the *What's Hot in Literacy* survey has captured trends while informing literacy professionals within the field. Oftentimes the annual lists have been influenced by policy and other initiatives like President George W. Bush's *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) and Barack Obama's *Race to the Top* as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Also noted in the current findings is that some topics have either influenced the amount of attention toward or diverted away from other literacy topics. Two such topics are the Common Core State Standards and the science of teaching reading.

The purpose of the yearly “hot” list has always been to inform the field about those topics that are receiving attention and those that are not. Each annual survey brings the opportunity to alert readers to topics that should be investigated in more depth. It has been noted in previous *What's Hot in Literacy* publications that one goal behind the annual survey is for “policy makers and researchers [to] note the discrepancies between the ‘what’s hot’ and the ‘should be hot’ list and then make every effort to reconcile the two lists” (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2002/2003, p. 18). In other words, the aim is to have literacy leaders “agree that the ‘hot’ topics are the ones that ‘should be hot’ and the ‘cold’ topics are the ones that ‘should be cold’” (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2002/2003, p. 18). This consensus approach to identifying hot topics in the field of literacy permits concerted and calculated efforts to improve curricular planning, instruction, and evaluation over time.

Raising awareness about literacy topics receiving attention allows K-12 educators and higher education faculty alike to stay informed about trends that are shaping the literacy landscape. Results from the annual survey have been used for a multitude of purposes. University faculty have shared that they routinely “use the list to introduce courses or segments of courses, particularly those that deal with trends and issues in literacy. Often faculty members have their students rate the topics before revealing the composite results from the literacy leaders” (Cassidy et al., 2017, p. 318). Additionally, K-12 professionals use roughly the same procedure for professional development workshops and some “schools have formed professional learning communities in which each teacher takes a relevant topic from the list, researches it thoroughly, and then shares the findings with other teachers” (Cassidy et al., 2017, p. 318). Reflecting upon the corpus of data over the last 25 years on topics and trends from the *What's Hot in Literacy* provides evidence of where the field has been and is currently while also giving signals about future directions for the field of literacy.



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**SPECIALIZED LITERACY  
PROFESSIONALS:**

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**A HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF ITS  
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**Abstract**

*The Specialized Literacy Professionals (SLP) special interest group is devoted to the needs and concerns of those with specialized training or responsibilities in reading or literacy education. SLP was founded within the International Literacy Association and recently became an independent special interest group that has partnered with the Association of Literacy Educators and Researchers. The mission of SLP is to provide a forum for the professional development of all literacy professionals; take a proactive stance on issues involving literacy professionals; engage literacy professionals in active research and advocacy related to current issues and trends in literacy; keep abreast of recent efforts to develop standards and assessments for those delivering reading/literacy services; and communicate with other professional organizations. This article will highlight how these goals are achieved through information sharing, engaged scholarship and awards, and opportunities for literacy leaders.*

The Specialized Literacy Professionals (SLP) special interest group is pleased to call the Association for Literacy Educators and Researchers (ALER) its home, beginning with the 2021 annual ALER conference. During the conference in Hilton Head, South Carolina, SLP held a two-hour session, where an invited group of speakers presented information regarding their nationally recognized graduate reading program. The meeting culminated with a business meeting where committee chairs provided updates of new and ongoing business and initiatives. All ALER conference members were invited to attend the session. Similar plans are being prepared for the 2022 ALER conference with the SLP session focusing on an analysis of state dyslexia handbooks. This analysis was completed as a special project of SLP.

SLP is devoted to the needs and concerns of those with specialized training or responsibilities in reading or literacy education. As defined in the International Literacy Association's (ILA) publication *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals (2017)*, these are individuals that include reading/literacy specialists, literacy coaches, literacy coordinators/supervisors, as well as classroom teachers, literacy support personnel, teacher educators, and principals. SLP provides resources for these specialized professionals in the form of newsletters, webinars, conferences, grants, awards, and research studies.

Originally named Professionalizing Careers in Reading/Literacy Development, followed by Specialized Reading Professionals, this special interest group has been in existence since 1988. Included in its membership are K-12 educators as well as many distinguished professionals, authors, researchers, professors, and Reading Hall of Fame members. Membership stretches across the United States and has even included individuals outside of North America.

The mission of the Specialized Literacy Professionals SIG is to provide a forum for the professional development of all literacy professionals; take a proactive stance on issues involving literacy professionals; engage literacy professionals in active research and advocacy related to current issues and trends in literacy; keep abreast of recent efforts to develop standards and assessments for those delivering reading/literacy services; and communicate with other professional organizations.

The SLP membership elects the following positions for the executive committee, all for two-year terms: President, President-Elect, Secretary, Treasurer, and four At-Large board members. The board meets, on average, three times per year, twice virtually and once at an annual conference. Most of the work of the SIG is accomplished through committees, which will be described further below.

## **Context of the Specialized Literacy Professionals Special Interest Group**

### **History of the SIG**

SLP was founded by former ILA President Dr. Jack Cassidy and was first housed under ILA as a Special Interest Group (SIG). There, SLP's membership surpassed 150 members which led SLP to be recognized as the largest SIG within ILA. As a result, SLP was allocated two hours to host a special session and business meeting during each annual ILA conference. Speaking at these sessions were past Presidents of ILA as well as leading literacy experts such as Doug Fisher, Rita Bean, Alfred Tatum, and Diane Kern. Also, topics for the annual sessions were usually chosen based on the annual results of Jack Cassidy's *What Hot, What's Not Literacy Survey*—ensuring the timeliness of each session that included presentations, break-out groups, and other engaging activities.

Over SLP's 34-year history, the SIG has initiated several special projects, some of the larger projects being research studies, practitioner webinars, literacy conferences, and yearbooks. In 2014, SLP embarked on a research project that involved over 2200 literacy teachers throughout the U.S. and Canada. This large-scale study resulted in two major research outputs:

- (a) ILA's (2015) research brief titled, *The Multiple Roles of School-Based Specialized Literacy Professionals* (<https://www.literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/where-we-stand/literacy-professionals-research-brief.pdf>), which drew distinct lines between the roles of specialized literacy professionals and other overlapping responsibilities that might be added to the position. The principal writers of the 20-page research



brief were SLP members Rita Bean, Jack Cassidy, Virginia Goatley, Diane Kern, Evan Ortlieb and others.

- (b) A major publication entitled, *Specialized Literacy Professionals as Literacy Leaders: Results of a National Survey* (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19388071.2014.998355>) was featured in ALER's *Literacy Research and Instruction* in 2015. This large-scale national survey included over 2,500 responses and found that specialized literacy professionals (i.e., instructional/literacy coaches, reading/literacy specialists, reading teachers/interventionists, and supervisors) had multiple responsibilities that included both instruction of struggling readers and support for teachers. Additionally, the findings enabled SLP to advocate for more precise definitions of these roles.

In addition to conducting and publishing research, SLP has held multiple professional development opportunities for educators. In 2015, SLP streamed a two-part webinar series focused on digital literacies and reading comprehension—specifically supporting productive online inquiry. The series was co-hosted with the University of Texas - San Antonio and featured keynote speaker Dr. Julie Coiro of the University of Rhode Island. Other professional development offerings included the hosting of national literacy conferences. The 2009 and 2010 conferences took place in Corpus Christi, Texas and were co-hosted with Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. The 2012 and 2016 conferences were co-hosted with The University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Texas and The Texas Association for Literacy Education (TALE). In fact, the 2012 conference was the start-up of TALE, and ILA presented that association with their official charter recognizing them as a state affiliate of ILA. The 2016 conference celebrated the first 20 years of Jack Cassidy's *What Hot, What's Not Literacy Survey*. Speakers at these conferences included some of the most well-known literacy researchers such as Jerry Johns, P. David Pearson, Karen Bromley, Linda Gambrell, Victoria Risko, Jill Lewis-Spector, and Donald J. Leu. Additionally, both conferences published associated peer-reviewed yearbooks capturing the presented research.

In 2021, SLP transitioned from its affiliation as a SIG associated with the ILA to being an independent non-profit organization. ALER has agreed to host the SLP annual meeting at its annual conference each year. The synergies between literacy coaches, specialists, and leaders were a natural fit for partnering with ALER. In addition, members from both organizations can now, to a greater degree, engage in valuable exchanges of knowledge and insight.

## **Membership**

The current membership of SLP is just under 150 members. SLP has members from across the United States and international members from countries such as New Zealand and Canada. In 2021 SLP saw some of the most significant growth in recent years with 75 new members. This growth is associated with individuals joining the association, grant-sponsored groups inviting members, and, of course, ALER members who joined. Roughly 60% of SLP's membership work in higher education, while the other 40% are active literacy professionals working in school districts or community literacy outreach programs. Given that SLP is a professional organization designed to meet the needs of specialized literacy professionals, SLP's service project grant, mentoring opportunities, and professional learning communities were created with the goal of attracting more literacy professionals to the organization. Membership enrollment and renewal is available on the SLP's website (<http://www.literacyprofessional.org>). There are three options for membership: one year for \$10, two years for \$15, and four years for \$30. Anyone interested in advocating for specialized literacy professionals is encouraged to join SLP.

## **Information Sharing**

### **Social Media**

SLP is on Facebook (@literacyprofessional.org), with over 465 likes and on Twitter (@SpecializedLit). Typical posts include information about upcoming SLP events, resources, and general announcements that are relevant to SLP members. SLP members interested in sharing information on SLP's Facebook or Twitter channels are encouraged to email the information to [litprofmembership@gmail.com](mailto:litprofmembership@gmail.com).

### **Newsletter**

SLP distributes a biannual newsletter to its members. Each issue includes a brief summary of the past half-year's events written by the current president, as well as a section devoted to each committee and their latest endeavors, members' service projects, and a special section titled "Members' Publications," which lists recent articles and books written by SLP members. A recent addition to the newsletter spotlights a graduate student member's editorial piece on an area of literacy instruction that is considered noteworthy to current literacy professionals. Newsletters are archived on SLP's website (<http://www.literacyprofessional.org>).

## Engaged Scholarship and Awards

### Research Projects

Research has always been fundamental to the mission of SLP. From topics related to better understanding the roles and responsibilities of literacy teachers, specialists, and coaches, to charting new pathways that explore the intersection of how literacy educators address issues of diversity, SLP has been a pioneering literacy organization committed to research that matters. Most recently, SLP embarked on a study in which a group of university faculty members and doctoral students examined dyslexia handbooks and resource guides published in individual states. The purpose of the study was to identify the following: (a) the most commonly used definitions among the states, (b) how states are assessing, identifying, and instructing students with dyslexia, and (c) educator preparation requirements and recommendations that are outlined in the collected publications. Like many of SLP's other projects, dyslexia was chosen as a focus area because of the current attention being paid toward the topic — it was recognized as one of the “hottest” topics in 2020 (Cassidy et al., 2020) and 2021 (Cassidy et al., 2021).

In addition, SLP remains open-minded to research that reflects the interests and needs of its constituency, and its future projects will remain aligned to these emergent areas, oftentimes linked to *What's Hot in Literacy*.

### Scholarship Award

In recognition of Dr. Cassidy's service to SLP and his scholarly contributions to the field of literacy through the *What's Hot in Literacy survey*, SLP annually recognizes the authors of one scholarly publication per year with the Jack Cassidy Award for Scholarly Contributions. Chosen scholars are recognized for their scholarship of timely (i.e., HOT) topics and the potential impact their scholarship may have on specialized literacy professionals. Recipients must be members of SLP, and their publication should be published within the awarded year. The first two recipients of this award were Bethanie Pletcher and Alida Hudson for their 2019 article *Coaching on Borrowed Time: Balancing the Roles of the Specialized Literacy Professional in The Reading Teacher*, and Alison Swan Dagen and Rita Bean for their (2020) book, *Best Practices of Literacy Leaders: Keys to School Improvement*.

## Opportunities for Literacy Leaders

### Service Project Grant

In 2021, for the first time, SLP offered to members an opportunity to apply for an SLP service project grant. One grant is awarded annually and provides a

maximum of \$500 to acquire materials and other resources for a service project that supports literacy development. The goals of the service project grant initiative are to:

- initiate, extend, or expand existing university-, school- and/or community-based literacy projects;
- support literacy-focused trainings for parents and other community members, and/or professional learning opportunities for teachers, specialists, and other school-based professionals /or parents;
- increase access, equity, and diversity efforts related to literacy instruction and/or literacy materials;
- expand literacy intervention work; and
- align grant work with the SLP mission (<http://www.literacyprofessional.org/>) and the 2017 Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals (<https://literacyworldwide.org/get-resources/standards/standards-2017>)

Applicants of the grant must be members of SLP. The submitted proposals must include the following: project overview; purpose, objectives, and the significance of the project; and how the project aligns with the goals of the service project grant initiative. Sustainability of project post-funding, a proposed timeline, and a proposed budget are also requirements for submission. Projects that are funded must be completed within 18 months from the awarding of the grant. The recipients must submit a deliverable after the project is completed. This includes a narrated three-to five-minute presentation that will be posted on the SLP website and information about the project for the SLP biannual newsletter. Also, any resulting publications relating to the project must acknowledge SLP as a funder. The Service Project Grant Committee uses specific evaluation criteria, in the form of a rubric, to score each entry. The rubric categories are directly correlated to the submission components.

The first recipients of this grant were Cheron Davis and Jhaneil Thompson from Florida A&M University. Their project was titled S.T.R.I.K.E. (*Sustaining Technology- and Reading-Infused Kid-Friendly Education*) at Night: A Virtual Summer Reading Camp. The purpose of their program was to “promote literacy activities during the summer months when children are typically away from their structured academic settings and to increase access to high-quality literature read-alouds in low-income communities.” The project coordinators experienced great success with the program and shared those with SLP through an infographic (<http://www.literacyprofessional.org/grant-funding.html>), a narrative, and links

to a local news story that featured *S.T.R.I.K.E. at Night*. They hosted a literacy camp where they provided books for children to build home libraries and hosted an event sponsored by a children's book author, where they distributed books, posters, and t-shirts signed by the author. The project coordinators also submitted conference proposals and a manuscript based on their project.

## **Mentorship**

The Specialized Literacy Professionals offers a mentoring program for current members who prepare literacy professionals to teach in grades K-12 or conduct research affecting those in specialized literacy positions. Those interested in the program may be doctoral students or new university faculty members. SLP is also striving to create partnerships between experienced literacy professionals and those new to these positions in schools. The goals of the mentoring program are to engage in active professional development through cultivating professional learning communities with literacy teachers, coaches, specialists, district literacy leaders, and others who share a passion for K-12 literacy teaching and the preparation of the next generation of literacy professionals. In 2018, SLP leadership approached the Reading Hall of Fame in hopes that linking those who seek mentoring could benefit from the years of experience and expertise from the foremost literacy leaders of all time.

## **Member Engagement**

The Membership Engagement Committee was created in 2021 to offer a platform for literacy professionals (from novice to advanced) to share, learn, and grow. This committee established three goals: (a) increase literacy leaders' efficacy of literacy advocacy in coaching experiences such as the delivery of professional learning opportunities; (b) engage members in authentic experiences such as coaching other literacy educators; and (c) create resources and establish a support system for current and future members who are beginning their journeys as literacy professionals in K-12 schools.

In the Fall of 2021, the committee organized a virtual common reader book study utilizing Rita Bean and Virginia Goatley's (2021) *The Literacy Specialist: Leadership and Coaching for the Classroom, School, and Community*. The participants met virtually once a month from September through December. The authors of the book joined several sessions and shared their thoughts about the work of the literacy specialist, and members were able to ask questions and offer contextual insight.

The committee is planning another common reader experience for fall 2022 and plans to pair mentors with mentees to engage in literacy coaching experiences. A future goal is to offer a space on the SLP website for coaching resources (e.g., videos, presentations) created by members.

## Conclusion

SLP is committed to growing membership, and more specifically, recruiting members who are currently serving as literacy professionals in K-12 settings. Maintaining a healthy and varied membership will ensure that many voices in the profession are recognized in the planning and execution of SLP projects. Finding a new home with the Association of Literacy Educators and Researchers has already helped SLP expand its outreach and consider new ways of collaborating with those who prepare tomorrow's literacy leaders.

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# WHAT HAS CHANGED IN STATE READING TESTS IN 10 YEARS? THE NAEP STUDY REVISITED

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**Abstract:**

*The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) revealed a decrease in reading comprehension scores among 4th and 8th grade students. These scores are based on the results of the 2018 and 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).*



*Although the scores are disappointing, they are not surprising considering the way states are inadvertently promoting reading as an emphasis on recall rather than deep comprehension. This issue was evidenced in a 2009 study when researchers examined the number of thoughtful comprehension questions posed in 4th grade state reading assessments (Applegate et. al., 2009). The current study was developed to further investigate the level of thinking required of state reading scores versus NAEP scores and the types of questions asked in these assessments. The researchers analyzed questions to determine the number of items that called for the reader to recall text, draw conclusions about text, or consider the implications of the ideas included in text.*

*Keywords:* Assessment, comprehension, critical reading, literacy

## Introduction

The United States, like all democracies, relies for guidance on a population of well-informed, analytical voters who can arrive at a well-reasoned choice of representatives. But this level of thoughtful analysis is increasingly challenging in a milieu characterized by enormous amounts of information, some of which is accurate and some of which is riddled with errors, intentional or otherwise. With remarkable prescience, Leu and his colleagues (2004) called for the teaching of digital literacy, the ability to determine usefulness of information in problem-solving, engage in the synthesis of ideas, and develop skills in communicating ideas to others. It is difficult to imagine a responsible citizenry navigating these waters without preparation to do so. Fortunately, educators have long recognized the links between democracy and public schools. Schools are charged with preparing thoughtful and knowledgeable voters; our representative government agrees in principle to provide guidance and resources to the schools (Kaestle et al., 2000). To assist students in becoming productive citizens, schools should require students to engage in activities that require them to analyze, reflect, and evaluate as opposed to simply just defining or describing (Santrock, 2014).

Even early literacy theorists like Louise Rosenblatt eloquently and passionately described the literacy traits that serve democracy well. Rosenblatt went so far as to describe thoughtful reading as incomplete until the reader engaged in an opportunity to share interpretations of text and to receive feedback and validation (Rosenblatt, 1983). Rosenblatt envisioned the public dialogue as an opportunity to encounter the thoughts and interpretations of others, to realize that there are viewpoints other than one's own, and to learn to respect and learn from them. Thus, the communication of readers' thoughts to others is envisioned as the crowning point of the reading transaction. And what better place to expose students to diverse ideas and interpretations of text than the nation's literacy

classrooms? What more valuable way to measure the success our educational enterprise than a comprehensive system of assessment geared toward identifying our ability to produce effective and thoughtful citizens?

The purpose of this study is to examine state assessments and determine if they are assessing thoughtful comprehension. If so, they will meet the national expectations for comprehension. If not, then we need to figure out where they fall short and how we might adapt them so that they do measure the levels of comprehension described in the Common Core. We used the following question to guide our review of these state and national assessments: What number of items on state tests and NAEP require the reader to recall texts, draw conclusions about texts, or consider the implications of the ideas included in text?

## **Literature Review**

### **Assessing Thoughtful and Analytical Reading**

In the best of educational worlds, data drawn from standardized assessment instruments can be invaluable contributors to the educational enterprise. Data are used for many purposes, including, “grouping and individualizing instruction, aligning instruction with standards, refining course offerings, identifying low-performing students, and monitoring student progress” (Dembosky, et al., 2005, p. 7). But the greatest value of the analysis of assessment data is that it can help schools adjust elements of the curriculum that are not effectively contributing to the achievement of educational goals. Evidence that accountability data affect curriculum content abounds. Plank and Condliffe (2013) found that during the months leading to state-level high stakes assessments, instructional support in Grade 3 classrooms (which is directly impacted by accountability on those tests) was lower than that in Grade 2 classrooms, which were not affected by this accountability. After the testing was complete, the levels of instructional support for Grades 2 and 3 showed no significant difference in terms of instructional support. In a review of literature, Gonzalez, et al. (2017) found that teachers revert to drill and practice types of instructional strategies, teach to the test as opposed to establishing their own goals for the classroom, and eliminate content which is important but may not be tested. Finally, a common response to high stakes testing is “curriculum narrowing” (Berliner, 2011, p. 289) to reflect test content, leading teachers to teach mostly the content of the high stakes test and includes “vast amounts of test preparation” (p. 288).

Many educators have argued that such negative effects of standardized assessments outweigh their benefits. In this study, we have not taken that position. In seeking the potential benefits of standardized testing in literacy, we posit

that if an analysis of statewide assessment in literacy and reading more specifically reveals an emphasis on the thoughtful response to text that we believe undergirds our democracy, then all is well. If teachers and administrators recognize that reading assessments are demanding a high level of thoughtful reading, then the curricular adjustments made in schools in response to such assessment are beneficial to our society. They make educators valuable partners in the production of analytic readers, who can make informed and intelligent judgments about the information that they are exposed to.

If assessments truly measure the kind of thinking we expect of our students, then the potential benefits of standardized testing will prevail. Unfortunately, our current assessment of reading comprehension and ability to read critically does not appear to be aligned with our national expectations as described in the Common Core Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). This mismatch is believed to be the cause for discrepancies among state reported scores of comprehension and nationally-reported scores. In 2009, Applegate and colleagues observed a discrepancy between reported state scores and National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores. They concluded that due to the NAEP demand for more thoughtful responses than state tests accounted for much of the difference. These discrepancies were further analyzed in 2016 and 2018 by a private organization identified as Achieve, an independent nonprofit education reform organization dedicated to working with states to raise academic standards and improve assessments. On their website in 2016 and 2018, Achieve reported that states' testing and reporting processes yield significantly different and more positive results than the data collected and reported by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. In 2017, Achieve reported that the gaps continue to exist and have increased in some states ("Proficient vs Prepared," 2018). If educators do in fact "teach to the test" as proposed by many researchers (Berliner, 2011 & Gonzalez, et al., 2017), then these discrepancies are of great concern as teachers will most likely teach to their own state tests.

## **Expanding Our View of Thoughtful Literacy in Light of Democracy**

Applegate and colleagues (2009) published a study similar to the current investigation. In that study, the authors revealed that the primary intent of both state and NAEP assessments is congruent with reader's ability to think about text and to draw conclusions that go beyond the text. However, NAEP comprehension items required higher-order interpretation more than three times as frequently as

the average state assessment. Thus, the researchers concluded that the discrepancy between reported state scores versus reported NAEP scores was not surprising.

Considering the demands for thoughtful literacy that undergird a successful democracy, we concluded that Applegate et al. (2009) had not gone far enough in their analysis of comprehension. Thoughtful literacy as they defined it could be largely directed to analysis of ideas included in the text, not necessarily to the thoughtful response to the implications of the ideas in that text. While we concede that the analysis of ideas in text includes valuable skills, we are taking the position that the analysis of text is not the sole determinant of the kind of

**Type A: Text-based Comprehension**

**Level 1**

Readers can recall the details of the text in verbatim form. In response to questions, readers can recognize ideas from the text so long as they do not deviate too far from the original wording of the story.

**Level 2**

Readers can recall the details of the text and demonstrate an understanding of the fundamental ideas about the characters or events in a story. In response to questions, readers can recognize ideas from the text that have been presented in words or forms different from those used by the author.

**Type B: Text-centered Comprehension**

**Level 3**

Readers can recognize and articulate simple logical relationships between or among the characters and events in a story. In response to questions, readers recognize that events or actions can produce straightforward effects.

**Level 4**

Readers can recognize and articulate complex logical relationships between or among the characters and events in a story. In response to questions, readers recognize that events or actions can have complex interactive effects upon each other.

**Type C: Idea-based Comprehension**

**Level 5**

Readers can generalize from complex logical relationships and view them as a dimension of the human condition. In response to questions, readers can recognize that the moral of a story can extend beyond the confines of the story and its characters.

**Level 6**

Readers can derive generalizations about a story to apply to their own lives from their observations about the human condition. In response to questions, readers recognize that some lessons about life embedded in the text have implications for the beliefs and values of the reader.

**Figure 12** Narrative Comprehension: A Continuum of Complexity

thinking required by a democracy. To identify the thinking demanded by a functioning democracy, we need to expand our view of reading comprehension itself.

For example, Thorndike (1917) described comprehension as the relationships between and among the ideas represented in text. But the RAND Reading Study Group (2002) arrived at a more comprehensive definition of comprehension as “the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language” (p. 11). Finally, Freebody & Luke (1990) describe a hierarchy of comprehension that includes, “code breaker, (how do I crack this?), text participant (what does this mean?), text user (what do I do within this here and now?) and text analyst (what does all this do to me?)” (p. 7). Clearly, these definitions describe a process that expects more than the mere recall of ideas. It requires the reader to decipher the printed language, take what has been recalled of the printed language, and integrate it with prior knowledge and experiences and connect those ideas to their own experiences.

Considering this broader view of comprehension, Applegate and Applegate (2013) developed a continuum of reading comprehension. Each stage in the Continuum represents a dimension of either Type A (Text-based), Type B (text-centered), or Type C (idea-based) comprehension, the comprehension item classification schema we used in this study. A description of each of the six stages of the Continuum is provided in Figure 2 below.

Using the continuum as our baseline description of levels of comprehension, we set out to identify the number of items in state tests and NAEP that called for the reader to recall text (Type A), draw conclusions about text (Type B), and consider the implications of the ideas included in text (Type C). We reasoned that a solid representation of each item type in state and national tests would enable their use as valuable diagnostic instruments that could contribute constructively to the critique of curricula, particularly curricula that serves to prepare thoughtful citizens of a democracy. If, on the other hand, assessments focus on lower-level skills, then success in the assessments will not require a child to think about the implications of ideas in text, only to remember or recognize its factual content. This is the fork in the road we have come to as a nation, and the road we travel matters a great deal.

For that reason, we have undertaken an examination of a sample of state literacy assessments and the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Our goal is to identify the extent to which those measures assess the deep thinking that supports democracy, any significant differences that exist across measures, and whether accountability tests can be reliably used as a tool for the analysis of thoughtful literacy curricula.

## **Methodology**

Seven researchers participated in the study. We began by selecting different 4th grade state literacy assessments to compare to the parallel assessment in NAEP. We selected 2018 and 2019 assessments from these states because each met the following criteria: 1) sample released items were available online; 2) the items were specifically designed to give educators insight into the content and assessment techniques included in the measure, and 3) sufficient numbers of items were available to allow for a reliable evaluation of the instrument. These state assessments included: Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts/Rhode Island, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Smarter Balance, South Carolina, and Texas. It must be pointed out that 11 states make use of Smarter Balance, including: California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, South Dakota, Vermont, and Washington. And since one assessment is used by both Massachusetts and Rhode Island, the conclusions concerning the assessment process using nine measures can be applied to students in twenty states.

The goal of our study was to examine the level of thinking required by each item on our sample of state tests with items appearing on NAEP, using the continuum described above. To increase inter-rater reliability, we took the six levels of comprehension from the Applegate's original continuum and collapsed them into three types of thinking (Types A, B, and C). We then classified each comprehension item in our sample based on their alignment to those three categories.

## **Procedures**

After we had assembled our samples of 4th grade reading comprehension test items, and after two practice sessions using samples not included in our final analysis, we reached a level of confidence in our ability to apply continuum criteria to comprehension test items. We examined the actual level of thinking required by each question item within each test. We then independently classified each item as reflecting Type A (text-based items), Type B (text centered items), or Type C (ideas-based items). We achieved an initial agreement level of 91%, and any remaining differences were resolved through discussion. We used the following parameters to define each of these levels of thinking:

### ***Text-based Items***

These items assess the ability to recognize ideas stated directly in the text when they are presented verbatim or in paraphrased form. Most text-based items call on the reader to verify the absence or presence of an idea in the text itself. In and of themselves, text-based comprehension enables educators to distinguish

between readers who grasp the general message of the text and readers with more fundamental needs.

### *Text-centered Items*

These items assess the reader's ability to recognize and understand the craft of the writer in presenting ideas and/or characters. Text-centered items often assess important reading skills like identifying the main idea of a text or choosing a word that would best describe a character. As such, text-centered items often (but not always) require readers to think deeply about what they have read. However, that thinking is primarily directed toward the analysis of text elements. These items cannot of themselves measure the kind of analytic thinking required of effective participants in a democracy.

### *Idea-based Items*

These items assess the ability of readers to reflect on the implications of ideas in the text for the larger society or the human condition. These items ask readers to consider ideas in text considering their own experiences, values, and beliefs and arrive at a thoughtful response that reflects sophisticated thinking ability. These types of items almost always require deep thinking on the part of the reader.

## Findings

As can be seen from an examination of Table 1 below, our analysis of a sample of state test questions reveals an overwhelming preponderance of Type A (text-based) and Type B (text-centered thinking) items. Only 3% of the 185 items we analyzed called for readers to consider the broad implications of ideas, identify and discuss opposing viewpoints, or link ideas in text to the human condition. If our sample is representative of state tests throughout the nation, it would appear that they are not equipped to provide educators with insight into a reader's ability to think deeply about ideas in a text and how they link to the broader society and the values that characterize a democracy.

On the contrary, 33% of NAEP test items we analyzed included were idea-based, suggesting that the national assessment places greater emphasis on the ability of readers to make connections to what they have read and link those ideas to the human condition. This kind of thinking is more representative of the thinking demanded by a functioning democracy. Throughout the nation, however, it is the state assessments that serve the role of accountability measures and exert an influence upon state and local curricula in literacy. If these results are representative of state tests in our nation, Type C thinking is not reliably

**TABLE 1**  
**Item Type Classification for State and National Tests**

| State Tests        | Type A | Type B | Type C |
|--------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Pennsylvania       | 11     | 8      | 2      |
| Illinois           | 10     | 7      | 2      |
| New York           | 7      | 11     | 1      |
| Texas              | 8      | 28     | 0      |
| Ohio               | 12     | 8      | 0      |
| Smarter Balance    | 8      | 8      | 0      |
| Mass./Rhode Island | 5      | 14     | 0      |
| S. Carolina        | 6      | 9      | 0      |
| Florida            | 13     | 6      | 1      |
| N= 185             | 80     | 99     | 6      |
|                    | 43.3%  | 53.5%  | 3.2%   |
| NAEP               | 10     | 2      | 6      |
| N= 18              | 56%    | 11%    | 33%    |

measured, and thus there is little or no incentive for our schools to emphasize the thinking that we believe undergirds effective democracies.

As we considered the overall results, we were encouraged by the fact that text-centered items outnumbered text-based items in our state test samples. After all, an item that requires only recall or recognition of text is not likely to demand a thoughtful response. Text-centered items have much greater potential to require thinking on the part of the reader. As we drilled deeper into our results, however, we began to find large numbers of multiple-choice items whose stems (the question segment of the item) seemed to require a thoughtful response to text, but whose distractors (incorrect choices) were so obviously wrong that only a cursory understanding of the text would suffice to clue the reader in to the correct response.

For example, let us suppose that the tale of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* were one of the passages in a comprehension test. If the item stem asked the reader to select the word that best describes the relationship between *Snow White and the Dwarfs*, then the potential exists for a thought-provoking item. If having read the passage and understood something of the characters and their reactions to one another, the reader is required to synthesize character interactions, the item must be regarded as thought-provoking. If the following are presented as the correct answer and three distractors, the task is significantly altered:



What word best describes the relationship among Snow White and the Dwarfs?

- A. Loving
- B. Competitive
- C. Angry
- D. Hateful

Only a reader who has failed to grasp the fundamental essence of the story could choose B, C, or D above. And while one of the valuable results of standardized testing is the ability to identify readers who do not understand the text they have read, that cannot be their only or even their most important role in our literacy education enterprise. When we drilled deeper into the results of our analysis, we found that state tests rely very heavily (84%) upon multiple-choice items in their literacy assessments. Further analysis revealed even more discouraging results. Sixty-one percent of the multiple-choice items used in our sample of state tests utilized distractors that required readers to demonstrate only a superficial level of comprehension of text.

## Discussion

Literacy education professionals are faced with a difficult dilemma. Teaching that is not directed to test content with an eye toward increasing test scores is not always welcome in educational settings. But if our analysis is correct, the assessments used by many states do not include dimensions of thoughtful response to text and its broader implications. Consequently, there is little incentive for educators to engage in the kinds of classroom instruction that might promote the deep thinking and analysis that undergirds our democratic society. But educators who are committed to the kind of teaching that promotes deep thinking have several options to pursue.

We recommend that literacy professionals seek support from recognized international organizations for engaging their students in the analysis of ideas. For example, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) defines reading literacy as the ability to understand and use those written forms required by society and/or valued by the individual. Mullis and Martin (2021) define reading literacy as, “the ability to understand and use those written forms required by society and/or valued by the individual [...] Readers read to learn, to participate in communities of readers in school and everyday life,, and for

enjoyment” (p. 3). The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (OECD, 2000) represents an international collaborative effort to assess what 15-year-old students know and can do. PISA defines reading as “understanding, using and reflecting on written texts, in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate in society” (p. 18). The PIRLS/PISA specifications stress the nature of reading as an active, complex, thoughtful, and multidimensional process that includes input from and application to the wider needs of society. Incidentally, it is customary for policymakers to bemoan the PISA and PIRLS performance of students educated in the United States when compared with their international counterparts. If our analysis of state tests is even partially accurate, it would seem that our poor performance in international literacy assessments is a result not of poor teaching, but rather our failure as a nation to place deep thinking at the core of our educational and assessment agenda.

Closer to home, the International Literacy Association is not alone in calling upon educators to adjust their literacy practices to provide students with opportunities to critically examine diverse texts that will enable them to participate in a democratic society actively and empathetically (International Literacy Association, 2019). As set forth by Vasquez et al. (2019), teaching critical examination of texts helps us develop literate citizens, who are prepared to participate in a democracy in an informed and productive manner. For this to occur, students must not only be provided access to diverse texts but must also be expected to grasp the message of the author, think deeply about that message and its implications, and engage in respectful dialogue with fellow readers. National literacy organizations are well positioned to engage in educational activities directed to state educational agencies, test constructors, the public at large, and a broad cross-section of fellow educators.

Even closer to home, to the extent that teachers have a measure of instructional autonomy in their classrooms, they have the option of raising questions and encouraging their students to engage in thoughtful analysis of the issues that have broader implications in our society. It is essential that school district administrators work with teachers to create tasks that demand these higher levels of comprehension tasks, as well as to encourage fellow educators to develop progress monitoring measures that can assess student growth in thinking skills. Teachers make decisions related to instructional frameworks all day long. To promote thoughtful analysis, they can utilize several well-researched frameworks across all grade levels. Some of the researched-based instructional practices that promote this kind of thinking include Literature Circles, Question the Author, and Discussion Webs, as well as the DRIVE model (Cartwright & Duke, 2019).

Furthermore, the extent of content knowledge that district leaders possess directly impacts their curriculum and professional development decision making (Houck & Novak, 2013). Therefore, district leaders need to recognize and value varying levels of comprehension to improve student learning outcomes. The depth of their content knowledge regarding comprehension and the levels of comprehension is likely to correlate with improved instructional practices among classroom teachers (Anderson et al., 1985).

Once district administrators have a clear understanding of the levels of thinking required of truly effective readers, then they need to provide ongoing, job-embedded professional development for teachers. This professional development would focus on specific content, uses active learning strategies, includes collaboration and coaching/modeling, and offers opportunities for feedback and reflection (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). This professional development should also assist teachers deepening their understanding of the levels of thinking, as well as assist them in using idea-based questioning with students so that their instruction can reinforce the type of thinking we hope for students to develop.

If there is anything encouraging about the results of our study, we have consistently discovered evidence that reading experts at the highest levels of the profession throughout the world recognize the need of the society for thoughtful citizens who honor the social contract by interacting respectfully with others. Test construction professionals and instructional leaders in our schools must be encouraged to follow suit.

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# USING THE F-WORD IN YOUR CLASSROOM: A SURVEY OF LITERACY TEACHERS' AND LEADERS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF READING FLUENCY

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## **Abstract:**

*The purpose of this study was to explore educators' definitions of reading fluency and clarify misconceptions regarding its meaning and role in reading instruction. We surveyed 168 educators ranging from elementary to postsecondary. When asked to define fluency, 43% of the respondents included accuracy, 30% included automaticity, and 65% included prosody (expression). Only 8.6% of the respondents accurately named all three components of reading fluency, and 16.7% used none of these terms in their definitions. A univariate ANOVA with the educator's role as the independent variable, and the number of competencies named as the dependent measure. There was a statistically significant difference in accurately named competencies by role, and all of the roles with the exception of public-school administrators, statistically significantly outperformed secondary teachers in their definitions of fluency. We also quantified the*

*number keywords used in respondents reasoning for why reading fluency is important and found that comprehension was the most frequently used term. We believe a better understanding of reading fluency's components should lead to better reading fluency instruction, which will lead to increased reading comprehension and overall reading achievement.*

*Keywords:* Reading fluency, automaticity, prosody, word recognition, reading accuracy

In 1983, Allington noted that students who were identified as disfluent were easy to identify but were not receiving reading fluency interventions. Instead, students were offered remediation in phonics, comprehension, or other aspects of reading. Indeed, it seems intuitive that disfluent readers would receive instruction in fluency, but unfortunately misconceptions of how reading fluency is defined and taught have continued for decades (Dowhower, 1991; Rasinski et al., 2009), and there is recent evidence that these misconceptions are manifesting as instruction in classrooms (Young et al., 2016). Therefore, we distributed a survey to various literacy educators and leaders to investigate their knowledge and perceptions of reading fluency, and answer the following research question: What are educators' perceptions and understandings of reading fluency as a component in the reading process?

## Literature Review

We often define fluency by its three indicators: accuracy, automaticity, and prosody (expression). It is characterized by effortless reading with expression that matches the meaning of the text (Kuhn, et al., 2018; Rasinski, et al., in press). In addition, there is a large body of research in reading fluency (Therrien, 2004; Rasinski, 2011, 2012), and it has been established as major component of the reading process (National Institute of Child Health and Development, 2000). Still, its definition and role in reading instruction continues to be misconstrued. For example, some have viewed reading fluency as only rate, and direct students to read fast (Samuels, 2007). Teaching students to read fast with little to no attention to meaning is a fallacy born from misconceptions. Unfortunately, these types of misunderstandings can have a negative effect on students' reading development. While speed does matter to some degree (Rasinski, 2000), proficient reading is not a race.

The ultimate goal of developing reading fluency is not to read fast, but to serve as a foundation for reading comprehension (Rasinski & Young, 2014).

The connection between reading fluency and reading comprehension is well-established (Kieffer & Christodoulou, 2020), as it is a strong predictor of a student's reading comprehension (Sabatini et al., 2019). In a longitudinal study, Miller and Schwanenflugel (2008) found that primary students who read with adult-like prosody were more likely to proficiently comprehend text in later grades. This finding confirmed what Goodman (1964) claimed decades ago: students who read aloud with appropriate expression tend to have better comprehension. So then, while reading fluency instruction's initial goal is to increase students' reading fluency, the ultimate goal is to increase students' reading comprehension and overall reading ability.

Still, historically and currently, definitions of fluency sometimes vary and can be misunderstood (Young, et al., 2020). A greater understanding of what reading fluency is would likely optimize the instruction delivered in classrooms as instruction could be focused on what really matters in fluent reading. For example, repeated readings is an effective way to help students reading more accurately and at a greater pace. However, this approach does little for reading expression. By adding a focus on reading expression, the instruction targets all aspects of reading fluency. Activities that require repeated readings and attention to prosody that are performance best, such as rehearsing and performing speeches require students reading expressively (Young & Rasinski, in press).

Understanding that reading fluency includes accuracy implies that decoding, to some extent as is necessary, should be included in reading fluency instruction. Mastering phonics and quickly recognizing phonemes, graphemes, rimes, morphemes, and words within words is essential to developing fluent readers. Mastery of decoding is necessary but not sufficient condition for fluency. Decoding mastery leads to the next component of reading fluency, automaticity (Pikulski & Chard, 2005).

Automaticity in word reading is essentially rapid, accurate, and effortless recognition words while reading. This component extends beyond decoding, and is theoretically crucial for reading comprehension. The theory of automaticity (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974) purports that students who effortlessly recognize words while reading can reallocate cognitive resources to reading comprehension rather than decoding. Instructional approaches based on this theory are largely practice-based. Arguably, two of the most used foundations for fluency instruction are practice-based methods called repeated readings (Samuels, 1979) and assisted readings.

Repeated readings is method that has had significant positive effects on students' reading fluency, especially in automaticity (Lee & Yoon, 2017; Vadasy & Sanders, 2008; et al., 2000). In assisted readings the reader reads a text while



simultaneously hearing a fluent rendering of the same text either from a partner or a recording (Rasinski et al., 2011). Both repeated and assisted readings can be combined to form synergistic instruction that improves fluency and comprehension (Stevens et al., 2017). Based on these promising findings, researchers have continued to develop fluency strategies derived from the method of repeated readings (Kuhnet et al., 2018). The derivations often include more motivational or authentic components, such as rehearsing and performing poetry (Wilfong, 2008) or readers theater scripts (Young & Rasinski, 2018). Performance-related instruction also develops prosody in reading, the third component of reading fluency. Poetry slams (Wilfong, 2008), karaoke in the classroom (Young et al., 2016), and readers theater (Young & Rasinski, 2018) have been found to improve students' reading expression, volume, pace, smoothness, phrasing—all dimensions of prosodic reading. In addition to whole group performance activities, some one-on-one reading interventions can significantly improve students' prosodic reading, including the Neurological Impress Method (Heckelman, 1969; Young, Pearce, Gomez, Christensen, Pletcher, et al., 2018) and Read Two Impress (Young et al., 2016)—two one-on-one assisted reading interventions

Knowledge of each component, its theoretical foundation, and research-based practices, has important implications for developing effective instruction. In other words, effective instruction is developed based on a solid understanding of the concept. By now, we had hoped reading fluency's definition and instructional implications would be clear, but we wanted to be sure, therefore we developed a survey, which is described below to answer the following research question: What are educators' perceptions and understandings of reading fluency as a component in the reading process?

## Method

This study used a qualitative survey and responses were later quantified for analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). To determine the level of understanding of reading fluency among literacy educators, we developed a two question survey. Once we agreed on the wording of the questions, order, and recruitment text, we used snowball sampling within each of our networks by sharing the Qualtrics survey on our respective social media platforms. We indicated that we would appreciate educators answering two questions about reading fluency. The survey did not ask for any identifying information including demographics, locations, or gender. The survey did ask for their role in education and years of experience. After three weeks, we collected 162 responses.

Participants included teachers at all levels [elementary (17.3%), middle school (9.9%), and secondary (9.3%)], literacy coaches (21.6%), administrators (4.9%), and university/college faculty (24.1%), curriculum coordinators (4.9%), and 8% identified as other education professionals. The participants ranged from one year to 49 years in education and the average was 24 years. Respondents were asked to share their understanding of fluency by answering two questions:

- 1) In your words, what is fluency?
- 2) Is reading fluency important in reading? Why or Why not?

## Coding

**Question 1.** Before coding, we discussed the coding procedures extensively. The procedure was also revised slightly through the process of trial, error, and further considerations. For the first question (In your words, what is reading fluency?), we created three columns for each component of reading fluency: accuracy, automaticity, and prosody. If the respondent stated the terms or synonyms, we awarded a 1 in each category. If the terms were absent, we awarded a 0. For example, in the first row of Table 1, a respondent included accuracy, but did not include automaticity or prosody. Indeed, s/he mentioned meaning (comprehension), and while it is the ultimate goal, it is not included the definition itself. The Total column is a summary of correctly identified indicators with a range of 0 to 3.

We also calculated the number of misconceptions. In second row of Table 1, the response was “words per minute.” While words per minute is often used as an indicator or reflection of fluency (automaticity), it is not considered a definitional component of fluency. Thus, the respondent who defined reading fluency as “words per minute” received a total score of 0, and we considered words per minute as a misconception.

**TABLE 1**  
**Example Coding for the Definition of Fluency Responses**

| <b>In your words, what is reading fluency?</b>                             | <b>Accuracy</b> | <b>Automaticity</b> | <b>Prosody<br/>Expression</b> | <b>Total</b> | <b>Misconceptions</b> |
|--|-----------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| accurately reading words in an appropriate way to garner meaning from text | 1               | 0                   | 0                             | 1            | 0                     |
| Words per minute   | 0               | 0                   | 0                             | 0            | 1                     |

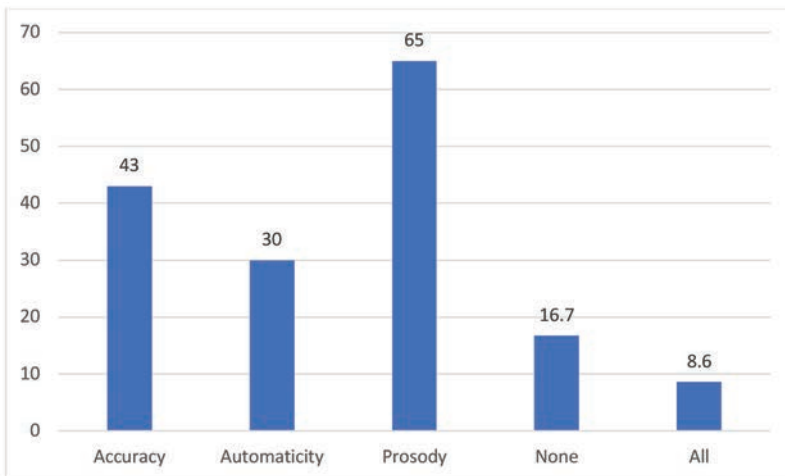
Once the coding was complete, we analyzed the descriptive statistics, as well as used a univariate ANOVA to examine whether there was a statically significant difference between groups (roles). In addition, a bivariate correlation was computed to determine whether years in education was correlated with the number of competencies named or misconceptions.

**Question 2.** In order to investigate the second question (Is reading fluency important in reading? Why or Why not?), we planned to quantify the number of yes's and no's to report how many educators believed reading fluency was important or not. To analyze educators' reasoning, the responses were analyzed with a frequency count of relevant keywords used in their explanations.

## Results

When asked to define fluency, 43% of the respondents included accuracy, 30% included automaticity, and 65% included prosody (expression). Only 8.6% of the respondents accurately named all three components of reading fluency, and 16.7% used none of these terms in their definitions (Figure 1). Those who included two competencies totaled 38.9%.

Means and standard deviations, the total number of correctly identified fluency indicators, and total misconceptions of the respondents are summarized by educator role in Table 2.



**Figure 1** Percentage of reading fluency components in responses.

**TABLE 2**  
Means and Standard Deviations Indicating Number of Correctly Defined Fluency Indicators by Educator Role

| Indicator                   | Elementary Teachers |      | Middle School Teachers |     | Secondary Teachers |     | Literacy Coaches |     | Curriculum Coordinators |     | Public School Administrators |      | Higher Education Faculty |     | Other |     | All Categories |     |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|------|------------------------|-----|--------------------|-----|------------------|-----|-------------------------|-----|------------------------------|------|--------------------------|-----|-------|-----|----------------|-----|
|                             | M                   | SD   | M                      | SD  | M                  | SD  | M                | SD  | M                       | SD  | M                            | SD   | M                        | SD  | M     | SD  | M              | SD  |
| Accuracy                    | .46                 | .51  | .38                    | .50 | .27                | .46 | .43              | .50 | .50                     | .54 | .63                          | .52  | .49                      | .51 | .31   | .48 | .43            | .50 |
| Automaticity                | .43                 | .50  | .19                    | .40 | .13                | .35 | .34              | .48 | .38                     | .52 | .25                          | .46  | .28                      | .46 | .31   | .48 | .30            | .46 |
| Prosody/<br>Expression      | .64                 | .49  | .56                    | .51 | .67                | .72 | .77              | .43 | .88                     | .35 | .50                          | .54  | .77                      | .43 | .54   | .52 | .65            | .48 |
| Total Correct<br>Indicators | 1.54                | 1.84 | 1.13                   | .96 | .67                | .72 | 1.57             | .70 | 1.75                    | .71 | 1.25                         | 1.17 | 1.51                     | .89 | 1.31  | .86 | 1.40           | .87 |
| Total<br>Misconceptions     | .46                 | .58  | .81                    | .75 | .87                | .83 | .46              | .66 | .38                     | .52 | .38                          | .52  | .59                      | .82 | .38   | .51 | .55            | .70 |

**TABLE 3**  
**One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Differences by Educator Role**

| Measure                  | <i>F</i> (7,153) | <i>p</i> |
|--------------------------|------------------|----------|
| Prosody/Expression       | 2.800            | .009     |
|                          | <i>F</i> (7,154) | <i>p</i> |
| Total Correct Indicators | 2.56             | .016     |

To further investigate the results inferentially, we conducted a univariate ANOVA with number of competencies named as the independent variable, and the educator's role as the dependent measure. First, assumptions were tested and met. Results of the ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in accurately named competencies by role,  $F(7,153) = 2.56$ ,  $p < .05$ . In addition, there was statistically significant difference in the use of the term prosody/expression in the respondents definitions of fluency,  $F(7,154) = 2.80$ ,  $p < .01$ . There were no other statistically significant differences (Table 3).

A post hoc LSD procedure was then used for comparisons by role. All of the roles with the exception of public-school administrators, statistically significantly outperformed secondary teachers in their definitions of fluency ( $p < .05$ .) The largest significant difference ( $p < .01$ ) was between curriculum coordinators and secondary teachers (raw mean difference = 1.08). In addition, most roles, with the exception of public school administrators, middle school teachers, and the other category, included prosody in their definitions ( $p < .05$ ). Significant pairwise comparisons are shown in Table 4.

We also coded the number of misconceptions in their definitions, such as the notion that reading fluency is simply reading fast. We found 73 instances of misconceptions. See Table 5 for a summary of those results by role. Overall, the top misconceptions were defining fluency as rate (mentioned 38 times) and speed (mentioned 18 times).

For the second question, every respondent ( $n = 162$ ) reported that reading fluency was important in the reading process. We also quantified the number of keywords used in respondents reasoning and found that comprehension was the most frequently used term. Table 6 lists the top 20 frequently used keywords.

Finally, a bivariate correlation was computed to determine relationships between years of experience and number of competencies named and the number of misconceptions. There were no significant correlations between years and competencies ( $r = -.03$ ,  $p = .75$ ) or years and misconceptions,  $r = .13$ ,  $p = .09$ .

**TABLE 4**  
**LSD Post Hoc Procedure for Prosody-Expression and Number of Competencies**

| Prosody/Expression            |                             | MD      | SE   | p    | 95% CI |       |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------|------|------|--------|-------|
|                               |                             |         |      |      | Lower  | Upper |
| Secondary Teacher             | Elementary Teacher          | -.376*  | .147 | .011 | -.67   | -.09  |
|                               | Middle School Teacher       | -.296   | .165 | .075 | -.62   | .03   |
|                               | Literacy/Reading Coach      | -.505*  | .142 | .000 | -.78   | -.22  |
|                               | Curriculum Coordinator      | -.608*  | .201 | .003 | -1.01  | -.21  |
|                               | Public School Administrator | -.233   | .201 | .248 | -.63   | .16   |
|                               | College/University Faculty  | -.503*  | .140 | .000 | -.78   | -.23  |
|                               | Other                       | -.272   | .174 | .120 | -.62   | .07   |
| <b>Number of Competencies</b> |                             |         |      |      |        |       |
| Secondary Teacher             | Elementary Teacher          | -.869*  | .268 | .001 | -1.40  | -.34  |
|                               | Middle School Teacher       | -.458   | .301 | .130 | -1.05  | .14   |
|                               | Literacy/Reading Coach      | -.905*  | .259 | .001 | -1.42  | -.39  |
|                               | Curriculum Coordinator      | -1.083* | .367 | .004 | -1.81  | -.36  |
|                               | Public School Administrator | -.583   | .367 | .114 | -1.31  | .14   |
|                               | College/University Faculty  | -.846*  | .255 | .001 | -1.35  | -.34  |
|                               | Other                       | -.641*  | .318 | .045 | -1.27  | -.01  |

\*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

**TABLE 5**  
**Means and Standard Deviations for Number of Misconceptions by Role**

| Role                        | N   | M   | SD   |
|-----------------------------|-----|-----|------|
| Elementary Teacher          | 28  | .46 | .576 |
| Middle School Teacher       | 16  | .81 | .750 |
| Secondary Teacher           | 15  | .87 | .834 |
| Literacy/Reading Coach      | 35  | .46 | .657 |
| Curriculum Coordinator      | 8   | .38 | .518 |
| Public School Administrator | 8   | .38 | .518 |
| College/University Faculty  | 39  | .59 | .818 |
| Other                       | 13  | .38 | .506 |
| Total                       | 162 | .55 | .697 |

**TABLE 6**  
**Frequency of Keywords**

| Rank | Keyword                                     | Frequency |
|------|---|-----------|
| 1    | Comprehension/Meaning/Understand/Comprehend | 177       |
| 2    | Reading/Read                                | 142       |
| 3    | Decoding/Decode                             | 27        |
| 4    | Focus                                       | 10        |
| 5    | Helps                                       | 10        |
| 6    | Allows                                      | 9         |
| 7    | Need  | 9         |
| 8    | Skills                                      | 9         |
| 9    | Bridge                                      | 6         |
| 10   | Essential                                   | 6         |

## Discussion

Overall, the results indicated that reading fluency is still not completely understood and that educators still have some misconceptions. Less than 10% of the respondents, included all three components of reading fluency in their responses. In fact, a larger percentage (16.7) never mentioned any of the components used to define fluency.

In regard to prosody, it appears to be contrary to what Dowhower (1991) found a few decades ago when she observed that prosody was often left out of fluency instruction. In the current study, prosody was the most frequently named component. This fact should have good implications for instruction, as attention to prosody and not simply rate, should better improve comprehension. In the multidimensional fluency scale (Zutell & Rasinski, 1991) rate is only alluded to in the category called pace. Pace is more of a qualitative measure that encourages teachers to assess appropriate pacing while students read rather than fluency norms often associated with reading rate (Hasbrouk & Tindal, 2006, 2017). Less focus on rate and more focus on prosody means that resulting instruction is more likely consider the meaning of the text rather than how fast a student can read it.

However, it is still important that students develop automaticity in word reading to support reading comprehension. And, according to the 162 educators in this study, only 30% included automaticity in their definitions of reading fluency. Word-by-word or dysfluent readers often struggle with reading comprehension (Lefly & Pennington, 1991; Levy et al., 1997; O'Shea & Sindelar,

1983), and therefore we must understand that automaticity is vital in fluency instruction. Reading fluency instruction should move students from decoding words accurately to automatically recalling the words from memory (Treisman, Vieira, & Hayes, 1992). Effortless reading of words allows readers to focus on reading comprehension (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974).

According to the data, those surveyed agreed that reading fluency was important for reading comprehension, which is confirmed by empirical research (Kieffer & Christodoulou, 2020; Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2008; Sabatini et al., 2019). In addition to increased reading fluency, research on reading fluency interventions/activities also report improved reading comprehension (Vasinda & McCleod, 2011; Wilfong, 2008; Young et al., 2018). Thus, utilizing methods in the classroom that include all three components of reading fluency can more effectively improve fluency and comprehension.

## **Limitations and Further Research**

As is the case with most research, an increased number of participants would have strengthened the study. Still, the analyses were strong enough to detect some effects. There was also an imbalance of participants by role. However, it could be argued that, in some way, it is a more representative sample. For example, there are certainly more elementary school teachers than curriculum coordinators in the public schools, similar to this study. Though, more equality would have made for a stronger analysis. Finally, the other category has more participants in the category than expected and they were not asked to specify what was meant by other. In the analysis, however, no differences were detected, indicating their understandings of fluency were aligned with most of the other roles.

Further research could continue to collect responses from a variety of roles in education. The research could also include observations of how reading fluency is currently being taught, and whether there is truly more of a focus on prosodic reading, which would be a great feat as rate dominated for at least two decades. Also, during observations, the duration of reading fluency instruction could be recorded to see if this important component of reading is gaining more attention in the classroom.

## **Conclusion**

Although reading fluency itself seems to be misinterpreted, many educators agree that reading fluency is important for reading comprehension. We believe that to develop and deliver effective reading fluency instruction, educators need a



concrete understanding of what reading fluency is and what it is not. An accurate scientifically-based definition of fluency will lead to an accurate understanding of its components, which should lead to effective reading fluency instruction, which will lead to increased reading comprehension and overall reading achievement.

Reading fluency is viewed as an important competency. However, the efficacy of fluency instruction may be limited by the extent to which reading practitioners define the chief characteristics or goal of fluency in limit ways. Each year, the What's Hot in Literacy (Cassidy et al., 2022) survey reports that reading fluency is not a hot topic and should not be. However, the continued misunderstanding of what fluency is and how it should be taught suggests that perhaps it should be a hot topic. Clearly, there exists a need to develop a universal and ubiquitous consensus on the nature and components of reading fluency. The only way to effectively use the F-Word in the classroom is to understand it completely.

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# MAKING THE CONNECTION: CHANGING THE LANGUAGE WITHIN THE TRADITIONAL LITERACY ENVIRONMENT BY INCORPORATING ELEMENTS OF SOCIAL-MEDIA AND POPULAR CULTURE

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## **Abstract**

*Literacy education settings are currently encountering a disconnect between students' social language and varying forms of communication that they are exposed to in their home environments, versus the academic language used within traditional literacy environments designed by state and national curriculums. A generation of students are currently moving through education systems that do not match the culture or meet the needs of their learning style. These students are used to communicating and sharing their literacy and communication skills through popular culture, gaming, and social media. Greater literacy access, engagement, and empowerment are key to making improvements. This article seeks to address and give more details on the areas which need further study in relation to bridging the gap between traditional literacy and digital literacies, as well as explores potential methods and strategies that can help to reimagine literacy education.*

*Keywords:* Literacy, Social-Media, Digital Literacies, Popular Culture, Communication, Literacy Engagement

## Introduction

Social media is not the first thing that comes to mind when thinking of literacy and literacy education. However, it is one of the most popular forms of communication used, as over 4.2 billion people in the world are users of social media (Global Digital Report 2021- We Are Social, 2021). Social media has its pitfalls and downsides, and whether it be TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp or platforms, it is a part of the popular culture in with school aged children engage with (Pew Research Center, 2018). Because of the negative aspects of this culture, it is often overlooked or not considered when evaluating forms of literacy. This creates a disconnect between students and their social culture and home life and the classroom. The lack of connection between traditional literacy skills that are honed in the classroom, and literacy skills that are used in their everyday lives leaves room for educators to further explore ways to close in on the disconnect.

## Social Media, Digital Literacies, and its Potential Impact on Literacy Education

### *Learning Environments and Engagement in Digital Literacies*

Effective literacy instruction involves acknowledging that "...all uses of written language (e.g., studying a biology text, interpreting an online weather map, and reading an Appalachian Trail guide) occur in specific places and times as part of broader societal practices" (Alvermann, 2002, p. 190)." In the classroom setting, educators are encouraged to create an environment that is print rich and inclusive (Hoffman, et.al., 2004; Tao & Robinson, 2005; Bucholz & Sheffler, 2009; Molina-Roldan, et al., 2021). The efforts to create these environments are done in various manners the in K-12 setting, but the manner in which digital environments are cultivated are not often explored or researched. In a society that is experiencing a pandemic, poverty, disengagement, and inequities, students need to learn the value of growth in literacy journeys. In that journey, they need not only learn about the power of the resources that they *do* have, but the value of *why* it's important to grow their literacy skills. Not omitting what they use and encounter outside of the four walls of a classroom is where reimagining the literacy learning experience should begin.

Many students have more access to books, authors, and resources at their fingers than ever before (due to technology), but due to various factors, they are somewhat limited in how they use the technology that is available. Gaming

(problem solving; drawing conclusions), chatting (speaking), posting captions (summarizing), paraphrasing (tweets), creating sequences and videos on apps (TikTok), are all just a few of the ways that users of social media immerse themselves in their own type of digital literacy. There is a gap that exists, or perhaps a door that has not been unlocked—which doesn't allow students to fully connect the skills that they are learning in class, and that could be narrowed with the implementation of social media and popular culture being implemented into literacy teaching and learning curriculum and lessons.

### ***Access to Digital Literacy Opportunities & Resources***

In order to ensure that students are receiving fair and equitable opportunities to succeed, they need the access and the ability to use digital resources (eBooks, videos, online classes, webinars, social media platforms, etc.) that are available. School districts tout that they are preparing students with life and career skills needed for the 21st century—but one must ask, is that truly the case, and if so, how are they meeting that need?

Digital literacy is defined as “information and communication technologies to find, understand, evaluate, create, and communicate digital information” (Office for Information Technology Policy’s Digital Literacy Task Force, 2013, p. 2). Students not only need access and the ability to create using technology tools, but they need educators and curriculum which supports multimodal ways (Cope & Kalantzis, 2019; Walsh, 2010) to make gains in their individual literacy journeys. Sye (2022) states that students “In the current information environment, sources can be accessed through many different tools. Students may or may not receive specific instruction on certain tools needed for their work (p. 11). From the youngest learners (as early as Kindergarten), to those studying in higher education institutions, students are taught to research (for assignments, to learn preferences, etc.). However, they don’t realize that being told to search for a book in a library is the same task that Google does. This is where the disconnect lies—the access is often there, but undefined. This becomes worse in areas in which there is limited or very minimal access to technology. More studies are needed on literacy access for marginalized groups. There is also a need to breakdown the various demographics (ages, locations, grade levels, races, social economic statuses, etc.) to determine how to mend the opportunity gap in education and literacy. If the focus is primarily or solely on traditional “learning to read” and becoming literate without touching new and future modes of literacy, schools are going to become further disconnected from newer generations of learners.

## Incorporating Elements of Social-Media and Popular Culture

### *Infusing Social-Media and Popular Culture into the Literacy Classroom*

Students need to know that utilizing their Smartphones and having access to the world via the Internet is powerful—in the sense that learning can become personal and reach almost endless possibilities. Engagement, hearing and incorporating student voice are necessary when teaching literacy skills (Ng, 2018; Wanless & Crawford, 2016). Educators need to know that using elements in which students identify with or that allow them to express themselves can be an asset to their instructional practices. According to Childs (2021), literacy

**TABLE 1**  
**Four components of literacy in relation to social media**

| <b>Social Media Apps and Technological Devices that use Literacy Skills</b>  |  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>Reading</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facebook (Status updates and chats)</li> <li>• Twitter (Tweets, news, hashtags, chats)</li> <li>• Instagram (Captions, hashtags, Stories)</li> <li>• Snapchat (Stories, chat)</li> <li>• Tumblr (Blog posts, reactions)</li> <li>• Blogs (Articles, Blog, Blog feedback)</li> <li>• Smartphones/Texting (Texts, acronyms, emoji)</li> <li>• Scribd (Book clubs)</li> <li>• Goodreads (Book clubs, tracking reading)</li> <li>• Wattpad (Stories, writing series, anthologies)</li> </ul> <p><b>Listening</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facebook (Videos and Facebook Live)</li> <li>• Twitter (Videos, Live events)</li> <li>• Instagram (Videos, Stories)</li> <li>• Snapchat (Stories)</li> <li>• Smartphones (Recording info to playback; FaceTime, Video Chat)</li> <li>• YouTube (Watching videos)</li> <li>• Audible (Listening to books)</li> <li>• Spotify (Podcasts, Music)</li> <li>• Apple (Music and Apple Podcasts/ Radio shows)</li> <li>• Tidal (Music, Videos, video series)</li> <li>• Pandora (Music)</li> </ul> | <p><b>Writing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facebook (Status updates and chats)</li> <li>• Twitter (Tweets, hashtags, chats)</li> <li>• Instagram (Captions, hashtags, Stories)</li> <li>• Snapchat (Chat)</li> <li>• Tumblr (Blog posts, reactions)</li> <li>• Blogs (Articles, Blog, Blog feedback)</li> <li>• Smartphones/Texting (Texts, acronyms, emoji)</li> <li>• Wattpad (Stories, writing series, anthologies)</li> <li>• YouTube (Content and scripts)</li> </ul> <p><b>Speaking</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facebook (Creating Videos and Facebook Live)</li> <li>• Instagram (Creating Videos and Stories)</li> <li>• Snapchat (Stories)</li> <li>• Smartphones (Voice Texts; FaceTime, Video Chat)</li> <li>• YouTube (Creating videos)</li> <li>• WhatsApp (Voice Messages and Video)</li> </ul> |

educators “must analyze their teaching practices and make efforts to connect in ways that students least expect” (p. 303) and that methods should be in place to “wake students up” (p. 304). Before they can plan lessons and make connections, they must be able to see for themselves how literacy is connected to daily browses online, or interactions with text messages and applications (apps).

In Table 1, Childs (2021) shows the link between four major components of literacy (Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking) and how the social media and popular culture are already exercising these skills with students outside of the classroom.

In Table 2, Childs (2021) shares specific literacy skills and applications or technology tools that match with those skills, and then shares connections that can be made between the two.

Social media informs and puts popular culture on display. “Influencers” on social media use strategies that captivate their audiences and get them to buy into their products. They create “buzz” by branding content, and marketing in catchy manners. Educators need “buy in” when it relates to teaching traditional aspects of literacy that students might find challenging or disengaging. Here are a few examples in which popular culture can be embedded into literacy instruction:

**TABLE 2**  
**Social-media and its literacy connections**

| <b>Literacy Skill</b>              | <b>Apps/Applications/<br/>Technology</b>      | <b>Literacy Connections to Social Media</b>   |
|------------------------------------|---|---|
| <i>Summarizing or Paraphrasing</i> | Twitter, Texts                                | 280 Characters on Twitter in which word usage is limited’ Texts (creation of acronyms and “stems” to communicate) |
| <i>Inferring</i>                   | Instagram; Twitter                            | Inferring photos or tweets and their accompanying captions  |
| <i>Visualization</i>               | Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat          | All apps provide a means to plan and demonstrate a “theme” of a story or idea.                                    |
| <i>Sequencing</i>                  | YouTube, Snapchat, Vlogs (any video platform) | “How To” videos-Create steps to complete a task; Option to tell stories or give directions                        |
| <i>Main Idea &amp; Details</i>     | YouTube, Snapchat, Vlogs (any video platform) | Developing a plot or theme within a video or event captured   |
| <i>Classification</i>              | Facebook, Instagram, Twitter                  | Using Hashtags, Facebook groups   |
| <i>Mood/Tone</i>                   | Facebook                                      | Asks for a “status update” or what is on the mind of the user.  |



- **Movies & Television:** Commercials, movie clips, documentaries, news, and television shows can be used to teach plot, theme, make comparisons, main idea, genres, gist, facts and opinions, imagery, and chronological order.
- **Music:** Music is a form of writing, and a way to write for different purposes. As is related to literacy, music can explore theme, lyrics, vocabulary, similes/metaphors, comprehension, and tone.
- **Social Language & Slang:** Have students create word walls that include slang terms paired with academic vocabulary. Language can also be explored by discovering the origins of academic vocabulary and slang terms. One other way to encourage learning about words and language is to break down the meanings of prefixes and suffixes or acronyms used in everyday life (DNA, RADAR, etc.) and those used on social media and text messaging (LOL, SMH, etc.).
- **Sports:** Sports can be used to teach and make connections about the skills/concepts sequence, order, patterns, uniformity, and themes.
- **Fashion:** Fashion can be used to highlight and make comparisons in theme, teach about visuals, mood/tone, descriptions, characteristics, imagery, and expression.

Paralleling relevant concepts with skills that are normally taught in isolation in a classroom setting make room for change and cultural responsiveness in literacy education.

## **Recommendations: Reimagining and Reinventing Practice in Literacy Education**

### *Using Technology as a Teaching Tool*

It is evident from the recent pandemic that there is a need for more training for educators on the use of educational technology. This should include the use of electronic texts (textbooks, ebooks, blogs), webinar platforms, messaging and communication tools and apps. But it is important to note, that all stakeholders (teachers, administration, coaches, teacher educators, etc.) receive training that will not only give the professionals new skills, but the ability to use technology to not only enhance lessons, but to truly teach students how to learn *with* technology.

***Potential Impacts on Literacy Assessment***

More long-term studies are needed on literacy assessment and the impact of digital literacies. According to Flowers (2022) “Standardized tests are supposed to be used to make instructional decisions. However, when it comes to literacy, test scores are used as indicators of disabilities, to eliminate recess, and to grade schools...” (p. 4). Literacy assessments need to be used beyond scores. Based off of state and national assessments, it is certain that learning gaps among disadvantaged students and students of color have been identified for years (due to a number of reasons—including bias, lack of quality resources, etc.). It is also important to note that data from these assessments have also been conducted and collected in the same manner, as well as the preparation of students has been essentially the same. Students that fall into these gaps need more than upped rigor, but they need relevance.

This is not implying that popular culture should be a part of assessing students, but the modes in which we assess them could be revamped by utilizing technology. This could include the creation of digital portfolios in which the students share their knowledge, and their teachers collect data from standardized testing—both to be housed in a central location. This would also allow educators more freedom to get to truly know the needs of their students.

***Strengthening Family Literacy Partnerships***

The stronger the partnership that is built between educators, students, and their families, the more opportunity there is to provide lasting and authentic literacy learning opportunities. At home, parents need to be provided with ways to make literacy connections to content being taught, but they must be made aware of what is being taught.

Connecting to the popular culture (including social media, music, technology, trends, etc.) that students relate to gives educators a sense of students’ interests and what they value. Knowing what students value is important, but educators need to gain knowledge and trust from students as well as parents and the learning community outside of school. Social media and technology can be used to provide a bridge that gives parents and guardians swift access to an educator’s resources, and it is a way to involve them in genuine conversations about required content, and what is transpiring in the classroom. Communicating using social media and technology (apps, blogs, digital newsletters, etc.) creates an environment that can not only inform, but teach—it is a could serve as a personal database that capsulates the culture of the student, and captures their family’s needs.

### *More Connectedness and Empowerment of Student Voices*

Incorporating references from social media and popular culture allows for a connection to take place in learning with skills that students might otherwise devalue. "...social media can be used for social good, such as overturning oppressive regimes or bringing income inequality to the forefront of national and international discussions" (Hemsley, et.al., 2018). Social media is a place where users go to have a voice, to ask for change, and to hear perspectives. Literacy learning involves knowing the power of voice within a plot, story, or piece of literature.

Speaking and listening are important elements of literacy. Student voice is key in engagement. More spaces in literacy classrooms need to be developed to allow students the access to form opinions, develop a sense of identity and agency (Alvermann, 2001; Vaughn, 2018; Frankel, 2016), and see themselves as readers, writers, and thinkers.

## Conclusion

Students need a safe space to grow in their literacy journeys. Care is put into place in earlier grades to ensure that students can grasp a foundation in phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, phonics, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000), and educators spend years reinforcing those skills. To remain being connected and in tune with students' needs, such a setting requires some reimagining. Social media, digital literacies, and popular culture hold value for this generation. If an educator can tap into the schema of their learners and make relevant connections, they will be able to create a rich literacy environment, with culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2006; Samuels, 2018; Crawford & Wanless, 2018) and assessment practices, foster better relationships with parents and the home learning environment, and most importantly—empower students, by showing them the freedom of being literate and using their voice.

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# LOOKING FORWARD: BEST PRACTICES FOR ONLINE CLINICAL EXPERIENCES

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## IN LITERACY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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### **Abstract**

*In this manuscript, we describe a self-study of how West Virginia University's graduate Literacy Education program transitioned from an on-campus program to being the only fully online program awarded the International Literacy Association (ILA) National Recognition with Certificate of Distinction in 2019 (Dagen, et al., 2021; Kern, et al., 2020). Details describing the A3 Conceptual Model (Morewood et al., 2019; Morewood et al., 2021) used to ground the program's context and structural changes and the shift to an online practicum experience are explained. A deep dive of ILA's Standard 7 (ILA, 2018) throughout the National Recognition process demonstrates how the four components of this standard are reflected across the courses and how the A3 Conceptual Model (Morewood et al. 2019; Morewood et al., 2021.) supports student engagement within the course design. Various educational stakeholders' perspectives are presented to demonstrate different noticings about the online practicum experience. A discussion is provided for other programs that are working through similar online transitions.*

*Keywords:* A3 Conceptual Model, reading specialist program evaluation, self-study, effective online teaching and learning, and practicum experiences.

## Introduction

Those who prepare reading specialists and other specialized literacy professionals (SLPs) have studied quality curricula, supervision of specialist candidates, and delivery platforms for decades. Guided by the International Literacy Association's (ILA) Standards (2018, 2010, 2003, 1998, and 1992), preparation programs have witnessed a shift in multiple areas, most notably toward increased literacy leadership, in both formal and informal capacities (Bean & Goatley, 2021; Bean & Ippolito, 2016; Bean et al., 2015; Sharp et al., 2018; Swan et al., 2020). ILA has recently guided program practicum supervision by introducing a new Standard focusing on Practicum/Clinical Experiences (Standard 7) (ILA, 2018). This standard outlines expectations for clinical practicums, including those housed in university clinics and school-based, virtual settings. These clinical experiences focusing on struggling readers also now include collaborative peer engagement and a leadership focus.

Further, a shift to online teaching before and after the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the field of teacher preparation. As many have learned in 2020, virtual learning requires new pedagogy and student engagement methods. All the changes in the roles and responsibilities and delivery platforms have re-shaped contemporary preparation efforts, requiring universities to engage in systematic program development and decision making. As outlined in this manuscript, the work encompasses frameworks for engagement, standards for supervision, and research-based—quality content. Considering ILA's added standard, this self-study research focused on how to effectively transition a traditional reading specialist practicum/clinical graduate course to an online learning environment.

## Literature Review

Understanding the role of the contemporary reading specialists is vital to the work. As outlined in *The Multiple Roles of School-Based Specialized Literacy Professionals*, ILA (2015) defines the “reading/literacy specialist” as:

an instructional [role], predominantly working with students who are experiencing difficulties with reading and writing. At the same time, to fulfill their instructional role effectively, these specialized literacy professionals must have the skills, knowledge, and dispositions

to effectively and collaboratively work with teachers to improve general classroom literacy instruction. (p. 7)

Clearly, the reading specialist's role is as "multifaceted" (Bean, 1979, 2020) as ever. Creating conditions for quality preparation and supervision in face-to-face and virtual environments is an ongoing and ever-changing endeavor.

The multiple roles are reflected in the newly added Standard 7 (ILA, 2018). As previously stated, this standard focuses on practicum/clinical experiences, reinforcing the importance that ILA sees in this learning context. Both the standard and the components focus on reading specialists working with the students and collaborating with peers through a literacy leadership lens. Table 1 provides the language of the overall standard and components of Standard 7.

In 2018, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education's (AACTE) Clinical Practice Commission (CPC) generated a report describing the necessity of practical experiences in (typically undergraduate) teacher education programs. The CPC's work was in response to the 2010 National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education's (NCATE) call for teacher education

**TABLE 1**  
**ILA Standard 7 with Components.**

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**STANDARD 7: PRACTICUM/CLINICAL EXPERIENCES**

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Candidates complete supervised, integrated, extended practicum/clinical experiences that include intervention work with students and working with their peers and experienced colleagues; practicum includes ongoing experiences in school-based setting(s); supervision includes observation and ongoing feedback by qualified supervisors.

7.1 Candidates work with individual and small groups of students at various grade levels to assess students' literacy strengths and needs, develop literacy intervention plans, implement instructional plans, create supportive literacy learning environments, and assess impact on student learning. Settings may include a candidate's own classroom, literacy clinic, other school, or community settings.

7.2 Candidates collaborate with and coach peers and experienced colleagues to develop, reflect on, and study their own and others' teaching practices.

7.3 Candidates have ongoing opportunities for authentic, school-based practicum experiences.

7.4 Candidates receive supervision, including observation (in-person, computer-assisted, or video analysis) and ongoing feedback during their practicum/clinical experiences by supervisors who understand literacy processes, have literacy content knowledge, understand literacy assessment and evidence-based instructional strategies and, preferably, have experience as reading/literacy specialists.

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(ILA, 2018)



programs to ground all their work in clinical practices. This report provides tenets of clinical practice in three areas: defining clinical practice, generating a common language and terminology around clinical practice, and topics centered on productive clinical experiences. The CPC provides ten proclamations to be considered when developing and implementing practical/clinical experiences. The Commission is clear in their brief that these ten proclamations are not in hierarchical order, and all must be considered at the same level when designing practical/clinical placements. The four proclamations that became most relevant to this graduate work are defined below.

- **Central Proclamation.** Clinical practice is central to high-quality teacher preparation.
- **Pedagogy Proclamation.** As pedagogy is the science of teaching, the intentional integration of pedagogical training into an educator preparation program is the cornerstone of effective clinical practice.
- **Skills Proclamation.** Clinical practice includes, supports, and complements the innovative and requisite skills, strategies, and tools that improve teacher preparation by using high-leverage practices as a part of a commitment to continuous renewal for all learning sites.
- **Expertise Proclamation.** Teaching is a profession requiring specialized knowledge and preparation. Educators are the pedagogical and content experts. It is through the assertion and application of this expertise that they can inform the process and vision for renewing educator preparation.

(AACTE, 2018, p. 3–4)

## Theoretical Framework

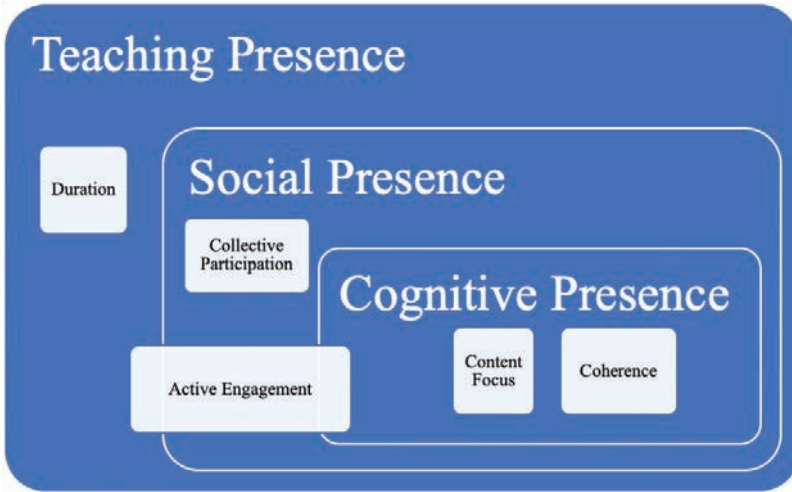
### A3 Conceptual Model

The LE faculty's efforts to transition to a fully online program were vast. In this self-study, one topic that continued to emerge was that of theoretical underpinnings. The faculty members returned to conversations about the online practicum's curricular and course design structures. Early in this process, one faculty member sought out what others in literacy education used as theoretical frameworks for online course design. After much investigation, it seemed this program was ahead of the curve, as the faculty member struggled to find theoretical constructs in online education widely used across literacy education.

One theoretical model identified was the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison et al., 2000). This framework looked at course design through three presences (teaching, cognitive, and social) and was specifically designed around asynchronous discussion boards in online contexts. The design and facilitation of a course define the teaching presence. The focus here is how the creation of the course and instructor facilitation support student learning. The cognitive presence focuses on how student content knowledge is built through discussion and reflection. Finally, social presence recognizes the importance of how people relate to one another in online settings.

As the LE faculty used this theoretical model in their conversations, other topics related to teachers' professional learning (such as student content connections, how frequently issues would be discussed, and how students participated in the courses) arose and disrupted the curricular changes. At this point, two of the LE faculty members and a colleague outside of WVU, who also studied teacher learning began to discuss the alignment of the CoI framework (Garrison et al., 2000) and Desimone's (2009) characteristics of effective professional development. Through this discussion, the A3 Conceptual Model emerged (Morewood et al., 2017; Morewood et al., 2019).

The A3 Conceptual Model (Morewood et al., 2017; Morewood et al., 2019; Morewood et al., 2021) was developed as these three faculty members created a crosswalk between the CoI (Garrison et al., 2000) and Desimone's (2009) characteristics. The initial 2017 model demonstrated the alignment of these two different frameworks (CoI focusing on asynchronous learning and then the characteristics of effective professional development). Something deeper emerged as the LE program continued to work with this crosswalk of frameworks. As the conversations, course design, curriculum reviews, and teaching in the online courses continued, the faculty members began to better articulate that Desimone's *active learning* characteristic was present across all three of the CoI presences (Morewood et al., 2017; Morewood et al., 2019; Morewood et al., 2021). This characteristic could not be parsed into one specific presence, arguably inherent in each. It was here that the theoritization evolved into the A3 Conceptual Model (Morewood et al. 2019; Morewood et al., 2021) in Figure 1. The LE faculty members began to think differently about how they were weaving active learning opportunities across the teaching, cognitive, and social presences. In these conversations, the faculty members found it helpful to have the A3 Conceptual Model (Morewood et al., Morewood et al.) to support their thinking and execution of programmatic changes, mainly regarding the redesign and launch of the online practicum. This publication demonstrates how a



**Figure 1** A3 Conceptual Model-Active Engagement Across the Three Presences.  
*\*Note: Reprint with permission from IGI Global Publishing Presences*

program can use the A3 Conceptual Model to guide the work of transitioning from a practicum course to an online environment.

## Methodology

This research took a self-study approach. Data collection occurred over years of program work. The data sources included a program of study documents, notes, memos of faculty conversations, publications, and presentations throughout this process, focused interviews with educational stakeholders, online course shells, and external evaluations of the LE program. The analysis of these sources was recursive, as themes continued to emerge throughout the process. For this particular research, ILA Standard 7 (2018) was used to focus on the different aspects of the practicum/clinical experience, and the A3 Conceptual Model (Morewood et al., 2019; Morewood et al., 2021) was applied to better understand the active learning that took place across the three presences within the online practicum/clinical learning environment.

The authors found that the nature of this exploration of these sources and the alignment of ILA Standard 7 (2018) with the A3 Conceptual Model (Morewood et al., 2019; Morewood et al., 2021) worked well with Loughran and Northfield (1998) ten statements regarding the nature of self-study. In particular,

the statements we kept returning to throughout this process were that self-study research requires outside perspectives to be collected, reviewed, and considered when making instructional decisions, a sense of shared learning occurred across faculty members, and that the audience must be considered when reporting on the self-study findings. In addition to Loughran and Northfield's statements, this research was also guided by Samaras' (2011) Five Foci Methodological

**TABLE 2**  
**Five Foci Methodological Framework**

| <b>Foci</b>                                  | <b>Methodological Component</b>   |
|--|---|
| <b>Personal Situated Inquiry</b>             | Self-study is a self-initiated inquiry of practice and draws from a practitioner's experience.  |
| <b>Critical Collaboration</b>                | Critical collaborative inquiry contributes to a validation of findings because the analysis extends beyond one's personal views, thus addressing potential biases. Paradoxically, self-study is both personal and interpersonal.  |
| <b>Improved Learning</b>                     | Self-study teachers question the status quo of their teaching and the politics of schooling in order to improve and impact learning for themselves, their students, and the education field.<br><br>Self-study is for improving and impacting learning. It is the "so what" of what we do as teachers. As self-study teachers work to improve their professional development, they impact students' learning, inform programs, influence policy decisions, and reform education.    |
| <b>Transparent Research Process</b>          | Self-study includes a hermeneutic spiral of questioning, discovering, framing, reframing, and revisiting.<br><br>Self-study necessitates a disposition of openness to outside views, questions, and critique. Self-study teachers strive to make their practice explicit to themselves and to others. The transparency of the research process is enhanced through the review of critical friends who ask probing questions and offer alternative perspectives and interpretations. |
| <b>Knowledge Generation and Presentation</b> | Self-study research generates knowledge that is made public through presentation and publication.<br><br>Self-study research contributes broadly to the knowledge base of personal, professional, program, and school development. Making the study public allows it to be available for review and critique. It contributes to the accumulation of pedagogical, content, and issue-based knowledge and serves to build validation across related work.                             |

(Samaras, 2011, p. 72)

Framework. This framework includes personal situated inquiry, critical collaboration, improved learning, transparent research process, and knowledge generation and presentation (p. 71). Table 2 describes the five foci and how they best relate to this work.

These five foci grounded the research into meaningful categories and shaped this self-study story. Below, these foci are used to describe this self-study findings.

## Findings

### Personal Situated Learning

West Virginia University (WVU) is a land-grant university that strives to provide high-quality educational experiences for the people in this state; therefore, the mission of WVU is to serve the people within the state. WVU's mission states,

As a land-grant institution, the faculty, staff, and students at West Virginia University commit to creating a diverse and inclusive culture that advances education, healthcare, and prosperity for all by providing access and opportunity; by advancing high-impact research; and by leading transformation in West Virginia and the world through local, state and global engagement (Retrieved from <https://www.wvu.edu/about-wvu/mission>).

The land-grant mission extends from undergraduate work through terminal degrees in many fields. WVU takes much pride in the teacher education programs that serve as a primary pipeline of teachers throughout the counties in the state.

Given the land-grant mission of serving the constituents of West Virginia and meeting the needs of practicing teachers across the state, the Literacy Education (LE) program worked to transition from an on-campus program to a 100% online program. Here we describe how this online program emerged and the history of how West Virginia University's LE program transitioned from an on-campus program to be the only fully online program to be awarded the International Literacy Association (ILA) National Recognition with Certificate of Distinction in 2019 (Kern et al., 2020; Dagen et al., 2021).

At WVU, the LE program offers a Master of Arts degree with reading specialist certification. In West Virginia, this certification must be attached to the initial teacher certification. In addition, educators must complete all coursework in the Master of Arts degree and pass the Praxis test before the state awards the

Reading specialist certification. Working within these state requirements, the LE program began moving from an on-campus to a fully online program in 2007. The transition to online was thoughtful, strategic, and occurred over a few years. This allowed the LE faculty to tinker with and learn about different aspects of online instruction that supported the conceptual framework aligned to this program (and specifically the online practicum) and the institution's land-grant mission.

Beginning in 2007, the faculty tried different online tools that were both within WVU's provided platform (Blackboard) and those that were available outside of WVU's resources. This time allowed the faculty to think through what tools would work best in the courses they taught to support student learning and meet course objectives while searching for a theoretical model that fit an online M.A. with the reading specialist certification program. It is important to keep in mind that at this time, the practicum course remained a traditional on-campus course (i.e., it was the last course in the program to transition to an online format), with some regional site-based practicum offering if there was a population of candidates in that area.

### **Critical Collaborative Inquiry**

During this transition time, the LE program continued its accreditation work. Engaging in the accreditation process over the years kept this program's paradox of personal and interpersonal work vibrant (Swan et al., 2012). Both internal and external professionals to the LE program were continuously providing feedback through the course and online platform observations, written, and verbal administrative feedback, and peer conversations within WVU and across institutions in the US. In 2012, the M.A. with reading specialist certification (i.e., the LE program) received national accreditation from the ILA, a Specialty Professional Association (SPA) aligned with the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (now the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP]). The WVU LE program earned national recognition for this program that offered coursework entirely online; the one exception was the practicum course, which continued to be provided in an on-campus setting.

Even with most of the LE program coursework offered online, aligned with trends in the field, enrollment in the program began to decline. The LE faculty noticed that the number of candidates supported through their school's Reading First (NCLB, 2002) funding had slowed down. Classroom teachers applying for reading specialist certification sought even greater flexibility for this advanced teaching degree. In response to candidates' needs, the program reduced its total credit hours from 36 to 30, eliminating the requirement of two elective courses.

In addition to restructuring the total credit hours, the program conducted a complete curriculum review in 2015 (Dagen et al., 2021). As part of this review, a new LE Program Coordinator and LE faculty members worked to align WVU's program with the early work of the *ILA 2017 Standards* (2018). This included a shift in the program name from *Reading* to *Literacy Education* to match the proposed standards' language.

Also, because of conversations and feedback from statewide stakeholders, the faculty considered designing an effective online practicum course to allow the program to be offered entirely online. The practicum course became increasingly problematic as the LE program continued to attract students beyond the counties surrounding the university. Students who were located in areas outside of the traditional counties surrounding the university were finding it difficult (at best) to participate in the on-campus practicum. In 2017, the program successfully offered Literacy Intervention II or LE 689 for the first time. It moved from a hybrid program designation, requiring an on-campus practicum, to a fully online program that allowed the practicum course to be based within any school setting. The faculty again grounded this transition in the A3 Conceptual Model to do this successfully.

### **Improved Learning**

The status quo approach to a reading practicum/clinic no longer worked for the students in this program. The WVU LE faculty were ready and positioned to impact student learning through meaningful and effective online instruction. The traditional on-campus practicum had the same setup as most practicums or reading clinics around the country. The LE candidates came to campus one night a week and provided instruction to one or more students struggling with reading and writing tasks. The LE candidates prepared lesson plans and taught the lessons. The course instructor observed a few candidates during each session, and the entire class met to debrief each week and provide feedback to one another. At times, some students videotaped lessons to share with the group during the debrief, but this activity was rare. Peer feedback was often a retelling of what occurred in the lesson by the LE candidate versus peers being able to see the instruction in action.

Again, with the transition to an online practicum, the LE faculty worked to conceptualize the replication of learning opportunities within a traditional on-campus reading clinic course in an online setting and hoped to expand on the traditional meaningful learning experiences through technology. During this planning time, the A3 Conceptual Model (Morewood et al., 2019; Morewood et

al., 2021) became the main focus of many of the conversations. The faculty were determined to continue to have the rigor and learning experiences of a traditional practicum course replicated in this online version of the course. The LE faculty member and course designer of the online practicum course worked tirelessly to change the learning environment without changing the learning. The purpose here is to describe the instructional design of the online practicum course and how the A3 Conceptual Model (Morewood et al., 2019; Morewood et al., 2021) is represented within and throughout the course.

The revised online practicum course, LE 689, meets synchronously online for approximately three hours per week for a 16-week term. Meetings are held using online platforms supported by our institution, such as Blackboard Collaborate and Zoom. Near the beginning of the term, reading specialist candidates are divided into three small collaborative groups (4–6 students per group depending on class size), who then work closely with each other for the remainder of the term. Collaborative groups allow candidates the opportunity to build close working relationships with their peers and allow the instructor the opportunity to provide more individualized instruction and feedback to candidates in a small group setting. Here, the A3 Conceptual Model (Morewood et al., 2019; Morewood et al., 2021) is present as the LE candidates actively engage with the instructor (teaching & cognitive presences [Garrison et al., 2000]), engage with each other in small groups, (social & cognitive presences [Garrison et al., 2000]), and work with their Pk-12 students in the practicum setting (social & cognitive presences [Garrison et al., 2000]).

The course is designed through a center approach, meaning that there are three distinct centers that the LE candidates rotate through each week with their small groups. The setup is very similar to any elementary classroom that uses centers to rotate students through during instructional time; however, this is done with graduate students in an online environment. Each week, the small groups rotate through the following three centers, each lasting approximately 50 minutes in duration:

- Center 1: Instructor Updates and Pedagogy
- Center 2: Content Knowledge
- Center 3: Literacy Leadership

During Center 1, students meet live with the course instructor to discuss course content, assignments, and updates. As the course progresses and candidates begin providing weekly reading intervention to a small group of 3–5 students,



candidates use Center 1 time to share short, 3-minute video clips from a recent intervention session to discuss and receive feedback from the instructor and their peers. Some weeks, candidates can choose any focus for their video clip, while other weeks, they are asked to share a clip from a specific portion of their lesson (e.g., word study, fluency, writing). Center 1 is structured using a Graduate Release of Responsibility (GRR) model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Feedback is given primarily by the instructor at the beginning of the course and then transitions to more peer-to-peer coaching and feedback as the course progresses.

During Center 2, candidates meet synchronously, without the instructor, to discuss relevant course readings about literacy intervention (building content and pedagogical knowledge) and literacy leadership. At the beginning of the term, candidates sign up to lead Center 2 discussions around each week's readings. Each group's Center 2 discussion is recorded, and the leader is responsible for submitting a summary and reflection of their group's discussion for that week.

In Center 3, candidates work asynchronously, using an online collaboration tool called VoiceThread, to share their upcoming intervention lesson plans and provide feedback to their group members' lesson plans. This center activity has two objectives. First, it gives the LE candidates feedback on their lesson plans before providing instruction to make any necessary adjustments to their instruction before they deliver the lesson. The second objective of this required course task is to provide the LE candidates with more opportunities to step into the literacy leader role. By repeatedly giving feedback on their peers' lesson plans, they become very familiar with the students their peers are working with and continually develop their feedback skills.

It is important to note that throughout the course, in addition to the weekly synchronous course meetings, writing of lesson plans, and instruction with their small groups of preschool-adult students, the LE candidates also submit weekly reflections on their lesson plans and maintain a literacy leadership log to demonstrate their development as literacy leaders. At the end of the course, candidates are responsible for writing case study reports for each of their intervention students. Their written reports are submitted to the instructor for feedback, and presentation versions of the reports are shared with the instructor and peers during the last week of class. The written reports are distributed to the parents after final edits are made.

## **Transparent Research Process**

Throughout the program revisions, the accreditation process, and the transition to offering a fully online program, LE faculty continued what Samaras (2011)

describes as the “hermeneutic spiral of questioning, discovering, framing, reframing, and revisiting” (p. 72). Engaging in this process with others and providing feedback at different steps and stages provided different perspectives to be shared and the program to be stronger through these critiques. The faculty continued to strive for additional feedback by applying for the ILA National Recognition with Certificate of Distinction. And in 2019, this program was the first fully online program to be awarded the ILA National Recognition with Certificate of Distinction (Kern et al., 2020).

The ILA process for this award first required a self-study report of the program’s alignment to all of the ILA Standards (2018). This report was submitted first, and if favorably reviewed, a site visit would be scheduled a few months after the self-report submission. The LE program received a positive review, and a two-day site visit was scheduled late in the spring semester of 2019.

While it is essential to recognize that the overall program was reviewed and received this recognition and distinction for its alignment with all of the ILA Standards, it was *Standard 7: Practicum/Clinical Experiences* (Table 1) that was the only standard where this program was evaluated as “distinguished” on all four components by all three external reviewers of the self-report.

For the two-day site visit, the LE program established a reading room on-campus that displayed the required course textbooks, binders for each course containing course syllabi, key assessment information, and LE candidate work samples. In addition, the reading room was where the site visitors met with current LE candidates, LE alumni, and principals of the schools where LE students and alumni were employed. Finally, the site visitors observed the practicum course in action. Since Standard 7 was so favorably reviewed by all external evaluators, the LE faculty decided to highlight the practicum course during the site visit and discuss the other field experiences throughout the program. The site visitors could view the course’s design and engage with the students taking the course that semester. The contents of the reading room, conversations that took place there, and the visit and observation of the practicum course enabled the LE faculty to not only report on how the ILA Standards guided their work but also how the program, faculty, students, and extended educational stakeholders (e.g., school principals) were impacted by the standards. One of the comments on the LE program’s site visit report states,

The Practice and Clinical Experiences in the WVU program are very strong and take place over several courses, rather than being embedded in just one class or capstone experience. Candidates are provided ample opportunities for scaffolded practice in doing the

work of literacy professionals, especially as it applies to instruction and remediation.

(Personal Communication, 2019)

Throughout the LE program, the candidates must complete course tasks in the field. These are often completed within the candidate’s classrooms and schools. There are a variety of field-based assignments throughout the program, some of which include teacher interviews, teaching mini-lessons, and conducting action/teacher research. Presenting and discussing how the content and field experiences were layered upon one another throughout the program during the site visit allowed the reviewers to see how the practicum experiences were strategically woven into different program elements.

Since the A3 Conceptual Model (Morewood et al., 2019; Morewood et al., 2021) heavily supported the design and implementation of the online practicum course, the LE faculty found it meaningful to have reviewer comments from the narrative self-study report align well with each of the CoI presences (Garrison et al., 2000) and Desimone’s (2009) characteristics of effective professional learning. Figure 2 provides reviewers’ comments on each component of Standard 7 and then explicitly identifies how these comments directly align with one or more of the presences (Garrison et al., 2000) and the characteristics outlined by Desimone. Furthermore, the reviewers’ feedback clearly shows how active engagement was present across Standard 7’s components. Again, this reiterates the necessity of having the A3 Conceptual Model in place before the

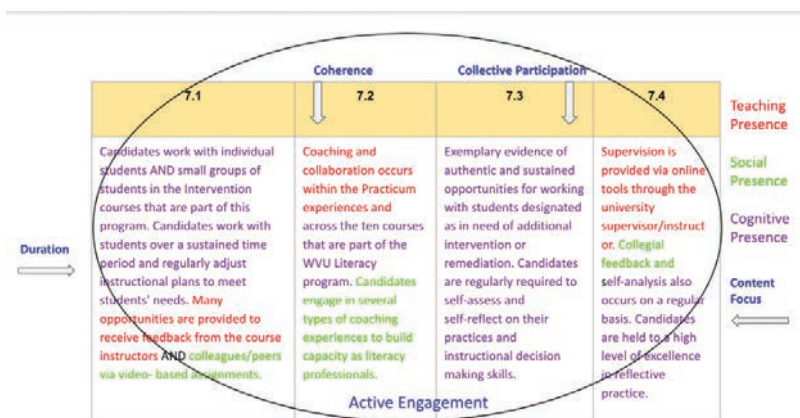


Figure 2 Self-study Reviewers’ Comments

programmatic changes. The curricular planning, the course design and structure, and instruction were grounded in a common and agreed-upon model by the faculty making these decisions.

In addition to the 2019 ILA National Recognition with Certificate of Distinction, the WVU Board of Governors recently awarded the LE program with the WVU Board of Governors Program of Excellence Award (2021). The four criteria for the WVU award are distinction (the program must be the recipient of a state or national award), *faculty* (the faculty must be fully qualified and credentialed), *graduates* (must show evidence of success in career or further education), and *curriculum and assessment* (curriculum must be clear and learning objectives defined) (WVU, 2021).

The national recognition and distinction process allowed the LE faculty to look critically at what was being done within the program and what changes needed to be made that would impact the candidates' learning. Throughout this process, the faculty solicited feedback from various educational stakeholders in the program. In particular, the site visit experience allowed different educational stakeholders to provide feedback on the entire LE program.

As the program continues, feedback from different stakeholders provides the LE faculty with various perspectives to consider. The LE faculty find it necessary to understand how the people teaching in the program and those enrolled in the program view the online practicum experience since this course best replicates the daily work of a reading specialist. To better understand these perspectives, feedback was gathered from the LE faculty member that was the Program Coordinator from 2016-to 2021, the LE faculty member who developed the course and has been the instructor of record multiple times, an adjunct faculty member who was also a LE program alumnus, and a graduate teaching assistant. To capture feedback from those positioned as learners in the course, a member of our LE alumni and current students were asked to provide their perspectives on the course. Both groups offered detailed feedback, and the topics included:

- **Flexibility** within the program-including scheduling and placements
- **Access** to diversity-students and contexts that were outside of what was typical for teachers in their local contexts
- **Student-centered** instruction-planning differentiated instruction to meet individual student's needs
- **Opportunities** to collaborate-being able to work with others within and outside of this state and within and outside of grade-level experiences.

- **Growth** in literacy leadership skills-observing LE candidates take on more distinctive coaching mindsets (Bean & Ippolito, 2016).

An interesting pattern we noticed across those responsible for teaching in the LE program was that every stakeholder mentioned *access to diversity* in their comments. One graduate assistant who taught the course multiple times captured access to diversity as,

The course's online format allowed candidates from around the country to complete their clinical experience within their local community. This allows candidates to work with students with whom they already have a relationship. It also allows for rich discussion during live class meetings about the social and cultural factors that impact literacy instruction (Personal Communication, 2021).

Having the practicum course be situated within the LE candidate's local schools provided relational comfort before the practicum course. Then, as the LE candidates shared their video lessons, their peers began to understand better the contexts within which they were working. This opened up opportunities for the LE candidates to learn about students with different cultural, linguistic, or socio-economic backgrounds other than those typical in their schools. This opened up conversations during the course about various social and cultural variables that teachers must consider. The course developer/instructor also commented on the program's flexibility, opening up opportunities for LE candidates to work when and where they were located. And this flexibility brought more diverse learning opportunities into the practicum course and the entire LE program (Personal Communication, 2021).

Another area that most of the instructional staff described in their comments was that they noticed *growth in the literacy leadership skills* of the LE candidates throughout the course. The course developer/instructor discussed literacy leadership growth as "Watching LE candidates move from receivers of information in the program's coursework to literacy leaders within our school communities" (Personal Communication, 2021). Here, this LE faculty member describes the learning progression of the LE candidates and how their learning moves beyond the LE program and impacts school environments and communities.

The adjunct instructor commented on the *collaboration & relationship building* she observed among the LE candidates: "Seeing students collaborate and build friendships with one another both in class (via Zoom and VT) and outside of class (group chats, traveling to see one another)" (Personal

Communication, 2021). To the faculty members of the LE program, this demonstrates the building of a professional community that will continue beyond their graduation from the program. Some of the pushback on online learning is that it is impersonal and isolating. This observation states just the opposite.

Finally, the LE Program Coordinator commented on *recruitment* when asked about the online practicum and said, “Recruitment, recruitment, recruitment! The online practicum removed a WVU recruitment barrier - most students from the rural state could not get to campus!” (Personal Communication, 2021). While the Program Coordinator was the only instructional person to comment on recruitment, the reality is that there is an abundance of pressure on reading specialist programs to maintain and grow enrollments. As this feedback suggests, moving from a hybrid program that required a traditional on-campus practicum limited the students who were able to enroll in the WVU LE program.

It was also essential to understand the perspectives of the learners in the online practicum course. To capture these beliefs, alumni of the LE program and current students in the practicum course were also asked for feedback. The responses received could be categorized into two areas: *a deepening of literacy content and pedagogical knowledge* and *literacy leadership*. The alumna’s responses described the deepening of her literacy knowledge as giving her the confidence to implement various differentiated reading interventions and assessments simultaneously. As a specialized literacy professional, she stated that she is now more comfortable working with struggling readers across the learning spectrum. Further, she critically thinks about her students’ progress and identifies more specific literacy techniques, texts, or skills to complement a struggling reader’s area of need.

In literacy leadership, the alumna states that the program supported her to develop confidence as a literacy leader and be brave about seeking literacy leadership opportunities at her school. Specific examples of these literacy leadership opportunities included volunteering to spearhead family engagement events, coaching peers in new literacy curriculum and strategy implementation, and applying to the school’s curriculum committee.

The candidates enrolled in the practicum course at this presentation were also asked to provide feedback about the course voluntarily. Again, their comments can be placed into the same two general categories as the other alumni’s comments. Current candidates agree that the program has provided them with the professional skills and personal confidence to succeed as classroom teachers and Reading specialists.

First, candidates describe learning how to coach peers and develop a coaching mindset (literacy leadership). This is something that many candidates did

not have the chance to do until they entered the program. Still, the weekly video review sessions, readings about coaching mindsets, lenses of feedback (Bean & Ippolito, 2016), and discussions with peers offer candidates synchronous and asynchronous opportunities to hone these coaching skills in the practicum course. Second, current candidates report an increase in their ability to differentiate literacy instruction and evaluate how effectively they teach to make the best instructional decisions for struggling readers (deepening content and pedagogical knowledge). Finally, the LE candidates reported increased confidence in administering assessments and using data to inform instructional decision-making (deepening content and pedagogical knowledge). Overall, candidates report a positive effect on the program's practical applications, closely mimicking real classroom contexts.

### **Knowledge Generation and Presentation**

Self-study research hinges on those who engage in this practice getting their information into conversations across the educational spectrum. This is one reason that the WVU LE program has continued to work at not only refining the practicum course but also promoting the work we have done in this area. As Loughran and Northfield (1998) suggest in one of their ten statements, "self-confidence is important" (p. 69). We recognize that this *self-confidence* is not just in the data collection and analysis stage, but also must be a part of the dissemination.

It is essential to understand that, like other graduate reading specialist programs, the journey of the WVU graduate LE program has been and continues to be on a trajectory of ongoing revision and conversations. Many hours of work and conversations took place as the LE faculty continued to refine the M.A. with reading specialist certification program and position itself for accreditation reviews and international and university awards. Much of this conversation circled back to the ILA *2017 Standards* (ILA, 2018) and the A3 Conceptual Framework (Morewood et al., 2019; Morewood et al., 2021). Both the generated internal and external conversations and presentations with our department, college, university, and professional colleagues across the country. We have made presentations for national and international associations discussing our journey and how we used the Standards (ILA) and A3 Conceptual Model (Morewood et al. 2019; Morewood et al., 2021) to continually shape our program work. In addition, we have published our work through peer-reviewed outlets to contribute to the literacy education program development knowledge base.

## Discussion

As we think about our past programmatic steps, there are three main takeaways we would suggest for any program that is working to transition from a face-to-face/hybrid program to a fully online program: a framework(s) provides guideposts, gains multiple perspectives about the program work, and continually shares insights.

### A Framework Provides Guideposts

The LE program revisions were based on continuous faculty professional learning, reflection, and growth. The *ILA 2017 Standards* (2018) provided a blueprint for the components of an effective practicum. The A3 Conceptual Model (Morewood et al., 2019; Morewood et al., 2021) supported this program's transition from a hybrid program with a traditional on-campus practicum to a fully online program that could meet the needs of WVU's land-grant mission and be an attractive program beyond state boundaries. The first takeaway of this article is that those who subscribe to the ILA Standards will be able to see how they can shape their online practicums to meet and exceed Standard 7 (ILA). Further, the program could use the A3 Conceptual Model (Morewood et al., 2019; Morewood et al., 2021) to make the practicum experience in online reading specialist programs meaningful.

Beyond the first takeaway, the frameworks used by the LE program provided a grounding space for the conversations. When faculty started to feel pressure to make changes that made them uncomfortable, going back to the frameworks became a neutral space of conversation; it helped to take the emotions out of the necessary changes. This neutral talking space helped to keep the conversations open and moving across the journey.

### Gain Multiple Perspectives

Bringing multiple stakeholders into the conversations is a main aspect of self-study. Samaras (2011) repeatedly states the need for these conversations to occur and discusses the paradoxical nature of this work as both personal and interpersonal. Conversations with fellow LE faculty, our administrators, the current LE candidates, alumni, and school administrators guided our work through content perspective. Our discussions with our university instructional designers and professional colleagues across universities (e.g., our Big 12 partner schools) supported our pedagogical and program design work. The program evaluations we



endured (e.g., NCATE/CAEP and ILA National Recognition with Certificate of Distinction in 2019) generated much thought-provoking ideas and questions that demonstrated our faculty's openness to external critiques.

## Share Insights

Dissemination of systematic, research-based programmatic changes is needed in the literacy education field. Sharing this information will add to the knowledge base of literacy programs. Further, this will “contribute to the accumulation of pedagogical, content, and issue-based knowledge and serves to build validation across related work” (Samaras, 2011, p. 72). This is important to the field. We believe that sharing our journey through professional conversations, national and international presentations, and publications (See Appendix) will help other programs find information on the pieces of this process where they need support. Making this experience transparent and accessible to others only moves literacy education forward, and this is what we all desire.

An additional way we found to have our program work accessible to others was through outside entities' recognition of the work. For example, both the ILA *2017 Standards* and the A3 Conceptual Model (Morewood et al., 2021) guided the overall program revision and the self-study with site visit work for ILA's National Recognition with Distinction award (2019). Then, this international award helped the LE program achieve the WVU Board of Governors Program of Excellence Award (2021). Both of these achievements make the LE program faculty proud and help our story reach more professionals doing this type of work.

Overall, this self-study process has taught us that we are impacting people's lives – both the specialists we prepare but also their p-12 students. Programmatic work can be messy, exhausting, tenuous, and *impactful*. We can explicitly see through our self-study work that WVU's online practicum/clinical experience supports its LE candidates as they work with P-12 students in their classrooms and provides these candidates opportunities to learn about students and contexts from around the country. Supporting and encouraging teachers to dig deeper and learn more helps students, schools, and communities. And this is why we continue to do this work.

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# EXPLORING HOW PRESERVICE TEACHERS USE DIGITAL TOOLS TO READ MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE

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## **Abstract**

*This research focuses on preservice teachers who were asked to read and discuss multicultural digital texts in literature circles. This study explored how students used digital tools embedded in the digital texts they read to enhance their reading experience as they prepared for their literature circle discussions. The study's raw data included three reflections from 86 preservice teachers who were asked to write about their perceptions related to using digital tools while reading electronic texts. The findings indicate that students' engagement with digital texts and digital tools did not enhance their critical reading of multicultural literature, as they read primarily within the text, according to the Fountas and Pinnell framework. Two major implications evolved from this study, including the need for teacher educators to explicitly teach ways to use digital tools when reading electronic texts and the need to explicitly support critical thinking when reading multicultural literature.*

*Keywords:* preservice, digital texts multicultural literature, literature circles, reading

## Introduction

As digital information sources become commonplace in our schools and everyday lives, it becomes increasingly important for people to learn to accurately, deeply, and critically process digital information. The definition of being literate is expanding. It includes being able to utilize various devices and platforms such as Dropbox, iMovie, educational games, and e-books (Leu et al., 2018). Often these digital formats are presented from a variety of social and cultural perspectives which require readers to engage in successfully when reading online. Therefore, the ability to successfully process multicultural digital texts is paramount. Separately, each type of text has its own processing requirements and skills required to fully understand the content. Digital texts or e-text (as presented in this article) require readers to use a variety of digital tools during reading (Larson, 2012); whereas multicultural texts require readers to explore and connect with texts that may have differing social and cultural realities (Snow et al., 2018).

There is a plethora of research which describes the importance of multicultural literature. However, what is not always discussed is the way readers must process this literature. Often, multicultural texts require the reader to process the reading from a more critical stance in order to construct meaning (Snow et al., 2018). Even though many types of text demand that readers activate a critical stance, multicultural books are generally more understood when the reader deconstructs different aspects of the text in order to connect with explicit and tacit cultural values, struggles, and ways of thinking—especially those that may differ from the reader’s own perceptions and experiences. There are many instances and much research which describes how readers adopt this stance when reading traditional paper texts. However, often readers may not adopt this stance when reading various types of digital content (Burnett & Merchant, 2019).

Districts are becoming more aware of the technology needs of its students, especially students from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse communities. In fact, the country has sought to promote equity in these diverse populations by making available digital devices and tools (Song, 2016). However, it is believed that true equity occurs only when students are able to confidently navigate these digital tools and critique digital resources. Thus, teacher preparation programs must provide their preservice teachers with opportunities to experience literacy in traditional and non-traditional ways, and include “digital critical literacy practices” (Delacruz & Jackson, 2019, p. 6) in preservice education courses.

Therefore, as literacy professors of preservice teachers at a midsize rural university in northeast Texas, we developed a learning experience for our students

to engage with multicultural digital texts and digital tools in literature circles. The multicultural literature we offered our students featured characters of diverse ethnicities, genders, cultures, and abilities. Our students engaged independently with the digital tools embedded in the multicultural digital texts before sharing their individually constructed knowledge with their peers during literature circle discussions (Tompkins, 2017).

## Literature Review

### Literacy Processing Framework

As teacher education scholars, we support the expanding definition of what it means to be truly literate in 21st century society. Additionally, we recognize that reading is a complex process, regardless of the reading context, event, or platform. Building upon Clay's (2001) complex processing theory, Fountas and Pinnell (2018) developed an explicit model of the "unconscious, simultaneous, in-the-head strategic actions" that readers adopt as they read continuous text (p. 11). This model includes the following processes: 1) *thinking within the text* processes, 2) *thinking beyond the text* processes, and 3) *thinking about the text* processes. When *thinking within the text*, the reader processes literal information, gleaned basic meanings from the text. When *thinking beyond the text*, readers construct new understandings by activating their prior knowledge and using that knowledge as a tool to uncover the author's implied meanings. Finally, when *thinking about the text*, readers take a more critical stance allowing them to form opinions about the author's purpose for writing the text, enabling the reader to understand the text from multiple perspectives and points of view. Therefore, we used this theoretical framework as a lens for understanding how students used digital tools while reading digital multicultural texts.

### Processing Multicultural Text and Criticality

Continued involvement of learners who read multicultural literature has been recommended as an act of professional development both inside of the K-12 classroom and in the university setting (Slay & Morton, 2020). Teacher educators are aware of the value that these conversations about literature provide in understanding the world and themselves. Teaching literature that centers diverse cultures is a socially important act in a multicultural society where there is constant struggle for agency and influence (Graff, 2010). Oftentimes, teacher educators find literature about other cultures to share to teach different perspectives as well as to create an environment of rethinking about other cultures. When preservice teachers are able to explore different perspectives through a literary experience, it



may serve as a way to prevent the development of “colorblind” teachers (Glazier, 2003). By incorporating multicultural literature, preservice teachers adopt student affirming behaviors which are associated with culturally responsive educators (Snow et al., 2018).

In addition to researching preservice teachers who read and learn from multicultural texts, we found it necessary to position ourselves in a digital space. There has been a rapid expansion in the use of digital texts in the 21st century (Goodwin et al., 2019). Kewel Ramani et al. (2018) indicate that 80% of eighth graders used computers daily to work on their school work. While many of the studies looked at the difference between students’ comprehension of paper texts versus digital texts, the data actually shows that students were more successful with understanding the paper texts (Clinton, 2019). In addition, no research has been done with students in K-12 grades utilizing multicultural digital texts. Readers of multicultural digital texts must be privy to some aspects of diverse cultures. In fact, in a study of African American eighth grade students, reading texts from different cultural orientations, McCullough (2013) found that prior knowledge was the strongest indicator of comprehension. Yet, students may be asked to read literature about cultures different from their own without having a strong prior knowledge. Based on the theory that multicultural literature provides windows and mirrors (Bishop, 1990) for students who are trying to understand their diverse worlds, it is imperative that teacher educators continue this line of research and in particular to explore how reading multicultural texts in a digital environment impacts comprehension and understanding.

## Methodology

Because we had already established a precedent for using multicultural literature in our reading methods classes, in this qualitative study we intentionally sought to examine the way students use digital tools when reading multicultural texts in a digital format. We wondered which tools they employed and to what end? Did using digital tools enhance their reading experience, impact reading comprehension, or assist them in making connections or understanding the culture represented in the digital books they were reading to learn more about the cultural differences or issues centered within the text? We anticipated that students might use a digital highlighter or underlining tool to mark the text while reading; however, we did not anticipate whether students would use other digital tools, such as a dictionary or internet, for example, to satisfy curiosity or to deepen understanding about cultural themes while reading. In fact, we did not direct the preservice teachers to use any digital tool in particular. We simply anticipated, based on the literature about how preservice teachers use digital highlighters to

mark quotes they want to remember (Davis & Neitzel, 2012), that our students would use whatever tools they thought were necessary to support comprehension and to facilitate their literature circle group discussions.

As a replication of Larson's (2012) study of preservice teachers using digital tools while reading electronic texts, we wanted to determine if our students would use tools to better comprehend the text, much like the dictionary and highlighting features. We also wanted to know if our participants would use digital tools to understand different cultural, social, or historical components identified in the stories. Therefore, we developed two research questions:

1. How do preservice teachers interact with multicultural digital fiction books?
  - a. How did preservice teachers perceive their reading comprehension of the e-text book versus a print book?
2. Did the preservice teachers understand the cultures represented in the stories?
  - a. What e-book tools did students use to help them understand the multicultural characters?

## **Literature Circles as Context for Research**

In our study we used literature circles as the context to explore how our preservice teachers engaged with digital texts and tools. Research (Daniels, 2001) acknowledges that literature circles or book clubs are an effective instructional practice in the classroom. Their use in schools is a great way to foster a love of literacy and to help students grow into lifelong readers. This instructional technique emphasizes targeted discussions that occur in agreed upon places throughout a text. In order to introduce preservice teachers to this strategy, many teacher preparation programs include literacy circles assignments in their literacy methods courses. These assignments allow preservice teachers to experience the key components of literature circles, including "choice, literature, and response" (Tompkins, 2017, p. 346). Additionally, students are motivated to read when they can select their books from a range of literature. They can also initiate their own ways to respond to the literature as they read. Opportunities to respond allow them to draw upon their prior knowledge, experiences, perceptions, and emotions and provide them with a space to learn from their peers as well as to empathize with their peers' unique experiences and insights (Jocius & Shealy, 2017).

We selected the books in Table 1 because they represented multi-cultures and examples of literature appropriate for upper elementary grade students.

**TABLE 1**  
**E-Books Selected**

| <b>Book Title and Author</b>                 | <b>Culture Represented</b> |
|--|----------------------------|
| <i>The Breadwinner</i> by Deborah Ellis      | Afghan                     |
| <i>Out of My Mind</i> by Sharon Draper       | Disability                 |
| <i>New Kid</i> by Jerry Craft                | African American           |
| <i>Towers Falling</i> by Jewel Parker Rhodes | African American<br>Muslim |
| Refugee by Alan Gratz                        | Jewish<br>Cuban<br>Syrian  |
| Wonder by R. J. Palacio                      | Disability                 |

In addition, we felt it was beneficial to expose preservice teachers to their future students' reading.

## Participants and Data Collection

In this study, 83 students participated in an ebook club featuring six (6) multicultural books. These titles had digital books available through Amazon Kindle, Google Books, or Barnes & Noble Nook.

Although we recruited 83 participants across our three classes to submit three different literature circle reflections into our university's learning management system, 39 students agreed to allow us to analyze their course work for this study. Students were organized into book clubs according to their selected titles. Groups then met after reading each third of their book and responded in a group meeting virtually through Zoom, GoogleMeet, or Apple Facetime. Finally, students noted their responses in reflective essays.

The first reflective essay was due after students read the first third of their digital book. Ten (10) students reflected on their reading, including information about the digital tools they used and their comfort levels when utilizing the digital texts. The second third yielded eighteen (18) reflective essays. For the last third of the book, we analyzed eleven (11) reflective essays.

## e-Book Tools

While students read their electronic book versions of the multicultural literature, they used digital tools to help them comprehend the text. Table 2 lists the digital tools participants reported using when reading the digital texts.

**TABLE 2**  
**Preservice Teachers' List of Tools**

| Digital Tool        | Number of Participants | Percent of Participants Using Digital Tool |
|---------------------|------------------------|--|
| Font size           | 1/39                   | 2.5%                                       |
| Highlight/Underline | 6/39                   | 15%  |
| Notes/Marks         | 1/39                   | 2.5%                                       |
| Bookmarks           | 3/39                   | 7.7%                                       |
| Dictionary          | 1/39                   | 2.5%                                       |
| Find/Search         | 1/39                   | 2.5%                                       |
| Internet            | 1/39                   | 2.5%                                       |
| Color/Brightness    | 1/39                   | 2.5%                                       |

## Data Analysis

During data analysis, we read all the participants' reflective responses and organized them into themes. Participants were asked to reflect on three questions after reading each third of their books (digital books do not have page numbers, so students were asked to divide the text into thirds). The questions were:

1. Did you like the section of the book? Why or why not?
2. What electronic tools did you use?
3. Do you feel comfortable using digital texts in the classroom?

These questions remained the same for each third of the books, regardless of the responses. Each researcher coded one of the three responses for basic themes, using holistic coding (Saldaña, 2016). After researchers coded the reflections for all student responses, two themes emerged. The first theme was that participants became familiar with the digital tools and used them to help them comprehend the text at a basic level. Participants identified only a few digital tools (Table 2) that were even used. The second theme was that there was some discomfort in using digital texts over paper texts. The digital tools used largely represented a convenience to mark quotes and passages potentially useful for the literature circle discussions.

## Findings

While the results provided information about how students used the tools while reading digital multicultural text, it became evident to us that students were not

mentioning the ways that the tools were used to think critically about the text. It also became evident that more explicit instruction was needed to teach students how to interact strategically with digital text using digital tools. Additionally, more guidance was needed to teach students how to engage critically with books that emphasize diverse cultural issues, practices, and ideas. These findings align the increasing use of digital tools in schools today. Many school districts have begun to make more technology resources available to teachers and students; yet, many districts have not fully trained its teachers to use technology tools and resources in more advanced ways that may support critical literacy (Larson et al., 2009).

Overall, the results of the study indicate that students used the tools to help them remember and locate ideas or quotes from the text, making it easier for them to revisit this information and add it to their written responses or share during the literature circle discussions; however, students did not appear to use digital tools to support the critical reading of the texts. These findings are described according to each of the research questions that guided our inquiry below.

### **Interaction With Multicultural Digital Books**

Some of the students (n=6) indicated they felt the highlighter was a helpful tool used often. The bookmark (n=3) tool is another useful tool for a few students. Other tools used included the notes, immediate resume, night mode, turn page icon, and the dictionary. Two participants explained that they generally benefited from reading digital texts for their ease and convenience. For example, one student explained that she “enjoyed reading on the Kindle app for this book. The various free tools that are offered greatly improved my reading experience.” Another student mentioned that “The kindle ebook makes it convenient to read with accessibility on various devices such as iPad and smartphone.” Yet two other students described which specific tools benefited their reading experience. One participant explained:

I believe students would benefit from reading an e-book. I enjoyed using the highlighter tool, because it was a great way for me to highlight my favorite quotes and to retain what I wanted to retain during our literature circle group. However, I think that the dictionary tool would be the most beneficial for students to use if they come across a word while reading and didn't know the meaning.

Another participant stated:

I have been loving the highlight tool to mark things I want to revisit or I use to mark some of my favorite parts of the book. I think this would be a great feature for students to use especially during group instruction so that they might highlight anything they may need help with individually. Still unsure about the x-ray feature.

The participants valued their emerging use of some of the tools available on the e-book readers to aid in their ease and comprehension.

### **Comprehension Of the E-Text Book**

In the third reflective essay, students were asked to consider how their comprehension and learning were influenced by the electronic books. Most students (n=11) continued to have positive thoughts about using ebooks, except for one student who mentioned a preference for reading print text, explaining: "My only concern is the fact that we are required to read an E-book (sic), I would much rather read a hard copy. I am not a fan of reading for a long period off of a screen." Most other students continued to mention that they enjoyed reading digitally, but did not mention how the tools enhanced their comprehension of the texts. For example, one student described her easy experience reading with a Kindle app:

Overall, with the use of technology to work with others and read a book it was all pretty simple and easy, so no complaints on that end. I would use these tools again if needed for this class or in any class that had group assignments. I enjoyed reading on the Kindle app for this book. The various free tools that are offered greatly improved my reading experience.

Another student also found the highlighter and dictionary tools useful:

I believe students would benefit from reading an e-book. I enjoyed using the highlighter tool because it was a great way for me to highlight my favorite quotes and to retain what I wanted to retain during our literature circle group. However, I think that the dictionary tool would be the most beneficial for students to use if they come across a word while reading and didn't know the meaning.

These quotes suggest that an easy reading experience supersedes deep reading comprehension. The responses tended to talk about the function of reading

more than the comprehension of ideas which suggests that the tools facilitated enjoyment rather than a deeper understanding of the ideas. This suggests that students may have been engaging with text content by *thinking within the text* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006) as they only acknowledged the physical aspects of reading. However, their reflection supports Fountas and Pinnell's (2006) assertion that when readers are processing texts, they engage in a wide range of activities, including physical, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic. This combination is what constitutes *thinking about the text*.

### **Tools Used to Discover Cultures Represented In E-Books**

Therefore, our findings for the second question suggest that as a whole students did not recognize the cultural nuances of the multicultural characters within the texts. One student did indicate how helpful the notes area and the access to a search engine were for her; however, we found that deeply understanding the cultures represented by the characters was not forefront in their minds. Additionally, because using digital tools on digital devices such as cell phones and computers has become commonplace, they most likely used more digital tools than acknowledged or revealed in their reflections. For example, using the internet is often taken for granted to ask questions and explore ideas; yet, none of the participants explicitly referred to using the internet to extend their thinking. However, one participant did explain how she used the digital search tool in the e-text: "For the e-book tools, I find the search option very useful. When I am trying to find a specific part or quote from the book, I can easily search using a keyword and find the part that I am looking for."

## **Discussion**

As digital books become more a part of classrooms, students require additional training to effectively use embedded electronic tools to facilitate thinking and construct meaning. Specifically, they must learn how to leverage the features of digital texts so that they naturally and seamlessly access those features to activate different levels of comprehension.

### **Constructing Meaning Through Systems of Strategic Actions**

Fountas and Pinnell (2018) provide a framework for describing the ways proficient readers engage with text. In this framework they illustrate the unconscious, simultaneous, and internal (or in-the-head-processes) that occur during reading.

This framework separates reading into three distinct but interrelated processes: *thinking within the text*, *thinking beyond the text* and *thinking about the text*. From class observations, it was observed that students tapped into these three processes when they orally discussed the events, themes, and ideas within their chosen text. However, based on their reflections, the use of the e-text features only captured their *within the text* processing. For example, students used the dictionary feature to look up words *within the text*. They also used the notes and highlighting features to remember specific quotes from within the text. Some students mentioned using the text to capture their favorite quotes, which could be considered a beginning stage of *thinking about the text*, in that the reader made a judgment about the author's use of language or about a description of an event, person or idea.

Thus, students' reflections in this study did not position the e-book as having tools that could capture *beyond the text* or metacognitive expressions of their understanding. For example, students did not use the tool to note any questions, inferences, or connections made as they read the text, even though it can be assumed that these students are proficient readers. Often students make these types of notations in pencil/pen within printed books especially when they are expected to reflect on and orally share their impressions of the text. Additionally, students did not indicate parts of the story that challenged their beliefs or values, or parts of the text that made them question the author's intent or message even though all of the stories contained controversial and socially relevant themes. Nevertheless, it should be noted that e-text features might have been used to capture those higher processing levels, but students may not have mentioned using them in that way. However, while some students may have used the tools in ways that exemplified higher level processes as they read the multicultural text, it can also be concluded that some students did not use the tools to engage in more complex thinking needed to make sense of upper-level multicultural texts. Although we did not explicitly measure the complexity of our students' reading comprehension, the findings suggest that students did not generally use digital tools in e-text to deepen their reading comprehension or understanding of multiple cultures. Instead, the findings suggest that using tools in more meta-cognitive, while critical analysis is a skill that requires more intentionality by the reader and more guided instruction by the teacher educator.

### **Distinguishing Digital and Paper Based Reading Proficiency**

Fountas and Pinnell's (2018) research highlights the types of interactions demonstrated by proficient readers who have learned successfully to navigate



print-based text, such as the preservice teachers who participated in this study. Yet, more research is needed on what true digital reading proficiency would look like as students now have more tools at their disposal to help them more deeply engage with the text. Research shows that the processing demand for digital reading is different from print-based reading (Goodwin et al., 2020). The processing skills needed for print-based reading comprehension experiences only partly represent the skills and strategies needed for online reading experiences (Coiro, 2011). Often readers must develop an additional set of skills appropriate for interacting with digital text for specific purposes.

### **Leveraging the Affordances of Digital Literacy**

The most significant advantage of using ebook features is in their utility to differentiate reading engagement and instruction (Larson, 2009). Struggling readers, emergent bilinguals, and students needing sensory support benefit greatly from digital tools. These tools lessen the demands of reading print by providing visual or audio aids that increase the accessibility of text. Additionally, teachers are able to customize students' interactions with digital text, providing them with more reading selections to choose from considering their reading levels and interests. Yet, despite these supports and affordances, it's the teacher's role to model and instruct students on more advanced ways of using the digital text features—ways that will encourage them to capture and store their reflective thinking. Additionally, the teacher must demonstrate the varied purposes of using tools, such as the internet tool which can be used to help students quickly search for additional information about unfamiliar topics as they read.

Nevertheless, it will always be the reader's role to actively engage with the text deeply in both efferent and aesthetic ways regardless of the genre of literature. This type of engagement requires students to be internally motivated. It requires them to be curious readers, especially when reading text intended to expand their knowledge or world view.

### **Proposing a New Role for e-Book Literature Circles: Cultural Navigator**

The most startling indicator of the data was that our participants' reflections indicated that they only read for content using *within the text* processing which indicates that they only gleaned a basic understanding of the content. Readers neglected to read critically, to apply *about the text* processing to delve more deeply into the book's deeper meanings. Expecting students to think *about the text* is not an idea that should be dismissed because students use electronic books. On the

contrary, electronic books are beneficial for those readers. The tools available on e-readers encourage the strategic actions of expanding thinking about topics they connect with, whether it was another text, a world view, or even a personal experience.

The authors assumed that the preservice teachers would read the multicultural digital texts through a critical lens; however, that was not evident. There was no response or even comment on how the readers used digital tools to help them better understand the cultural evidence significant in these books. In order to teach critical literacy in the classroom, teachers must first become critically literate (Dozier et al., 2006). They must understand how to intentionally question the author's perspectives, as well as the behaviors, intentions, and motivations of the characters presented in the story in relation to their unique cultural experiences. This form of *about text processing*, described by Fountas & Pinnell (2018) requires more specific instruction in how to look at a book critically through the lens of culture and how to ask relevant questions that help readers take a more critical stance as they engage with the book. Additionally, when reading electronic texts, students would need more guidance for using digital tools effectively to better navigate the nuances of multicultural literature and develop the capacity for critically literate thinking.

Research explains that a reader's comprehension is influenced by their prior knowledge on the topic and their reading interest (McCulloch, 2013). Although students were able to select their book choices for the literature circles as in traditional literature circles (Daniels, 2001), the choices had been initially selected by the teacher educators. This explains why the preservice teachers did not always have prior knowledge or even interest in the cultures represented in the books. In preparation for incorporating literature circles in their future classrooms, the teacher educators believe that the student teachers should have knowledge of multicultural children's literature so that it is believed to have a positive response to many. Yet, when students do not have prior knowledge about the content and characters, they encounter in the literature they read, they may require resources to help them navigate new reading territories.

Therefore, to augment our preservice teachers' limited prior knowledge about multiple cultures they encountered in the texts they read for the multicultural literature circles assignment, our lead researcher created a new literature circle discussion role, the *Cultural Navigator*, to add to their repertoire of traditional literature circle roles (i.e., discussion director, illustrator, connector, or word wizard). Typically, literature circle members rotate preparing role sheets for each of these jobs while reading and then use them to facilitate group conversation. While this is an effective way to help students utilize their past experiences

to better respond to texts, it also sets parameters for deepening the level of their responses. As shown in this study, when readers are trying to complete an assignment, they may strive to read at a basic level unless they are provided with a tool to support deeper, more critical thinking. Because critical reading requires deep engagement with the ideas in the text, making connections with personal and prior experiences and knowledge, and a focused purpose for reading, the *Cultural Navigator* role has the potential to facilitate deeper reading and connections with the multi-cultures when they are *thinking about* the text.

The *Cultural Navigator* literature circle role has been designed to assist readers with thinking deeply about characters from different races and ethnicities. It helps readers navigate the cultural territories by inviting a connection to a personal interpretation of a character's response, event, or experience that happens in a story. As a literature circle discussion role, it promotes using a critical lens while reading texts about cultures that may offer new perspectives, that may challenge the readers' personal experiences, and hopefully promote new ways of thinking about multi-cultures. The *Cultural Navigator* role is an opinion, based on the perspective of the reader's connections (or lack of connection) to cultural elements represented in the text so that the literature circle groups will have significant conversations about culture and its complexity.

Reading with a critical lens tends to be challenging for readers at any level, across any platform. Therefore, preservice teachers must be trained to prepare their future students to use tools that will support both their ability to read *within the text*, *beyond the text*, and *about the text* in both traditional and non-traditional ways. The *Cultural Navigator* literature circle has the potential to provide an opportunity for students to think critically about the text they are reading. It provides students with a framework to have meaningful discussions and to consider implications about culture that may impact both their own lives and society, which we believe is an important step toward developing responsive literacy and equity in the classroom.

## Conclusion

The research presented in this article acknowledges that teacher education programs must continue to develop preservice teachers' knowledge of literacy practices that equip their future students to use digital tools to enhance their reading comprehension as well as to deepen their critical literacy stance in ways that might differ from reading printed text. In this study, literature circles discussion supported students' exploration of multicultural themes; however, because students primarily used e-text tools to read *within the text*, it suggests that the

**Literature Role Sheet**

**CULTURAL NAVIGATOR**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Circle \_\_\_\_\_  
 Meeting Date \_\_\_\_\_ Reading Assignment \_\_\_\_\_  
 Book \_\_\_\_\_

Cultural Navigator: Your job is to identify an character's cultural reaction, response, experience or an event that can be explained through a cultural lens. As you are reading, think about statements that made you pause, reflect, and think.

- Why did the character say that?
- Why did the character do that?
- Why did the character participate in that event?
- Does the event have a special meaning?

After identifying the passage with the meaningful statement, think critically about its origin. Consider and share the responses to the following prompts:

1. What happened on page \_\_\_\_?
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Why is it important?
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. So what? How does this notation inform future reading?

**Figure 1** Literature Circle Role Sheet: Cultural Navigator

participants did not fully understand ways to engage with digital texts and digital tools in ways that could deepen their critical thinking about the multicultural content of the books they were reading. We do not know how well they used the digital tools to support their understanding of the texts they read. The digital tools simply appeared to have supported the digital reading experience and possibly helped them mark text they might discuss with their peers. Yet, given the

low percentages of digital tool use reported, it suggests that students were neither prepared nor inclined to use digital tools to support their critical reading experience. This suggests a need to explicitly teach readers how to use digital tools to support their reading comprehension and to provide students with a structure, such as the *Cultural Navigator* role. This role can guide students in the types of annotations and highlights they might make while reading and marking digital texts, and thus contribute toward developing more equitable literacy learning responsive literacy teaching.

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# DELIVERING STORIES AND NARRATIVES: BUILDING A BALANCED COLLECTION OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE DIVERSE IN REPRESENTATION

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## **Abstract**

*Through a critical lens, educators must be aware of the message that is reflected in children's literature. This conceptual research paper presents an evaluation checklist designed to support teachers in building a diverse collection of children's literature. Numerous researchers have conducted studies that demonstrated the need to support teachers in their ability to expand their classroom library selection in the most culturally responsive manner, (Crisp et al 2016; Howlett & Young 2019). The scope of the studies was often limited to multicultural principles or content analyses explorations of existing classroom library bookshelves related to representations of diversity. The purpose of this manuscript is to extend the current research to encompass a broader concept of cultural awareness and supply an evaluation tool reflective of the diverse society through children's literature.*

*Keywords:* Diversity, children's literature, cultural awareness



## Introduction

Teachers recognize that students need access to a variety of different texts. One way for teachers to do this, is by providing their students access to diverse texts in their classroom libraries. For some students, the classroom and school libraries are the only places where they have an opportunity to access different texts on a variety of topics. Teachers realize that they are the conduit to this access for students, but they need support in what texts to place in their classroom libraries and which texts to advocate for in their school libraries. The ideas presented here are supportive in nature. They provide teachers with a strategic way to critically evaluate the texts they are selecting for inclusion in their classrooms. Guided by the work of multiple researchers (Crisp & Hiller, 2001; Crisp et al., 2016; Howlett & Young 2019; Sims, 1982), a comprehensive literature review resulted in the formation of an evaluation checklist designed to support teachers in building a collection of children's literature diverse in representation. Previous studies have demonstrated evaluation of current classroom bookshelves in regards to diversity and anti-bias checklists based upon multicultural principles. Howlett and Young (2019) engaged in research with a purpose to place a critical eye on educating teacher candidates on the importance of selecting high-quality children's literature that represented a diverse reading list across a variety of cultures; however, it focused on multicultural literature and representing different cultures, not individual differences (diversity). Crisp and colleagues (2016) found that there is a lack of diversity of books on classroom bookshelves and encouraged classroom teachers to look at their classroom library through various lenses. An evaluation tool designed to support diversifying classroom bookshelves enables educators with a checklist reflective of the diverse classroom population.

The theoretical framework that supported this investigation was Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and Adichie's (2009) dangers of the single story, the theoretical framework situated the single research study. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model allows for an understanding of the external influences on human behavior and development, including the role of subjective experiences, (Kemmerlin & Wilkins, 2020). Adichie (2009) advocates that only by distrusting single stories with narratives from numerous perspectives may a broader, more global representation of the world be presented. This perspective builds upon the notion that books serve as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors and the role that children's literature fulfills in the classroom (Bishop, 1990). Through the dual lenses, the theoretical framework places the role of children's literature in the classroom as vital in forming a more nuanced picture of the world; one that genuinely

reflects that reflects the diverse classroom population. Children's literature has a profound impact on children in the classroom and the way they view themselves and the world. It is essential to understand that there is never a single story about a place, person, or group of people; rejection of the single story encourages one to understand empathy and common humanity.

## **Diversity Defined**

*What is diversity? Its message is beguilingly simple and effective. Humans come in a variety of formats—with differing genders, skin tones, hair color and types, eye shapes, and sizes in the realm of physical differences, and diverse languages, religions, nationalities, and lifestyles in the realm of social differences. While diversity acknowledges the unique identity of such peoples, it also stresses that despite differences, we are all the same—that is, we are all humans with equal rights and privileges*

(Davis, 2015).

In consideration of classroom population, engagement with text, and academic guidelines, it is essential to define diversity. Describing and defining diversity can be broad, all encompassing, and complicated. Exposure to and interaction with text influences readers, both emotionally and cognitively. Legislation policies and curricular guidelines expect elementary educators to present a wide range of text, including increased complexity, varied formats, and multiple genres. To clarify the research, the academic guidelines, engagement with texts, and classroom population it is essential to define diversity. *All Sides Red Blue Dictionary* (2019) presents diversity as the range of differences in human experiences. *The Encyclopedia of Diversity and Social Justice* situates human diversity as the variety of differences that exist among the human differences (Thompson & Cusseo, 2014). Merriam-Webster (2020) defines diversity as being composed of different elements and/or the condition of differing qualities. Cambridge Dictionary (2020) describes diversity as a range of different people; including a mixture of races and religions that make up a group of people. The sources of diversity include, (not limited to): social, physical, and emotional development, gender, language, cultural, religious, and ethnic identity, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation (Tarbutton, 2018). Hermann-Wilmarth (2007) and Boyd (2015) advocate for diversity in literature to expand beyond race, ethnicity, and language. It is recommended that diversity characteristics in literature should also include various family structures, physical and mental disabilities, socioeconomic

status, language variations, dialect differences, and language variations (Boyd et al., 2015).

### **Diversity versus Multiculturalism**

While the terms may be used as interchangeable, there is a difference in the definition and implications in the terms, *diversity* and *multiculturalism*. For this conceptual research paper, it is essential to differentiate the terms that are often substituted and used synonymously with one other. As presented, diversity references a state of unlikeness and the manner in which all of the ways in which people are different, including individual, group, and cultural differences. While diversity includes the broad range and acceptance of all the ways humans are different, multiculturalism can be narrowly defined to mean ethnicity and race, (Holland & Mongillo, 2016). A dictionary definition presents multiculturalism as the presence of, or support for the presence of, several distinct cultural or ethnic groups within a society...cultural pluralism," (Merriam-Webster, 2020). In regard to multicultural literature, it can be defined as literature that focuses on people of color from diverse cultural, linguistic, and religious groups (Yokota, 2001). Our nation's classrooms are reflective of our diverse population. As The IRIS Center (2012) presents, it is important to recognize and honor student diversity in the classroom; this acknowledgement embraces and includes different races, cultures, ethnicities, linguistic differences, socioeconomic backgrounds, a range of academic, physical, and social abilities and skills (The IRIS Center, 2012). As reflective in educational policies and guidelines, it is important that classroom teachers accept and recognize diversity in the classroom.

### **The Value of Children's Literature in the Classroom**

In the classroom, children's literature is an essential resource and fulfills multiple roles, including the support of the cognitive and affective domain. For some young children, the classroom setting is the first/only exposure to children's literature. The influential interaction of children's literature, whether it exclusively occurs in the classroom or not, is one of great significance. Situated in the concept that books may act as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990), books provide a vicarious experience that may represent reality or distortion of reality, as well as observation and insight into other worlds. Children's literature presents the foundational support platform for the development of young readers, the promotion of readers, storytelling, comprehension, vocabulary, and exposure to new concepts and ideas (Serafina & Moses, 2014). Research has demonstrated that due to the varied and multiple benefits, children's literature in

the classroom must not be utilized as a luxury; rather, a necessity in the literacy curriculum (Leu, 2003). Across the domains and curriculum, there is a great value on the importance of children's literature in the classroom.

Bloom (1956) describes the cognitive domain as learning of new knowledge, concepts, and mental skills, including comprehension and application. Commonly referred to as *Bloom's Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain* (Bloom, 1956), the levels within in the cognitive hierarchy range include knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Literacy skills, vocabulary exposure, content area concepts, writing styles, and print concepts include just a few of the cognitive services fostered by children's literature. Critical thinking skills are developed through the use of children's literature. Through meaningful discussions, children's literature may spark inferential discussion and develop listening and speaking skills (Kelly & Moses, 2018). In 2011, Lefebvre, Trudeau, and Sutton found that children involved in shared read-alouds outperformed their peers on vocabulary, print awareness, and phonological awareness measures. Numerous studies have presented evidence that reading aloud has the potential to increase the oral language abilities of young children and be a factor in sustained literacy growth and achievement (Beauchat et al., 2009; Diehl & Vaughn, 2010; Lefebvre et al., 2011). The connections between children's literature and the cognitive domain are highly valuable and nonnegotiable.

The value of children's literature in the classroom has been well documented to support the cognitive domain; however, children's literature in the classroom has been shown to effectively support the affective domain as well. While Bloom (1956) categorized knowledge in the cognitive domain, he presented the affective domain as feelings, emotions, and attitudes. Children's literature presents an opportunity to promote a love of reading, motivation, empathy, and a sense of community. Through interactive discussions, read-alouds, and independent reading, children's literature can be a venue for building a cohort of learners through social interactions (Bridges, 1995). A sense of empathy for other people and an understanding of self can be developed through children's literature. Children's literature provides a platform for vicarious experiences, a reflection of reality, self, and narratives of places and people that they are unaware of and/or have not experienced. An understanding of self and increased self-esteem can occur when children read stories about children like themselves; a connection to the literature is established and it may normalize experiences that may otherwise be isolating (Lea, 2015). A yearlong collaborative study with first-grade students found that discussions based around literature presented multiple opportunities to address social injustices, share life experiences, and express compassion and empathy (Kelly, 2019). Read-alouds, independent reading, and meaningful

conversations about children's literature supports growth and knowledge gained in both the cognitive and affective domain. An evaluative checklist would enable the educator to present a broader variety of perspectives, including who they are presenting in the texts that they are using in their classroom.

### **The Diversity of Children's Literature in Early Childhood Classroom Libraries**

The examination of diverse children's literature on bookshelves has had limited analysis. Research completed by Crisp et al. (2016) involved classrooms spanning across eleven early childhood sites and predominantly served low-income, racially diverse (but predominantly African American) populations. Nearly all of the teachers identified themselves as African American females. At various points during the fall and early winter months, the research team visited the locations and scanned the barcodes of all of the books. Information from Goodreads and the Library of Congress allowed the researchers to create a centralized database. An examination of preschool classroom libraries with attention to representation of diversity populations and identities, the results revealed that the classroom libraries were lacking in terms of cultural diversity. Little diversity in languages, members of parallel cultures, depictions of class and socioeconomic status, characters with dis/abilities, developmental differences, and chronic illnesses were found. The greatest diversity was found in representation of gender; however, there was nearly double the number of male representations as compared to female, with even fewer ungendered depictions and no representations of transgendered people (Crisp et al).

### **Elementary Teachers' Perspectives on the Use of Multicultural Literature in their Classrooms**

Research on teachers' perspectives on their perspective and representation of diversity is limited; however, Holland and Mongillo's (2016) work is important to include in this conversation. They sought to determine how multicultural literature was used and perceived by US elementary school teachers. From their work, Holland and Mongillo's (2016) findings included:

- Strong support for multicultural education by elementary administrators encourages reading of multicultural literature in the schools
- Mandating multicultural literature does not always increase the reading of multicultural literature in elementary schools

- Administrators involved with mandates may limit the use of multicultural literature by promoting close adherence to curriculum for multicultural literature selections

The findings emphasize the importance of the theoretical underpinnings that all students must see themselves in the books they are reading; therefore, the importance of diverse representation in children's literature. The study expanded on the need that teachers understand the components of multicultural literature in the broader term and they increase their use of high-quality, authentic multicultural literature in their classrooms.

Additional research has been done to reveal a teacher's perception of diversity in children's literature; however, those studies reveal a need to support educators in building a diverse representation of children's literature. In a study that asked teachers to identify two children's books from five different ethnic groups, Brinson (2012) discovered that the majority of the sixty-one participants could only identify two books from the Anglo-American category and lacked book knowledge in all other cultural areas. Patt & McBride (1993) conducted an exploratory study of gender equity in picture books. In their research, they asked elementary teachers to name their favorite books to read aloud and only 21% of the books contained female protagonists (Patt & McBride, 1993). In a study that explored the disparities of the awareness of teachers in a special education framework to use books as a mediating tool, Baratz (2015) found that teachers did not regularly place effort to use diverse literature as a tool. Boyd, Causey, and Galda (2015) have found that culturally diverse literature in classrooms is delivered when teachers make it happen.

## **Theoretical Framework**

To create a coherent, conducive framework, this conceptual research paper and evaluation checklist that is designed to be supportive in building a balanced children's literature collection diverse in representation is enclosed in a dual theoretical perspective. The theoretical framework that situated the research (Onwuegbuzie, 2016), was Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and Adichie's (2009) dangers of the single story. Through the lens of Adichie's (2009) dangers of the single story and Bronfenbrenner's (2006) bioecological systems theory, this research is built upon the notion that teachers' perceptions of diversity are influenced by prior experiences, relationships, and interactions; therefore, in the classroom, exposure to children's literature must allow for multiple stories and perspectives to be shared. The dual lenses that this

research is situated in provides an opportunity to consider the bidirectional interactions within one's ecological contexts and the influence those interactions have presenting representations of diversity in children's literature. The dual lenses provides a framework for the construction of the evaluative tool that could assist educators to think more critically about the texts they are using in the classroom and on their bookshelf.

### **Bronfenbrenner's (1994) Bioecological Model**

A framework that one can examine of individuals' relationship within communities and wider societies, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological systems theory presents a theory of human development. An evolving theoretical system, the bioecological model describes development as phenomenon of continuity and change in the biopsychological characteristics of human beings, (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). First proposed in the 1970s, the emerging theory was described as an ecological model/approach to human development (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). This model was first used in the world of human development with an emphasis on the role that the environment played in an individual's development, including all the intrinsically interconnected structures. Bronfenbrenner's primary theoretical contribution was his Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) in which he described four types of nested systems. He called these the *microsystem*, the *mesosystem*, the *exosystem*, and the *macro-system*. Bronfenbrenner later added a fifth system, called the *chronosystem* (1979). The nested five ecological systems were arranged to demonstrate the order of impact that each structure had on an individual's development. The conceived environment topologically was arranged of five connected configurations, (Rosa & Tudge, 2013):

*Microsystem:* The most proximal setting in which a person is situated; Examples include the home, child care, playground, place of work et al... The setting allowed for interactions that are face-to-face and have interpersonal roles and relations that are engage in over time

*Mesosystem:* A system of microsystems; Active participation in a new setting and diminishes when the individual leaves; Examples include the interactions between a child's parents and teachers

*Exosystem:* The developing individual is not an active participant nor situated; never less, experiences its influences; Examples include mass media, the individual's neighborhood

*Macrosystem:* Embraces the institutional systems of a culture or sub-culture; an overarching belief system; Examples include ethnicity, geographic location and ideologies of the culture

*Chronosystem:* The overarching system; normative and nonnormative life transitions, including sociohistorical events; Examples include marriage, divorce, winning the lottery.

As the theory continued to evolve, Bronfenbrenner revised his theory in 1994 and named it the Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). His focus shifted from environmental influences to developmental processes individuals experience over time. Bronfenbrenner emphasized the role played by an individual in their own development by proximal processes; the center of the bioecological theory and viewed as the driving forces of human development, (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). The bioecological systems theory presents an understanding of how an individual grows and develop. The ecological journey that one embarks on varies from one individual to the next. An individual's interactions within a series of larger systematic influences has an impact on human development and growth. This theoretical approach highlights the importance of an individual's relationships and prior experiences. An exploration of an individual's systems provides a holistic approach to their development, including a contextual setting, values, ideologies, and personal characteristics. Awareness of one's bioecological model promotes an understanding of how one constructs their identity, including influences on worldwide views and meaning making.

### **Adichie's (2009) dangers of the single story**

The importance of exposure to a rich and varied children's literature is solidified with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2009's TED Talk lecture on dispelling stereotypes through children's literature and the dangers of the single story. Adichie's concept of the single story builds upon Bishop's (1992) windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors metaphorical notion and connects Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (1994) by the pivotal role and experience that children's literature accomplishes in the classroom. It establishes children's literature as a tool to promote moving beyond one story projected in the classroom. "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (Adichie, 2009, para. 24). This perspective builds upon the notion that books serve as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors and the role that children's literature



fulfills in the classroom. Children's literature has a profound impact on children in the classroom and the way they view themselves and the world. It is essential to understand that there is never a single story about a place, person, or group of people; rejection of the single story encourages one to understand empathy and common humanity.

### **Binary Theoretical Framework**

Using a binary theoretical framework to situate the research, through the lens of Adichie's (2009) dangers of the single story and Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (1994), places the paper in a position to examine the environmental framework of the teacher and children's literature as an influential entity in the classroom. In consideration of the legislative policies and educational guidelines that encourage a range of text and the diverse classroom population that is representative in the United States public school system, this framework provides support of the evaluation checklist to support educators and their children's literature that they share in the classroom. The dual lenses intentionally position a teacher's understanding of diversity as pivotal to students' exposure to children's literature. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model allows for an understanding of the external influences on human behavior and development, including the role of subjective experiences, (Kemmerlin & Wilkins, 2020). Through the dual lenses, the theoretical framework places the role of children's literature in the classroom vital in forming a more nuanced picture of the world; one that genuinely reflects the diverse classroom population.

### **An Evaluation Checklist Supportive of Building a Balanced Children's Literature Collection Diverse in Representation**

As the literature review identified the need to place a critical eye on the importance of a balanced children's literature collection diverse in representation, the principles for evaluation are built upon the binary theoretical framework. The evaluation checklist provides an opportunity for reflection of self, classroom school, community, then evaluation of one's current collection of shared children's literature, and concludes with reflective prompts to raise awareness of the stories and narratives that are being delivered. Appendix A explains Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model Theory Five Connected Configuration. Each system is explained, as well as examples provided. As the first step in a balanced children's literature collection diverse in representation, a visual of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model Theory is included to guide the educator in creation of their

**TABLE 1**  
**An evaluation checklist supportive of a balanced collection of children’s literature diverse in representation**

| Reflective Prompts  | Response |
|---|----------|
| <p><i>Create your bioecological model, Appendix A (Bronfenbrenner, 1994)</i></p> <p><i>Reflect on your school, community, and classroom population and demographics. What identities are represented in your school? In your community? In your classroom?</i></p> <p><i>Next, think about the children’s literature, (nonfiction and fiction, digital and print; genres and formats) that is shared in your classroom. Identify the identities represented in the stories and narratives. Books may be categorized in more than one genre/format, (Crisp et.al, 2016).</i></p> <p>Identity categories, (Crisp et.al, 2016):</p> <p>Parallel cultures<br/>                     Socioeconomic status and class<br/>                     Dis/abilities, developmental differences, and chronic illnesses<br/>                     Sexual identity<br/>                     Religion<br/>                     Gender<br/>                     Language</p> <p><i>Next, reflect on the genre and format categories of the children’s literature, (nonfiction and fiction, digital and print; genres and formats) that is shared in your classroom. Identify the formats/books; books may be categorized in more than one genre/format, (Crisp et.al, 2016).</i></p> <p>Genre and format categories, (Galda et. al, 2014):</p> <p>Concept books (texts that support understanding of ideas, patterns, relationships)<br/>                     Non-picturebook<br/>                     Folklore<br/>                     Science fiction<br/>                     Contemporary realistic fiction<br/>                     Historical fiction<br/>                     Nonfiction<br/>                     Poetry/rhyming<br/>                     Graphic novels</p> |          |

*Then, consider the literature that you have identified. Ask yourself the following prompts, (Bishop, 1990):*

Are the books mirrors for my students?  
For myself? Are my students able to see themselves in the stories? Am I able to see myself in the stories?

Are the books windows for my students? For myself? Are my students able to learn about the lives of others? Am I able to learn about the lives of others?

Do the books present an opportunity for a change in perspective? A social justice transformation for my students? For myself?

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own bioecological model. The design of one's own bioecological model provides an opportunity to reflect on relationships and interactions that have been influential in development.

Next, engage in reflective practice both of self and of the current children's literature that is on the bookshelf and used in the classroom. Table 1 presents the evaluation checklist and reflective prompts. The reflective prompts provide one with an opportunity to increase awareness of identity, genre, and format categories that are currently represented in the classroom. Reflective prompts, such as analysis and examination of the school, community, and classroom demographics, allow for the educator to carefully consider the variety of narratives and identity categories present in one's interactions and situations. After the educator completes the reflective prompts, the next step is identification of identities represented in the shared classroom texts. After an analysis of those texts, the educator is encouraged to consider the stories and narratives that are being delivered in the classroom through the metaphorical notion of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990). Influenced by the dual theoretical framework, each step is clearly outlined in the checklist to allow the educator to carefully consider the stories being told and are the stories that are available reflective of a diverse population.

Upon completion of the reflection process, to support building a balance collection of children's literature diverse in representation, consider identity, genre, and/or format categories that are omitted in the classroom and/or not included in shared texts. Table 2 provides examples of award-winning children's literature that align with identity categories (diverse representation).

Through the dual lenses, the supportive checklist provides the opportunity for reflection and raised awareness of the stories and narratives that are being distributed. An elevated mindfulness allows for reflection. An evaluation tool, such as the supportive checklist, places the role of children’s literature in the classroom vital in forming a more nuanced picture of the world; one that genuinely reflects the diverse classroom population.

Through the lens of the binary theoretical framework, the checklist is designed as a supportive tool to assist educators in building a classroom library reflective of the diverse population. The checklist is provided as both a launching point and reflective guide to help educators present an array of identity representation through shared texts. Stories matter and can be used to empower and to humanize (Adichie, 2009). The contribution of children’s literature texts to learning and development is critical in the classroom; a balance children’s literature collection diverse in representation is essential. Diversity matters.

**TABLE 2**  
**Examples of award-winning children’s literature that align with identity categories**

| Code  | Children’s literature examples<br>(Leading characters/figures and protagonists)  |
|---|--|
| Parallel cultures (primary)                                   | <i>We are Water Protectors</i> , (2020) Carole Lindstrom (Author) and Michaela Goade (Illustrator); 2021 Caldecott Medal   |
| Socioeconomic status and class                                | <i>A Different Pond</i> , (2017) Bao Phi (Author) and Thi Bui (Illustrator); Caldecott Honor Book 2018   |
| Dis/abilities, developmental differences, and chronic illness | <i>I Talk like the River</i> , (2020), Jordan Scott (Author) and Sydney Smith (Illustrator); 2021 Younger Children Schneider Family Book Award   |
| Sexual identity   | <i>Home at Last</i> (Rainbow Project Book List 2016 Award)   |
| Religion  | <i>Welcoming Elijah: A Passover Tale with a Tail</i> , (2020), Leslea Newman (Author) and Susan Gal (Illustrator); Multicultural 2021 ALA Award-Winning Children’s and YA Books              |
| Gender  | <i>Hidden Figures: The True Story of Four Black Women and the Space</i> , (2018) by Margot Lee Shetterly (Author), Laura Freeman (Illustrator) ( <b>Coretta Scott King Book 2019 Award</b> ) |
| Language  | <i>Evelyn Del Rey is Moving Away</i> , (2020) Meg Medina (Author) and Sonia Sanchez (Illustrator); A 2020 American Library Association Notable Children’s Book                               |

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## APPENDIX A

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### BRONFENBRENNER'S BIOECOLOGICAL MODEL THEORY FIVE CONNECTED CONFIGURATION

*Microsystem:* The most proximal setting in which a person is situated; Examples include the home, child care, playground, place of work et al. . . . The setting allowed for interactions that are face-to-face and have interpersonal roles and relations that are engaged in over time

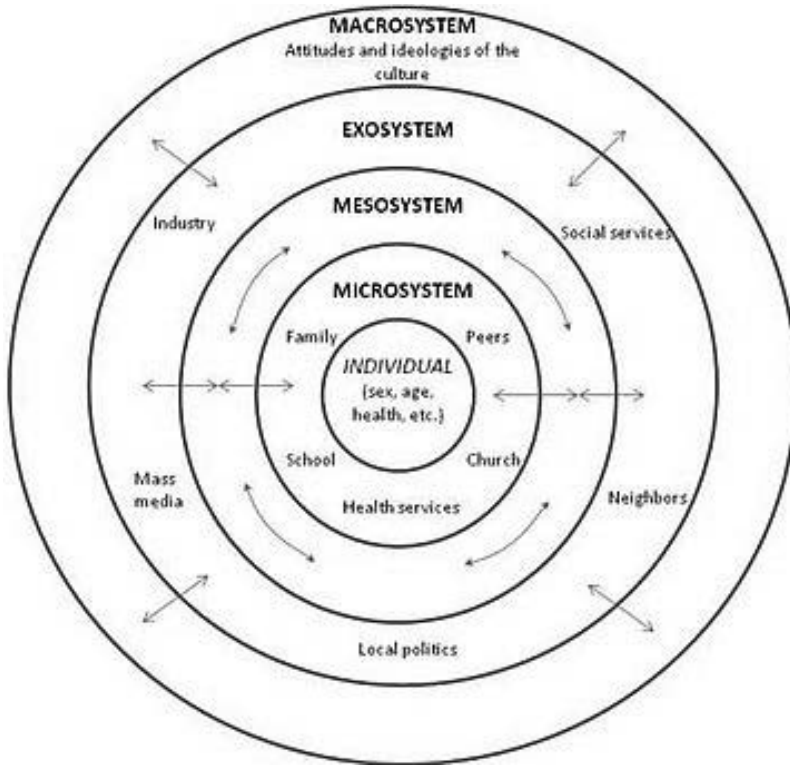
*Mesosystem:* A system of microsystems; Active participation in a new setting and diminishes when the individual leaves; Examples include the interactions between a child's parents and teachers

*Exosystem:* The developing individual is not an active participant nor situated; nevertheless, experiences its influences; Examples include mass media, the individual's neighborhood

*Macrosystem:* Embraces the institutional systems of a culture or sub-culture; an overarching belief system; Examples include ethnicity, geographic location and ideologies of the culture

*Chronosystem:* The overarching system; Normative and nonnormative life transitions, including sociohistorical events; Examples include marriage, divorce, winning the lottery.





# A PILOT STUDY OF PRESERVICE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS' CONTENT KNOWLEDGE AND SELF-EFFICACY RELATED TO ASSESSING PHONICS BASED ON LEARNING MODALITY CHOSEN

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## **Abstract**

*Universities now offer more mixed-mode and online courses in response to students' needs and preferences. Therefore, the purpose of this pilot study was to explore the course delivery preferences, the self-efficacy ratings, and the content knowledge of preservice teachers in assessing and instructing phonics based on their decision to engage in a face-to-face class or complete an online module. Quantitative findings showed no statistical difference in the content knowledge and self-efficacy ratings of the preservice teachers who attended the face-to-face class as compared to those who completed the online module. Qualitative findings indicated preservice teachers chose the face-to-face modality because they experienced challenges related to phonics content knowledge and they wanted more opportunities to ask questions. On the other hand, preservice teachers who chose the online module did so because they had confidence in phonics content and wanted to complete the content at their convenience.*

*Keywords:* Preservice teachers, self-efficacy, learning preferences, online learning, hybrid learning, modality preferences, and phonics instruction and assessment

## Introduction

For the past decade, universities have offered more mixed-mode and fully online courses based on college students' scheduling and personal needs (Patterson et al., 2020). In addition, throughout the past three years, COVID-19 has forced many universities to shift courses virtually or online (Betancourt, 2020; Dennen et al., 2022). Although online course modalities are preferred by many students (Nujid & Tholibon, 2021), as instructors we had concerns about how effective these modalities are in terms of student learning, especially for students who struggle with low self-efficacy in online environments (Cho et al., 2017; Prior et al., 2016). Furthermore, Du et al. (2015) found that learning preferences may affect performance in online settings. Therefore, the purpose of this mixed-methods pilot study was to: a) explore the course delivery preferences of undergraduate elementary preservice teachers enrolled in a reading assessment course, b) explore the self-efficacy of preservice teachers in assessing and instructing phonics, and c) compare preservice teachers' content knowledge related to assessing and instructing phonics based on their decision to engage in a face-to-face class or an online module developed by the authors.

Three research questions guided this pilot study.

1. What are the reasons undergraduate elementary preservice teachers prefer either online learning or face-to-face learning?
2. Is there a mean difference in content knowledge related to assessing and instructing phonics between undergraduate elementary preservice teachers who attend a face-to-face class and undergraduate elementary preservice teachers who complete an online module?
3. How do undergraduate elementary preservice teachers rate their self-efficacy in assessing phonics before and after instruction?

## Literature Review

The theoretical framework that guided this pilot study was in the area of self-efficacy and specifically educator self-efficacy beliefs. The exploration of self-efficacy, especially the self-efficacy of preservice teachers was explored to help provide one explanation for preservice teacher learning preference, either face-to-face or online. Other key concepts explored in this literature review include the role of phonics knowledge and blended learning in teacher educator preparation programs.

## **Phonics**

For preservice teachers to provide effective instruction to their future students, they must have a strong foundation in the content they are teaching (Washburn & Mulcahy, 2014). One area of instruction that elementary preservice teachers will engage in when they enter the classroom is phonics. This means, for preservice teachers to be effective teachers of phonics, they must have a strong understanding of phonics and how to teach it. Unfortunately, many preservice teachers do not have a strong foundational knowledge of the structure of English and therefore struggle with concepts related to phonics (Englert et al., 2019; Washburn & Mulcahy, 2014). To help preservice teachers develop their understanding of phonics content and pedagogy, teacher educators should provide explicit instruction and time for the preservice teachers to practice and apply what they have learned (Englert et al., 2019; Washburn & Mulcahy, 2014).

In addition, many preservice teachers do not have a realistic understanding of what they know and do not know related to phonics, as illustrated by their identification of their perceptions of knowledge (Nicholson & McIntosh, 2019). This misalignment of perceived phonics knowledge and actual phonics knowledge could not only impact their learning but also their future students' learning.

## **Blended Learning**

Teacher educators must examine the most effective method of teaching content to preservice teachers to ensure they are prepared to enter the field. Students in the 21st century learn differently and have schedules that require them to have flexibility in terms of when they attend class and complete their course work (Cottle & Glover, 2011; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Thanyaphongphat and Panjaburee (2017) recommended that university educators utilize online learning systems that align with the learning styles of undergraduate students. Utilizing a blended learning environment (both face-to-face and online modalities), teacher educators can ensure that preservice teachers are getting the instruction they need while still being adaptable to their busy schedules. Utilizing both face-to-face and online modalities also allows teacher educators to combine the strengths of each and minimize the weaknesses through reconceptualizing their course delivery (Cottle & Glover, 2011; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Shand & Glassett-Farley, 2018). Due to preservice teachers' lack of foundational knowledge of phonics content and pedagogy, blended learning can offer preservice teachers opportunities to engage in more student-centered and personalized instruction (Shand & Glassett-Farley, 2018). While several studies have shown

strong benefits of blended course modalities for both academic achievement and how they feel about it (Cottle & Glover, 2011; Rasmitadila et al., 2020; Shand & Glassett-Farley, 2018), there is a need for studies that specifically focus on blended learning used within teacher preparation programs (Shand & Glassett-Farley, 2018).

### **Self-Efficacy**

The construct of self-efficacy is rooted in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977; Pajares, 1997) and is an individual's belief in their ability to achieve desired outcomes (Bandura, 2006). Self-efficacy can be used to explain and predict an individual's choice of activities, the effort they will put forth, and how long they will persist with an activity, even when in stressful situations (Cantrell et al., 2015; Kitching et al., 2011; Pajares, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). According to Pajares (2002), people choose or alter their environment and behaviors based on their perceptions of their capability to perform tasks which impacts and determines future behavior (Usher & Pajares, 2009). Furthermore, a strong sense of efficacy can be motivating and contribute to success while a weak sense of efficacy can lead one to avoid difficult tasks and failure (Pajares, 1997).

### **Educator Efficacy Beliefs**

Teacher efficacy impacts student achievement (Cantrell & Hughes, 2008; Caprara et al., 2006; Guo et al., 2012; Klassen et al., 2011; Pajares & Urdan, 2006). Teaching efficacy beliefs refer to a teacher's perception of their capability to instruct and positively influence student learning (Dellinger et al., 2008). Research has shown that teacher self-efficacy beliefs predict a variety of student- and teacher-related outcomes in terms of learning (Aldhafri, 2016; Garvis, 2013). According to Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001), "Teacher efficacy has proved to be powerfully related to many meaningful educational outcomes such as teachers' persistence, enthusiasm, commitment and instructional behavior, as well as student outcomes such as achievement, motivation, and self-efficacy beliefs" (p. 783). As noted by Guo et al. (2012), the greater the sense of efficacy a teacher has, the better their students perform on reading assessments. Therefore examining the self-efficacy of preservice teachers related to instruction is integral to enhancing student achievement.

Several studies suggest that self-efficacy beliefs are contextual and task specific (Bandura, 2012; Klassen et al., 2011; Milner & Woolfolk Hoy, 2003). Mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and emotional and

physiological states are four sources of information that influence one's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1994; Pajares, 1997; Pajares, 2002; Usher & Pajares; 2008). Researchers agree that the most powerful influence on a person's sense of efficacy is mastery experience (Cantrell et al., 2015; Pajares, 2002; Usher & Pajares; 2008). Understanding mastery experience is particularly helpful to teacher educators as they develop preservice teachers' teaching abilities. Mastery experience is achieved through practice sessions (Fives & Buehl, 2017; Usher & Pajares, 2008). This can be accomplished when a more experienced person helps another person achieve a mastery experience via modeling, guided practice, and a gradual increase in responsibility (Bandura, 1977; Pajares, 2002).

Another way to develop a person's sense of efficacy is through social persuasion (Usher & Pajares, 2008). Through suggestions and feedback from a credible person, one can persuade another that they can perform a task well (Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009; Usher & Pajares, 2008). The effects of these social judgments are enhanced through instruction and if the task is performed under the right conditions (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Fives and Buehl (2017) suggested that workshops (e.g., professional developments and course work) can be used to bolster a person's self-efficacy beliefs.

Somatic and emotional states (e.g., feeling excited, stressed, nervous, or anxious) provides insight into a person's self-efficacy beliefs and influences a person's thoughts about their capabilities to perform a task (Usher & Pajares, 2008; Zeldin & Pajares, 2000). These four sources of information collectively impact a person's sense of efficacy and self-efficacy can be a predictor of one's performance level for specific tasks (Usher & Pajares, 2009). Exploring the self-efficacy beliefs of preservice teachers as it relates to literacy instruction has the potential to impact instructional delivery and effectiveness.

## **Methods**

A mixed-methods research design was used for this pilot study. A mixed-method research design integrates both quantitative and qualitative data to support and elaborate on the findings of each (Onwuegbuzie & Mallette, 2011). One purpose of this pilot study was to compare the preservice teachers' content knowledge and self-efficacy ratings through quantitative data based on the modality selected. Although understanding the impact of course modality on preservice teachers' quiz scores and self-efficacy ratings was important, information was also needed on why the preservice teachers chose the course modality they did. Therefore, an additional purpose was to explore the course delivery preferences of the preservice teachers through qualitative data.

## Context

This pilot study took place in the fall of 2019 at a large, urban Southeastern University within an undergraduate elementary reading course titled “Diagnostic and Corrective Reading”. This is the second reading course taken out of a three-course reading sequence that leads to a reading endorsement recognized by Florida. Author 2 was the instructor of record for the course and author 1 was the graduate teaching assistant. This course met in person once a week for two hours and 50 minutes throughout a 15-week semester. The data for this pilot study was collected during one of the course meetings on the topic of phonics. For this course meeting, the preservice teachers had the option to attend class face-to-face or complete an online module created with the same information as the face-to-face class.

The phonics instruction for both the in-person preservice teachers and the online module included information on: a) basic phonics concepts, b) systematic and explicit phonics instruction, c) approaches to phonics instruction, d) five teaching videos related to phonics instruction, e) textbook resources on phonics instruction, f) assessing phonics informally and formally, g) instruction on the Phonics Mastery Survey and the Basic Phonics Skills Test, and h) an activity using phonics assessment data to analyze and plan instruction. Within the online module, the preservice teachers also read an article on phonics instruction. The in-person preservice teachers did not read the article, but the information was provided within the PowerPoint presentation and class discussion.

## Participants

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling, as the preservice teachers within the class were the participants. All 35 undergraduate elementary preservice teachers enrolled in the course participated in the study. Of the preservice teachers enrolled, 13 selected to participate in the face-to-face class session and 22 of the preservice teachers participated in the online module on phonics.

## Data Collection

Qualitative and quantitative data was collected to answer the research questions. Qualitative data was collected during the next face-to-face class session that followed the phonics instruction. The preservice teachers answered the question, “What modality did you choose and why for the phonics content?” All (35) preservice teachers wrote their responses to this question during class time and submitted them in person.

The quantitative data collected included the preservice teachers' module quiz score and their self-efficacy ratings. All preservice teachers took a quiz created by the authors related to the phonics content. The quiz measured the preservice teachers' knowledge of phonics content and phonics assessment. There were nine fill-in-the-blank questions and four multiple-choice questions. The quiz was taken on the university's learning platform, Canvas, and each preservice teacher had a week to complete the quiz with up to three attempts. The preservice teachers were able to see their score after each attempt, but they did not know which questions they got wrong or right. The preservice teachers had the same quiz and a 120-minute time limit for each attempt.

The self-efficacy ratings were collected during the next face-to-face class session that followed the phonics instruction. Preservice teachers answered the following questions:

1. Rate yourself from 1–5 (5 being the highest) on your level of comfort in assessing phonics prior to the module/class.
2. Rate yourself from 1–5 (5 being the highest) on your level of comfort in assessing phonics after the module/class.

All 35 preservice teachers submitted self-efficacy ratings.

## **Data Analysis**

To analyze the qualitative data, holistic coding, in vivo coding, and code mapping were used (Saldaña, 2016). To analyze the preservice teachers' responses related to why they chose the modality they did, holistic coding was used to become familiar with the data as a whole prior to completing a more detailed coding process (Saldaña, 2016). After completing holistic coding, in vivo coding was used to utilize the preservice teachers' language during the analysis process (Saldaña, 2016). Through in vivo coding, words and phrases the preservice teachers used in their responses, such as "easily ask questions," "struggle in the phonics area," "read it on my own time," and "comfortable with phonics" were identified. Code mapping was implemented to combine the in vivo codes to develop a category with meaning (Saldaña, 2016). An example is when the in vivo codes "opportunity to ask questions," "I had so many questions," and "ask questions if need be" were combined into the category asking questions. From the categories, themes were created by combining any categories that were similar and then further adding meaning to the themes by defining the theme and creating an overarching sentence or phrase that encompassed the theme (Saldaña, 2016). For example, the



category asking questions was not combined with any other category during the theming process but was expanded on to become the theme *Desire to have more opportunities to ask questions*. This theme's definition included codes from reasons preservice teachers attended the face-to-face class that aligned with wanting to ask the instructor questions in relation to the phonics content. This whole process occurred in a cyclical format, as every time a code, category, or theme was created, all of the preservice teachers' responses were reread to ensure no other codes or categories were identified.

An independent *t*-test was used to determine the mean difference between the self-efficacy ratings of the preservice teachers who completed the online module and the preservice teachers who attended the face-to-face class. Another independent *t*-test was used to determine the mean difference between the module quiz scores of each group. Due to the preservice teachers' selecting their course modality, there was not a random assignment to groups which means the assumption of independence was not met, increasing the chance of Type 1 or Type 2 error.

## Results

This section begins with the quantitative results from the module quiz scores and the preservice teachers' self-efficacy ratings and ends with the qualitative results from the themes identified from the preservice teachers' open-ended responses. The results of the quantitative analysis of the module quiz scores found no statistically significant mean difference in content knowledge related to assessing and instructing phonics between the preservice teachers who attended the face-to-face class and those who completed the online module. In terms of self-efficacy ratings, the preservice teachers who attended the face-to-face class session rated themselves lower than the preservice teachers who completed the online module both before and after the phonics content but the difference between the two groups narrowed. From the analysis of the qualitative data, four themes were identified. Two themes were created from the preservice teachers' responses to why they attended the face-to-face class session: the desire to have more opportunities to ask questions and experiencing difficulties in phonics content. Two additional themes were created from the online preservice teachers' responses: the ability to complete the content on their own time and experiencing confidence in phonics content.

### Module Quiz Score

An independent *t*-test was used to determine if the preservice teachers who completed the phonics module online and the preservice teachers who learned the

phonics content in the face-to-face class differed in their module quiz scores. The test was not statistically significant for attempt one of the module quiz ( $p = .148$ ), attempt two ( $p = .900$ ), attempt three ( $p = .667$ ), or the overall final score of the module quiz ( $p = .572$ ). This means there was not a statistically significant difference in content knowledge related to assessing and instructing phonics between the undergraduate elementary preservice teachers who attended the face-to-face class and the undergraduate elementary preservice teachers who completed the online module.

Although there was not a statistically significant difference in the module quiz scores, the preservice teachers who attended the face-to-face class session did score slightly higher on all three quiz attempts and the overall module quiz score compared to the students who completed the online module, as shown in Table 1 (Kelley & Lopas, 2020).

### Self-Efficacy Rating

An independent  $t$ -test was also used to determine if the preservice teachers who completed the phonics module online and the preservice teachers who learned the phonics content in the face-to-face class differed in their self-efficacy ratings prior to or after learning the content. The test was not statistically significant for the preservice teachers' self-efficacy ratings before learning about phonics ( $p = .220$ ) or after ( $p = .534$ ). This means there was not a statistically significant difference in the undergraduate elementary preservice teachers' self-efficacy ratings related to assessing phonics based on whether they attended the face-to-face class or completed the online module.

**TABLE 1**  
**Module Quiz Score Descriptive Statistics**

| Group        | Attempt | N     | Mean  | Standard deviation |
|--------------|---------|-------|-------|--------------------|
| Face-to-Face | 1       | 13/13 | 33.54 | 4.81               |
|              | 2       | 7/13  | 35.86 | 2.48               |
|              | 3       | 1/13  | 38    | -                  |
|              | Overall | 13/13 | 36.31 | 3.54               |
| Online       | 1       | 22/22 | 29.68 | 8.58               |
|              | 2       | 13/22 | 35.69 | 2.90               |
|              | 3       | 3/22  | 35    | 5.20               |
|              | Overall | 22/22 | 35.27 | 5.91               |

While there was not a statistically significant difference in the preservice teachers' self-efficacy rating before and after learning the phonics content, the preservice teachers who attended the face-to-face class did rate themselves lower on average both before and after learning the content as compared to the preservice teachers who completed the online module as demonstrated in Table 2 (Kelley & Lopas, 2020). Although on average, the preservice teachers who attended the face-to-face class rated their self-efficacy lower, they did show the most growth in their self-efficacy after learning the content. The preservice teachers who attended the face-to-face class session increased their average self-efficacy rating by 1.500 points, while the preservice teachers who completed the online module increased their average self-efficacy rating by 1.272 points (Kelley & Lopas, 2020).

### Qualitative Open-Ended Responses

After analyzing the preservice teachers' responses to why they attended the face-to-face class session, two themes were created: the desire to have more opportunities to ask questions and experiencing difficulties in phonics content (Kelley & Lopas, 2020). The most recurrent theme was that of wanting to have more opportunities to ask questions related to the phonics content which was included in nine of the 13 preservice teachers' responses. An example of this theme is shown in the following preservice teachers' response, "I chose F2F because I know that I had many questions regarding phonics that I would have the opportunity to easily ask when in class." The second theme, which occurred in three of the 13 preservice teachers' responses was experiencing difficulties related to phonics instruction in the past. For example, a preservice teacher wrote, "I picked F2F for the phonics content because I still struggle in the phonics area."

**TABLE 2**  
**Self-Efficacy Rating Descriptive Statistics**

| Group       | N  | Mean  | Standard Deviation |
|-------------|----|-------|--------------------|
| Pre F2F     | 13 | 2.308 | .855               |
| Pre Online  | 22 | 2.705 | .984               |
| Post F2F    | 13 | 3.808 | .830               |
| Post Online | 22 | 3.977 | .645               |

Table 3 includes the themes, their definition, the codes included in each theme, and the frequencies.

From analyzing the online preservice teachers' responses to why they chose the modality they did, two themes were identified: the ability to complete the content on their own time and experiencing confidence in phonics content (Kelley & Lopas, 2020). Of the 22 preservice teachers who completed the online module, nine wrote about wanting flexibility in when they completed the phonics content. For instance, a preservice teacher wrote, "I chose the online portion of the phonics content because I was able to complete it on my own time and at my own pace." Additionally, four of the 22 preservice teachers who completed the online module wrote about experiencing confidence in phonics content. This theme appears in the following preservice teachers' written response, "I picked online because I'm pretty comfortable with phonics from last semester already." Table 4 includes the themes, their definition, the codes included in each theme, and the frequencies.

**TABLE 3**  
**Face-to-Face Themes**

| Theme  | Definition   | Codes   | Frequency |
|--|--|---|-----------|
| Desire to have more opportunities to ask questions | This theme includes codes from reasons PSTs attended F2F class that aligned with wanting to ask the instructor questions in relation to the phonics content. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "I wouldn't be able to ask questions"</li> <li>2. "ask questions in that moment"</li> <li>3. "in case I miss something or have questions"</li> <li>4. "get clarification in person"</li> <li>5. "more opportunity to ask questions"</li> <li>6. "I had so many questions"</li> <li>7. "I had many questions"</li> <li>8. "I can ask questions"</li> <li>9. "ask questions"</li> </ol> | N = 9/13  |
| Experience difficulties in phonics content         | This theme includes codes from reasons PSTs attended F2F class that aligned with past experiences with phonics being challenging.                            | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "I find phonics to be a little confusing"</li> <li>2. "I struggle in the phonics area"</li> <li>3. "phonics I feel is a weakness of mine"</li> </ol>  | N = 3/13  |

**TABLE 4**  
**Online Themes**

| Theme   | Definition   | Codes  | Frequency |
|---|--|--|-----------|
| The ability to complete the content on their own time | This theme includes codes from reasons PSTs completed the online module that aligns with wanting flexibility in when they completed the phonics content. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "read it on my own time"</li> <li>2. "Complete it on my own at and at my own pace"</li> <li>3. "spend extra time on what I'm not sure of"</li> <li>6. "go over the content on my own time"</li> <li>7. "do my phonics module when I chose"</li> <li>8. "complete the module at my pace"</li> <li>9. "work at my own pace"</li> </ol> | N = 9/22  |
| Experience confidence in phonics content              | This theme includes codes from reasons PSTs completed the online module that aligns with feeling confidence in phonics content.                          | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "I'm pretty comfortable with phonics"</li> <li>2. "Felt pretty confident with my previous phonics instruction"</li> <li>3. "I felt comfortable enough with phonics"</li> <li>4. "comfort with phonics"</li> </ol>  | N = 4/22  |

## Discussion

Findings from this pilot study showed that the preservice teachers who chose to attend the face-to-face class session did so because they did not feel confident in the phonics content and they wanted to have the ability to ask the instructor questions. The preservice teachers who attended the online module did so because they felt confident in the phonics content and they wanted the flexibility to complete the phonics content on their own time. From these findings it would suggest that allowing preservice teachers to select the modality of their choice each week based on the topic of study could lead to a positive, differentiated, and personalized learning experience. It would be intriguing to see if the preservice teachers who chose to complete the online module would choose to complete a face-to-face class when the topic of study is not one that they are confident in or if the desire to complete the content on their own time would have more influence on their decision. Likewise, it would also be interesting to see if the preservice teachers who chose the face-to-face class would choose to complete an online module for a topic of study that they felt more confident in, even if that would mean they would not have the ability to ask questions in person during

the learning. Especially considering the preservice teachers could have the ability to ask the instructor questions within an online modality through email, discussion posts, and synchronous platforms like Zoom or Teams. In the current COVID-19 climate, there is still a lot of uncertainty on whether classes will take place in person, synchronously online, or asynchronously online. If a course is offered online, one way to ensure the preservice teachers are comfortable and able to ask questions is to have the instructor take a poll of how the preservice teachers would prefer to ask questions online and then implement them within the course.

Furthermore, the findings from this pilot study demonstrate that the preservice teachers who engaged in the phonics content through a face-to-face class or an online module did not have significantly different module quiz scores or self-efficacy ratings related to phonics. This is an interesting finding as the most common reason for the modality the preservice teacher selected was related to confidence or lack thereof in terms of phonics. It would seem from the themes identified that the preservice teachers' self-efficacy ratings would be different between the two groups, at least before the content was taught, but their self-efficacy ratings were not significantly different before and after instruction. It would be compelling to investigate preservice teacher self-efficacy ratings further to see if there is a statistically significant difference in the self-efficacy ratings of those who attended the face-to-face class as compared to those who chose to do the online module related to more specific areas of the phonics content like phonics principles, teaching phonics, and assessing phonics.

## **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

There were several limitations to this pilot study. For one, the post-learning quiz the preservice teachers took on phonics instruction and assessment was created by the researchers and was not tested for reliability and validity. Additionally, the researchers did not gather validity and reliability for the self-efficacy scale used to collect the data on the preservice teachers' self-efficacy on assessing phonics. Future research could identify and use valid and reliable instruments for collecting the preservice teachers' knowledge related to phonics instruction and assessment, as well as self-efficacy related to assessing phonics. Second, the selectivity of the preservice teachers in this pilot study limits the generalizability of the findings. Third, this pilot study only focused on one literacy topic, phonics. Further research is needed on other topics covered in the course, such as comprehension and vocabulary. Findings could lead to important information on the students' course modality preferences based on each topic and their performance.

Fourth, in order to collect data on the preservice teachers' knowledge of phonics instruction and assessment, a post-test was used. When engaging in future research, it would be important to utilize a pre-test and post-test design to show growth in the preservice teachers' knowledge based on the modality selected. Fifth, when conducting the independent *t*-test the assumption of independence was violated, increasing the chance of Type I or Type II error. Lastly, the preservice teachers who attended the face-to-face class also had access to the online module. It is uncertain whether any of the face-to-face participants went through the online module in addition to attending the class, which could have impacted their scores on the phonics post-test.

### Implications and Recommendations

Post COVID-19, teacher preparation programs will likely continue to offer blended or online courses. The findings from this pilot study could be useful in instructional design and implementation. Using a similar approach as in this pilot study with other literacy topics, such as fluency and vocabulary, could be one way to be responsive to students in terms of providing the choice of instructional delivery and achieving a truly personalized learning approach. A self-efficacy and pre-post measure could also be developed for each literacy topic and students could decide what format would best meet their personal and learning needs. This would be a new and novel way of approaching blended learning. Integral to this approach would be making sure that opportunities to ask questions (regardless of the modality) were readily available. With COVID-19 altering the learning environments and schedules of many K – 12 students, it is even more imperative that preservice teachers have the pedagogical skill and content knowledge to be prepared to provide high-quality literacy instruction for all. Therefore, teacher educators need to examine the most effective methods of teaching so preservice teachers are fully prepared as they enter their future classrooms.

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# HELPING PK-12 TEACHERS TRANSITION TO TEACHER EDUCATION PROFESSORS

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## **Abstract**

*We, the researchers, are two literacy educators: one, a new University faculty member who came from PK-12 and the other a tenured faculty member who has been out of the PK-12 setting for quite a while. We have formed a collaborative mentorship to help the new faculty member adjust to the expectations and experience of being in higher education. In this autoethnographic study, we used our own experiences to shape our research plans and our understanding of the problems we are hoping to address. What could make this transition to higher education for the PK-12 teacher easier? This study seeks to explore the role of co-mentorship in the experience of new education faculty.*

*Keywords:* Mentorship, Co-mentorship, Transition to Higher Education, Teacher Education, Building Professional Capacity

## **Statement of the Problem**

The ideal candidate for a Teacher Education faculty member will have substantial experience in the PK-12 classroom. Being able to channel the early childhood, elementary or middle/high school literacy experience for education students is crucial; however, there are obstacles to recruiting such experienced candidates to the University setting. Many education candidates don't even apply at all

Huston, Norman, 2005). This can be especially daunting when it comes to filling a literacy education position because there are so few literacy specialists compared to early childhood, elementary or secondary education candidates. This paper explores these barriers for faculty coming from K-12, in hopes of finding ways to clear them in the future.

We, the researchers, are two literacy educators: one, a new University faculty member who came from PK-12 and the other a tenured faculty member who has been out of the PK-12 setting for quite a while. We have formed a collaborative mentorship to help the new faculty member adjust to the expectations and experience of being in higher education. In this autoethnographic action research study, we used our own experiences to shape our research plans and our understanding of the problems we are hoping to address. Our research questions included: What challenges do PK-12 teachers face when transitioning to the higher education setting? What could make this transition to higher education for the PK-12 teacher easier? What role could a mentorship play in this transition? We hoped that our research would help us to create a space for a successful model of faculty mentorship and collaboration to have implications for others making the transition to higher education from PK-12 settings as well as those in the broader Teacher Education field.

## Literature Review

There has been far too little written about this topic so far, but we will be analyzing what the researchers have found so far to date in order to create a typology of the way that new Teacher Education faculty coming from PK-12 have experienced this transition. As Page & Jenks (2012) point out, former teachers who become professors find there is much more freedom and autonomy in the higher education setting; however new second-career professors struggle to read what expectations are and to avoid becoming overwhelmed by seemingly competing priorities. Second-career Teacher Education faculty share many challenges with other second-career faculty having to do with adjusting to the new culture of the University as compared to other workplaces (Assaad, 2015). In addition, New Teacher Education faculty from PK-12 experience unique challenges because they often complete low residency doctorates while working, meaning that they have less time to soak up the academic culture from professors and peers than those who do full-time doctoral work, like those in English Literature for example (Chase, 2016; LaRocco & Bruins, 2006). Also, those who have mastered the pace and scope of work in the PK-12 classroom, may find that the seemingly endless

string of things one can do in an University setting may take time away from precious family-time, creating an unhealthy balance (LaRocco & Bruins, 2006).

Making the transition from public education to higher education is a complex process. Novice professors often struggle to meet the individual needs of an increasingly diverse and growing population of students, while simultaneously attempting to balance the research, scholarship, and stewardship requirements of their institutions (Amey, 1996; Stupinsky, et al, 2015; Trotman and Brown, 2005). At times, many of the challenges cause new faculty members to transition back to PK-12 educational settings. Almost half of all assistant professors resign from their faculty position (Amey, 1996). Many new faculty reported low self-efficacy in their role and the impact on their role by unclear expectations for attaining tenure, advising students, and receiving conflicting messages about their responsibilities, and a lack of discussion about their progress (Austin and Rice 1998; Stupinsky, et al, 2015). Evidence suggests that new education faculty coming from the PK-12 system may struggle to build a set of research skills and a research agenda that reflects the bridging of theory and practice—a most intimidating challenge in the resocialization process (Kinsey et al., 2006).

In order to support a smooth transition from public education to higher education, mentoring between a novice professor and a tenured faculty can be an effective and supportive structure (Chase, 2016). In fact, mentoring is viewed as an important professional activity in all organizations (Lunsford, Baker & Pifer, 2018). “Mentoring has traditionally been defined as ‘a dynamic, reciprocal relationship in a work environment between an advanced career incumbent (mentor) and a beginner (mentee) aimed at promoting the career development of both’ (Brubaker, Bunton, Dandar, Lyness, Myeloma, Novielli, Pollart, Willians, 2016, p. 671). Mentoring involves a collaborative relationship aimed to benefit the mentor and the mentee (Gagliardi, Webster, Perrier, Bell, Straus (2014). Lunsford, Baker, & Pifer (2018) examined the influence on mentor relationships quality and job satisfaction within faculty members at 12 liberal arts colleges. The findings suggested that faculty members who reported higher quality mentoring relationships reported even greater levels of job satisfaction. Lunsford, Baker, & Pifer (2018) also reported that individuals engaged in the mentoring programs with varied levels of commitment. Not all college faculty participants reported having a mentorship program. Furthermore, faculty members with advanced ranks such as associate or full professor were more likely to be mentors and assistant professors filled the role of protégé. This study provided some empirical evidence supporting the mentorship relationship between novice faculty and advanced career stages but also left some unanswered questions regarding the

parameters around the structure of the mentor program; however, the findings suggest that partnerships impact job satisfaction of the assistant faculty.

Mentoring as a form of professional development is noted as a way of building professional capacity (Darwin, Palmer, 2009). Adult learning is a balance between accessing one's own schema and the learning that has developed over time to construct new insights and interpretations and mentoring can help adults incorporate new knowledge when switching careers (Drago-Severson, Blum-DeStefano, 2018). The applications of adult developmental learning theories in education are informative resources to support how adults learn, communicate, and work collaboratively together to build the capacity of the organization (Drago-Severson, 2009; Drago-Severson & Blum-DeStefano, 2018). Drago-Severson (2009) has suggested that "educators must be supported in pursuing adult learning and development. Developmental capacity concerns the cognitive, affective (emotional), interpersonal and intrapersonal capacities that enable us to better manage the complex demands of leadership, teaching, learning, and life" (p. 8).

In higher education settings, two traditional models of mentoring dominate: pairing novice faculty with experienced faculty or administrator-led mentoring of groups of new teachers through University Teaching Centers (Darwin, Palmer, 2009). In novice-established faculty pairings, faculty who have been at the University and likely have tenure will be assigned to mentor a new faculty member. Some programs assign mentors from within the home department, and others assign an established faculty from another department (Darwin, Palmer, 2009). There are pros and cons to each approach, with department-colleagues holding departmental-level knowledge and cross-department mentors better able to protect the privacy of the mentor relationship.

While the traditional mentorship approaches maintain a hierarchical relationship between the less and more seasoned professor, a more recent, reciprocal approach is the co-mentorship model, where each co-mentor brings support and knowledge to bear to help the other co-mentor. This co-mentor model makes a lot of sense for the PK-12 faculty and more established faculty since both bring valuable skills and experience to the table of which the other is lacking (Barrett & Brown, 2014, Jipson & Paley, 2000).

## **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

Our approach to our understanding the transition to higher education is informed by the infinite building metaphor of Social Constructivist Theory and the multi-identity metaphor of postmodernist theories. Amineh & Asl, (2015) describe the underpinnings of the Social Constructivist Theory,

Anyone who directly interacts with the learner under learning circumstances can be taken into account in the social world of learner. The pioneer of social constructivism was Vygotsky. Based on Vygotsky's social learning theory, it is believed that psychological phenomena emerge from social interaction. They are established by social relationship, and their elements are social artifacts such as signs, symbols, and linguistic terms (p. 64).

As higher education professionals we inhabit many different positions or identities which impact our work. We are learners, scholars, teachers, friends, colleagues, novices, experts, collaborators, administrators, professional-organization members, reading specialists, literacy education professors, researchers, advisors and more. Postmodernist theories that recognize our understanding of identity as "multiple and changing" (Ivanic, 1997) help us to conceptualize the experiences of a new professor as he or she enters the University culture, where her/his multiple identities are taken up depending on what is needed and where multiple identities interact with each other in helpful and problematic ways.

Trowler & Knight (2000) describe the changing and social nature of identity formation among new academics as "constructing and re-constructing relationships with others, giving messages about the 'self' through actions... (34). One of their participants describes the process of identifying with the new culture of academia this way:

Because you are in a competitive university world you have to actually construct yourself to be good at all three of these things [research, teaching and administration]... . You have to present yourself as ... being good in all these three areas and then it's actually hard to take yourself back out of that and say "well what originally was I interested in" , or "what did I think I was good at?"... You have to have this very fluid identity (Respondent 2, new academics study, female, women's studies, English chartered university, 34).

In our work we conceptualize the experience of a new academic as a time of identity shaping and changing. We recognize the role of the self and the social environment in that changing. We also know that the power dynamics, values and specific context of University culture and work can mean this "identity work" is exciting, empowering and productive as well as frustrating, disempowering and constraining.



Our work as teachers and teacher educators draws on Social Constructivist theory as does our research. As collaborators we are building knowledge together based on our experiences and what we've learned from others outside of our collaboration. As we conceptualize the challenges and opportunities of transitioning to higher education, we draw on the ideas Social Constructivist offer about the layering of experiences and reliance on schema to understand transition.

Because our actions would impact our lives so quickly, there was a certain urgency to our work, which was a bit different from other research studies we've been a part of, which had longer or unknown timelines. We needed to build our research on research methodologies that would allow for us to quickly view ourselves and take some actions based on what we found. Ethnographic methods allowed us to collect data on our own interactions and experiences, and an Action Research approach enabled us to quickly shape our own behavior in ways we hoped would have a positive impact.

Our approach to our study of ourselves was autoethnographic. Autoethnographic fieldwork typically involves the development of close connections between the fieldworker and subjects and situations being studied (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Murphy, Jerolmack, & Smith, 2021). Autoethnographic fieldwork works to make the familiar strange (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Murphy, Jerolmack, & Smith, 2021). As researchers, we worked categorizing our experiences into the two categories of 1.) Coming to academia straight from PK-12 with part-time doctoral experience; 2.) Coming to academia after an extended full-time residential doctoral program. Categorization is a major component of qualitative data analysis by which investigators attempt to group patterns observed in the data into meaningful units or categories. Through this process, we then began reflecting on the challenges and opportunities afforded by each of these paths. Based on our findings from this early data collection, we used an action research methodology to plan an intervention for better success. The intervention we planned was a collaborative mentorship, based on the idea of a co-mentorship, described by Jipson & Paley (2000) as creating "a "shelter" or safe space within which we can encourage, support, and critique each other in the trying out of ideas, feelings, and actions" (p. 37). Jipson & Paley capture the equity in the co-mentoring relationship as a "practice creates a creative, democratic space for the formation of insights and understandings" (p. 37). We planned to use our individual expertise to help each other thrive in the academic setting.

## Findings

Conversations between the two of us about these different transitions (See Table 1) revealed the challenges that Julia could help Ivy with. Many of these

challenges (See Table 2) revolved around newness to the world of establishing a personal academic research pipeline, which is necessary for attaining tenure. This research pipeline includes projects in early creative stages, projects being prepared for presentation or publication, and presentation or publication. A common complaint seen in the literature studying the transition from PK-12 to higher education work is a lack of this kind of cultural knowledge about research.

Another area of challenge identified was the independence of the higher education setting as compared to the PK-12 setting. Setting one's own priorities to balance the requirements and responsibilities of teaching, scholarship, advising and program administration can be daunting. Demands from all of these areas come quickly and often and being reactive and proactive on these fronts is necessary. In the PK-12 setting time is more highly managed and structured for the teacher or specialist.

**TABLE 1**  
**Notes About Transition to Tenure-Track Faculty Position**

| <b>High Residential Full-Time Doctoral Program</b>  | <b>Straight from PK-12, Part-Time Doctoral Program</b>   |
|---|--|
| For five years I watched my professors from a close proximity, soaking up the academic culture and expectations, especially for tenure.   | Prior to my current role as a faculty member, I worked as a classroom teacher, reading specialist and literacy instructional coach for 25 years. |
| I internalized the triad of University expectations: Teaching, Scholarship, Service.  | In addition, for nine years, I worked as an adjunct instructor teaching graduate evening courses in literacy.                                    |
| I taught within the University setting each year, while being mentored by college faculty.  | Within the University setting, I had little to no interaction with the faculty.  |
| I collaborated with graduate students on presentations at national conferences, practicing in front of professors and students.   |  |
| Grad program had a class on writing for publication.  |  |
| Because of life circumstances, I worked as a tenure-track faculty member at three schools before beginning my current job. I had a lot of exposure to the expectations of a University setting. |  |

**TABLE 2****Issues Identified as Challenges for PK-12 Colleague**

- 
- Cultural differences - each setting is different
  - Collaboration and level of support (mentor)
  - Scholarship - (value for research, funding, grants)
  - Priorities (Balancing teaching, research, and service)
  - Autonomy
  - Structure of University
  - Time consuming new tasks and learning curve: learning info. for advising, creating C.V., researching new conferences and professional organizations
- 

We also were able to flush out special challenges for the Full-Time Doctoral Student faculty member, who may not have been in a PK-12 classroom in a long time. These challenges stemmed from this lack of connection to the current school environment. This faculty member does not have the recent muscle memory experience of the classroom to draw on. Also, the meeting and collaboration style of the PK-12 setting has much to offer the higher education setting—being conducted among teachers, specialists and administrators who are interacting with children, other teachers and parents daily.

### **Interventions Suggested by Findings**

Based on our Findings, the two of us embarked on a co-mentorship, during which we could both gain support from each other. Julia took the lead on the research front, including Ivy in the process of creating a collaborative research project on a topic of mutual interest. Eventually we sent out the proposal, which became the first of two presentations at national professional conferences that we as a team presented at.

Ivy took the lead on planning a professional development workshop for recent alumni of the department that would address needs of teachers new to the profession. We planned and proposed this summer workshop to the Dean of

**TABLE 3****Issues Identified as Challenges for Tenured Full-Time Doctoral Program Colleague**

- 
- Distance from PK-12 Classroom
  - Lack of recent contact with PK-12 Administrators, Specialist, Teachers, Instructional Assistants, Students and Families and Communities of Students
  - Lack of Learning Communities of PK-12 teachers
  - Prioritizing of research and scholarship
  - Isolation (Siloizing)
-

the School of Education. Ivy offered ideas about what new teachers could most benefit from in this kind of setting. Ivy also contributed to the revamping of the Graduate Reading Program Julia was in charge of running, bringing her current knowledge and understanding around teachers' needs for completing this kind of program.

### **Foundations of Our Co-Mentorship**

In the context of our University setting, Julia and Ivy engaged in meaningful dialogue. The conversations varied to many diverse topics such as the structure of the University setting to include the role of the president, the provost and academic deans in departments, how to plan and execute undergraduate advising sessions, conversations on how to engage in the annual portfolio reviews by the department and the university in order for new faculty to progress towards tenure. Within our collaborative framework, we developed a space for questions, answers, and reflection. The space we developed created a safe space for vulnerability and open communication built on mutual trust. Ivy demonstrated her ability to be vulnerable asking very concrete literal questions such as, "What is the role of the Provost?" or "What are the literacy associations that you would suggest I send my proposals to? Julia approached each question with meaning and detailed responses and also anticipated possible challenges to communicate information to support Ivy's capacity. This, "holding environment," according to Drago-Severson (2004) allows the mentee to build their professional capacity. The "holding environment" or space is a context that supports learning and growth, but can be fraught with possible conflict and intensity because beliefs and knowledge are challenged. The conversation between the mentor and mentee supports a structure to challenge, support, and form new meaning of experiences in qualitatively new ways.

Likewise, Julia made herself vulnerable and open to new growth when she asked Ivy for her insight and help with developing professional development opportunities for new teachers who recently graduated from the department. As a tenured faculty, Julia needed to better understand the barriers new teachers faced in the current context of education as teacher candidates engaging in newly appointed positions. Julia asked questions and took detailed notes while Ivy shared her insights. Julia's questions included, "How do you envision the summer workshops being structured to support our Post-Graduates?" and "What are the various topics that you would suggest we offer? The reciprocal process of this interactive dialogue provided a platform for the relationship between the participants to first build the necessary trust needed for each individual to

become vulnerable enough to ask the necessary questions to build their capacity. Then, the reflection process after their dialogue included a positive lens on the culture of the space.

Reflection, after an experience and depending on its context, can lead to transformational learning - through thinking, problem-solving, examining self-beliefs, or assumptions (Kegan, 1982, 1984, 2000). The connection between the experience and the learning is the connection the learner is able to make in beginning a new stage of development (Drago-Severson, 2009; Kegan, 1982, 1994, 2000). Drago-Severson (2004) illuminates the importance of dialogue to build the professional capacity of individuals. Drago-Severson (2004) explains the importance of collaboration to support learning:

Dialogue on classroom practice, improving skills, or expressing vulnerabilities is inherent to this practice. Over time, this dialog offers an opportunity for both participants to challenge their thinking, reshape their assumptions, and grow to more complex ways of knowing. As both participants better understand the values they bring to the teaching process, mentoring can support transformational learning. (p. 125)

### **The Shared Space of a Shared Experience: The Professional Conference**

Although our collaboration began before our shared experience of traveling to and presenting at a professional conference together, we both point to this experience as a safe holding environment, which gave us a pause to build something together. We had to depend on each other to make our trip and our presentation successful. We supported each other and used the “pause” as a chance to build up our ideas in the areas we had begun to work on before. Perhaps because we had a chance to reflect in this space outside our regular routine, and because we were working in the intense learning environment of a professional conference, we both felt a strong sense of self efficacy come out of this shared experience. Ivy felt more certain of her identity as a researcher and Julia felt a renewed sense of being part of the academic community with a new colleague to share that with.

We lay the groundwork for this time of work in our earlier conversations and collaborations. Kochan & Trimble (2000) refer to this trajectory as “laying the groundwork,” “warming up,” “working,” and “long-term.” During the

working phase co-mentors are able to be very productive and creative, asking questions instead of telling each other what they think should be done and “taking action.”

At the conference it seemed like everytime we had time to talk with each other, we had great ideas about what we could do to move several of our individual and collective projects forward. Our conversations were very associative, often beginning with the speaker we just saw and moving to topics of our departmental work, our classes or our paths as professors and researchers. We were inspired by one of the keynote speakers, and we used that experience to think about how we could structure the professional development workshop for recent alumnus. Another term used in the literature to describe the work of co-mentoring comes to mind: “heaping.” Jipson & Paley used the term “heaping” to describe the productivity of their research collaboration.

We left the conference with new ideas about how to work together on the Graduate Reading Program and the Professional Development workshop, as well as a strengthening of our co-mentoring relationship.

## **Implications**

### **Why is this important?**

Firstly, the issue of supporting PK-12 education faculty is important because we need these faculty teaching our teacher candidates. We, in literacy education know how important it is to have faculty who have recently been in touch with the ever-changing literacy climate public schools. Julia has watched a talented literacy education faculty member leave and return to PK-12 because of a lack of support, and the literature supports that this is a widespread problem. The University is a culture unto itself and like any culture, you need to be immersed in it and observe members of that culture to figure out what the norms for fitting in and being successful are. We owe it to our teacher education students to give this issue time and resources.

Secondly, we feel like we have both discovered a way to be supportive to each other that could be duplicated by others. By having the chance to reflect on our experiences and connect them to research and findings in the literature, we see the connections with our own experience. We certainly have come to appreciate the complex and formative collaboration we have stepped into, and we see the power and productivity of such a relationship,

Lastly, we have talked about how we can use what we have learned to create a smoother pipeline from PK-12 to Education Departments for those who would like to share their experiences with teacher candidates as adjunct faculty

and hopefully ultimately as a tenure-track faculty. We have come up with the follow as part of a Pre-K to Higher Education “pathway project”

- To encourage PK-12 to share expertise and practice, create learning communities that extend beyond the university walls
- Encourage PK-12 educators to see themselves as possible future higher education faculty through professional development partnerships.
- Create alternatives to time-consuming adjuncting like on-line workshops or guest lectureships for PK-12 educators who would like to share but have limited time.

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# EXAMINING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND UNDERSTANDINGS OF VISUAL LITERACY INSTRUCTION

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## **Abstract**

*Despite the importance of promoting visual literacy in content instruction, there is scant research investigating pre-service teachers' perceptions and understandings of visual literacy instruction. To fill these research gaps, we developed a unit in a literacy methods course that integrated visual literacy and social studies instruction for pre-service teachers. In this qualitative study, we analyzed 65 elementary and secondary pre-service teachers' reflections after the unit. Findings revealed that a majority of pre-service teachers developed a positive attitude toward visual literacy (instruction), demonstrated better understanding of visual displays (ViDis) and visual literacy skills, and recognized the advantages of using ViDis for teaching and learning. Finally, we provided implications for teacher educators and future endeavors to promote more effective visual literacy instruction.*

Recent research highlights that visual displays (ViDis) in K-12 social studies texts become increasingly complex as the grade levels ascend considering the density and variety of visuals and formatting features (Fingeret, 2012). Without explicit instruction, even skilled readers cannot naturally acquire and apply visual literacy skills when processing informational texts (e.g., learners may not be able

to extract relevant information from a flow diagram and rely heavily on verbal texts, McTigue & Flowers, 2011).

It should be noted that social studies demand our students to develop the competencies of critical thinking, inquiring and incorporating multimodal information (National Council of Social Studies, 2010). We argue that, if our young generation is going to be critical consumers of multimodal information, teachers must have a more nuanced understanding of visual literacy instruction, so that they can support students to foster skills of navigating and producing visual information (Roberts & Brugar, 2017).

Interestingly, when examining teachers' competency of developing effective visual literacy instruction in social studies, Brugar & Roberts (2017) found that even veteran elementary teachers need support to develop effective instructional strategies to align visual literacy instruction with Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association, 2010). This is very likely due to the fact that visual literacy instruction is rarely provided or emphasized in teacher education programs (Burgar, 2017). These findings call for empirical research to explore teachers' understanding of visual literacy and their competencies of developing effective visual literacy instruction.

Although the impact of visual literacy instruction on K-12 students' learning has been widely researched in the past few decades (Flynt et al., 2010; Miller 2016; Guo et al, 2020), there is scant research focused on teachers' instructional strategies in content areas. Specifically, within the context of social studies, it is less known if we prepare pre-service teachers with the knowledge and skills to deliver specific visual literacy instruction. To address these research gaps, we developed a unit aiming to facilitate pre-service teachers' understanding of visual literacy (instruction) in social studies in a literacy methods course. We then collected and analyzed their reflections after the unit. The primary focus of this study sought to explore pre-service teachers' perceptions and understandings of visual literacy (instruction) as well as their instructional needs after the unit.

## Literature Review

### Visual Literacy in Social Studies

The purpose of social studies is to prepare young children to be good citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society (National Council of Social Studies, 2000). To achieve this goal, the National Council of Social Studies (2000) further suggested that K-8 social studies instruction should incorporate literacy skills including, but not limited to, reading, writing, listening, and communicating to engage students to better understand content. Especially in the 21st century, students

are more frequently exposed to a wide range of multimodal texts in social studies (Guo et al., 2018; Fingeret, 2012). To be critical consumers and active citizens, students should develop proficiency in interpreting, evaluating and navigating a wide range of multimodal sources.

Borrowing from previous research, we define visual literacy as the ability to decode, interpret, critique, and produce meaningful visual communications (Metros, 2008). It encompasses the skills to visualize and communicate internally, as well as ethically judge the accuracy, validity, and worth of ViDis in both print and digital format (Bramford, 2003; Metros, 2008). These visual literacy skills are essential in social studies texts, because students often encounter a variety of ViDis such as maps, tables, flow charts, timelines that require specialized literacy skills to process (Guo et al., 2018). For example, evaluating a context-specific map of World War II can be very different from organizing experiment data into a graph. Correspondingly, classroom teachers should be able to develop effective visual literacy instruction to equip students with these skills, depending on the subject matter. To achieve these goals, teachers should also have solid understandings of ViDis and develop proficiency in visual literacy.

## **Visual Literacy and Teacher Education**

When examining teachers' instructional strategies of visual literacy, recent research revealed that elementary teachers rarely provided explicit visual literacy instruction to develop students' higher-order thinking in the content areas (Coleman et al., 2011; Brugar & Roberts, 2017). For example, in a self-reported survey study of visual literacy instruction, Coleman and colleagues (2011) revealed that 65% of the teachers reported that the most frequently used strategy was pointing to the ViDis in learning materials (Coleman et al., 2011). However, when asked whether elementary teachers used ViDis to guide children organize or create information, 30% of the respondents mentioned that they often had their students organize information from multiple sources and only 7% asked students to create a ViDi. These findings demonstrated that elementary teachers were less likely to utilize ViDis to their fullest potential in content areas.

One of the reasons why teachers did not provide explicit visual literacy instruction may be that teachers did not recognize their own visual literacy skills and their competencies of developing effective literacy instruction. As such, they were unlikely to transform such content knowledge into their instruction, and may have encountered challenges to explain ViDis to their students (Henderson, 1999). In fact, the Association of College and Research Libraries (2011) has established standards to promote visual literacy in higher education. For example,

it is suggested that visually literate learners should be able to “situate an image in its cultural, social, and historical contexts, and use images effectively for different purposes.” These standards provide a framework for educators to develop effective instruction in teacher education.

Although it is widely acknowledged that teacher education programs should emphasize visual literacy, the effectiveness of these programs needs to be investigated (Yeh, 2010). However, there is scant research conducted to explore pre-service teachers’ perceptions and understandings of visual literacy (instruction). Given the important role that future teachers play in promoting visual literacy, in our literacy methods class, we developed a unit to facilitate pre-service teachers’ understanding of visual literacy instruction. In the current study, we explored pre-service teachers’ perceptions and understandings of visual literacy (instruction) as well as their instructional needs after completing the unit.

## Method

### Overview of the Study

Participants were 65 pre-service teachers who enrolled in a teacher education program at a state university in the Northwestern area of the United States. At the time of data collection, they were enrolled in a literacy methods course, pursuing their initial teacher certification.

The current study is a part of our larger research project. To investigate pre-service teachers’ perceptions and understandings of visual literacy instruction, we developed a survey and two visual literacy assessments. Based on an initial analysis of their survey responses, we then developed an interactive unit to enhance their pedagogical content knowledge of visual literacy. Specifically, students read scholarly articles and attended one two-hour Zoom meeting. In this virtual workshop, we provided mini-lessons to introduce the most commonly used ViDis in social studies textbooks (Guo et al., 2018), essential visual literacy skills, and instructional strategies that promote higher-order thinking. By analyzing authentic examples, pre-service teachers discussed classroom applications in small groups. Finally, after the Zoom meeting, they developed a reflection paper based on four prompting questions provided.

### Data Sources and Analysis

We provided four open-ended questions that guided pre-service teachers to reflect on (a) their perceptions of visual literacy (instruction) after experiencing the unit; (b) their major takeaways from this unit; (c) their thoughts on the advantages of visual literacy instruction; and (d) topics of visual literacy that they would like to

explore more. For the specific purpose of this study, we centralized our research on analyzing the data from their reflection papers because we were interested in exploring pre-service teachers' perceptions and understandings of visual literacy (instruction) after this unit, so that we could adjust our course and provide recommendations for future endeavors to strengthen teacher education programs.

We analyzed the pre-service teachers' reflective responses based on the following procedure. First, we imported their responses to each question by typing the phrases extracted from their narratives in an Excel spreadsheet. Next, we collaboratively examined the phrases to develop the initial coding schemes. Using the initial coding schemes, the first author analyzed the entire sample set as well as calculated the frequency of preservice teachers' responses within each theme. During the entire coding process, our team met regularly to refine our coding schemes by reorganizing and collapsing several initial coding categories. Findings were generated by examining the content of each theme in more depth.

## Findings

Through a systematic analysis of 65 pre-service teachers' responses, we generated our findings in the following section aligning with the main prompt questions in their reflection papers: (a) their attitude toward visual literacy (instruction); (b) their thoughts on the advantages of visual literacy instruction; (c) their main takeaways; and (d) further exploration they would like to do. We discussed each section with examples.

### Pre-Service Teachers' Attitude toward Visual Literacy (Instruction)

We identified three types of changes in their attitudes toward visual literacy after this unit: making positive and negative changes, and staying positive. Table 1 represents the frequency of responses regarding the change of preservice teachers' attitudes toward visual literacy (instruction).

**TABLE 1**  
**The Change of Pre-Service Teachers' Attitude toward Visual Literacy (Instruction)**

| Theme                | Frequency of responses |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| Made positive change | 51                     |
| Stayed positive      | 11                     |
| Made negative change | 1                      |

A majority of the pre-service teachers mentioned that they developed a positive attitude toward visual literacy (instruction). Specifically, they purported that they used to have a very limited understanding of visual literacy before this unit. For example, several pre-service teachers mentioned that “I am not able to define or describe what visual literacy is;” and, “I thought visuals are just photos/pictures.” These examples demonstrated that they were unfamiliar with visual literacy terminology. However, after this unit, they gained a deeper understanding of visual literacy. For example, one pre-service teacher wrote: “Visual literacy is more than simply understanding the information from the photos, it involves the ability to interpret the visual information critically using their own words.” Moreover, they also provide examples of different types of ViDis in their responses. For example, one pre-service teacher wrote: “Something new I learned from this unit is there are [sic] more than one type of maps, such as bird’s-eye view, flow map, and context map.”

Furthermore, with a deeper understanding of visual literacy, several pre-service teachers pointed out that they started to recognize the importance of teaching students visual literacy skills. For example, one pre-service teacher mentioned: “By learning the knowledge (e.g., definitions, features, design principles) of different formats of visuals, students will be able to interpret the visual information they are exposed to critically, instead of believing everything they see or interpret visuals just at a superficial level.” This pre-service teacher believed that teaching essential visual literacy skills would allow students to develop critical thinking by evaluating different sources of information.

In addition, several pre-service teachers mentioned that their attitude toward visual literacy did not change because they have appreciated the advantages of ViDis all along. From a learner’s perspective, they appreciated how ViDis improved their understanding of information. For example, one pre-service teacher mentioned: “The use of visual aids within literacy was the best supplemental aid to curriculum and always reinforced content for me.” From an educator’s perspective, they appreciated how ViDis would engage their students by pointing out: “My perception has not changed, it has only added a stronger support to my initial ideas of how visuals should be incorporated in schools to engage more students by providing fresh information.” Although these pre-service teachers seemed to hold the same perspective, this unit reinforced their beliefs about the advantages of incorporating ViDis into their classroom instruction.

Interestingly, despite the fact that nearly all pre-service teachers demonstrated a positive perspective toward visual literacy instruction, we found one pre-service teacher shared a somewhat negative perspective. He claimed that “Visual sources such as tables and flowcharts explain themselves perfectly, so

instructional activities are not necessary.” This example showed that this pre-service teacher did not recognize the value of visual literacy instruction because he believed that ViDis were self-explanatory so that students might not need additional instructional support.

### **Advantages of Visual Literacy (Instruction)**

62 out of 65 pre-service teachers mentioned the advantages of ViDis and the importance of using visual literacy instruction from two angles: students’ learning, and teachers’ instruction. Table 2 summarizes the frequency of responses regarding the advantages of using visual literacy (instruction).

A majority of pre-service teachers emphasized that using ViDis allowed students to recall, comprehend, and think critically, which align with three levels of educational learning objectives from Bloom’s taxonomy: remembering, understanding, and analyzing. Specifically, several pre-service teachers believed that using ViDis allowed students to recall information. For example, one pre-service teacher wrote: “Providing students with visual aids is a helpful way to increase students’ memory about important concepts and events in any subject matter.” Moreover, beyond recalling, several pre-service teachers agreed that using ViDis would also facilitate students’ comprehension. For example, one pre-service teacher pointed out: “With the help of ViDis, students could dig deeper into a topic and visualize what might have happened during the event.” Finally, other pre-service teachers proposed that ViDis would help students develop critical thinking. An example selected from a pre-service teachers’ reflection may represent this perspective: “Visuals could help students see the content in a different way from texts, and in order to absorb the visual information, the students must think critically.” In summary, these pre-service teachers believed that using ViDis could benefit different levels of learning.

**TABLE 2**  
**Advantages of Visual Literacy Instruction**

| <b>Theme</b>                           | <b>Sub-theme</b>            | <b>Frequency of responses</b> |
|--|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Advantages for students’ learning (59) | enhance memory              | 14                            |
|  | improve comprehension       | 21                            |
|  | develop critical thinking   | 5                             |
| Advantages for teachers’ instruction   | differentiating instruction | 8                             |
|  | making clarifications       | 5                             |
|  | engaging students           | 2                             |



Additionally, several pre-service teachers explained the advantages of providing visual literacy instruction from a teacher's perspective, involving differentiating instruction, making clarifications, and engaging students.

First, several pre-service teachers shared that ViDis would allow them to differentiate instructions by bringing more possibilities into classrooms. For example, "Visuals could help teachers to support different types of learners or learning styles;" and, "If there are visual learners and non-visual learners in the same classroom, ViDis could be crucial tools for visual learners and could serve as optional tools for non-visual learners."

Additionally, a few pre-service teachers agreed that ViDis would support them to better explain complex content. For example, one pre-service teacher wrote: "By offering a topographic map, students can quickly pick out the various rivers and mountains which blocked the way and then understood [sic] why the trek was extremely challenging." When the topics were complex and abstract, visuals presented more concrete information which is easier to understand.

Moreover, two pre-service teachers pointed out that using ViDis could engage students because ViDis can bring an element of excitement for students to look at something novelty instead of a block of text." This pre-service teacher surmised that ViDis better present information that catches students' attention, sparks their interests, and keeps them engaged.

In summary, these pre-service teachers agreed that using ViDis would not only allow students to better recall, understand and critique information, but would also help teachers to differentiate instruction for different types of learners, better explain information and engage their students.

## Pre-Service Teachers' Main Takeaways

We found two common themes in pre-service teachers' main takeaways: pedagogical content knowledge of visual literacy instruction, and visual literacy instructional strategies. Table 3 presented detailed information regarding each theme.

**TABLE 3**  
**The Pre-service Teachers' Main Takeaways**

| Theme                         | Sub-theme     | Frequency of responses |
|-------------------------------|---------------|------------------------|
| Pedagogical content knowledge |               | 35                     |
| Instructional strategies      | comprehension | 17                     |
|                               | analysis      | 13                     |
|                               | creation      | 6                      |

First, over half of pre-service teachers emphasized that they gained deeper pedagogical content knowledge about visual literacy instruction. The pedagogical content knowledge involves: (a) accuracy, for example, “teachers need to be aware of the message that the images are portraying and if the message is accurate”; (b) appropriateness, for example, “educators need to make sure that the visuals are used appropriately to that subject and that grade level”; and (c) purpose, for example, “visuals must be incorporated meaningfully with purpose and intention for what you want the students to get from the visual”. They demonstrated that visual literacy instruction should be taught intentionally in their classrooms.

Moreover, a majority of pre-service teachers shared a wide range of visual literacy instructional strategies, which demonstrated different levels of learning based on Bloom’s learning taxonomy (Anderson et al., 2001; Bloom et al., 1956). For example, to improve comprehension, a pre-service teacher mentioned that she would “show students comparison pictures before and after a historical event happened to help students understand the effects of that event more straightforwardly”. In addition to facilitating students’ reasoning and analysis, one pre-service teacher mentioned that she would “have students consider several prompt questions while looking at the historical photos in order to explain the reasons or effect of a historical event”. Finally, to foster creativity, several pre-service teachers proposed “hands-on activities” in visual literacy. For example, one mentioned that she would “facilitate students to make their own storyboards of a historical event or flowcharts of a geological formation”. Many pre-service teachers pointed out that “learning some instructional strategies for teaching visual literacy” was one of their greatest gains from this unit. These examples showed how pre-service teachers developed visual literacy strategies to address different learning targets.

### **Further Explorations**

It also should be noted that several pre-service teachers still felt unprepared to teach visual literacy after this short unit. For example, one pre-service teacher wrote: “I still considered teaching visual literacy as a tough and challenging task.”

**TABLE 4**  
**Further Explorations for Visual Literacy Instruction**

| <b>Theme</b>  | <b>Frequency of responses</b> |
|---|-------------------------------|
| Explorations for universal instructional strategies | 31                            |
| Explorations for a specific subject/group/resource  | 23                            |

A few of them mentioned that they expected more courses about visual literacy (instruction) in teacher education programs to prepare them to teach visual literacy. Table 4 presents the frequency of pre-service teachers' responses regarding further explorations.

The majority of pre-service teachers expressed that they would like to further explore more instructional strategies. For example, one asked: "How [do] I use visual literacy to reach more learners?" Other participants clarified that there were some specific areas they wanted to explore further. For example, they were interested in teaching strategies for a particular group of students, such as students with visual impairments, or a particular subject such as ELA, as well as teaching tips for using a multimodal resource in class (e.g., a thinking map).

To sum up, after this unit, we found a majority of pre-service teachers developed a positive attitude toward visual literacy (instruction) as well as demonstrated a more in-depth understanding of visual literacy. Furthermore, they recognized the benefits of using ViDis for student learning, and were able to develop pedagogical content knowledge and instructional strategies in visual literacy. Finally, they also reported that they would like to further explore more specific instructional strategies.

## **Discussion and Implications**

In this age of information, students encounter an increasing number of ViDis in content areas (Guo et al., 2018). As such, acquiring visual literacy skills allows our young generation to consume, critique, and produce information in a visual world (Brugar & Roberts, 2017; Coleman et al., 2018). Correspondingly, pre-service teachers should develop proficiency in visual literacy skills, as well as be prepared to provide effective visual literacy instruction in content areas. As such, we developed a virtual workshop to enhance pre-service teachers' understandings of visual literacy instruction and analyzed their reflection papers after the workshop. We summarized the major findings and discussed the implications as follows.

First, we found that prior to this unit, a majority of the pre-service teachers reported that they demonstrated a surface understanding of visual literacy, and were somewhat unprepared to teach visual literacy. After one intensive session, they gained a better understanding of visual literacy and different types of ViDis. Our findings are consistent with Farrell's study (2015), which revealed that without explicit instruction, pre-service teachers often demonstrated very surface understandings of visual literacy terminology (e.g., types and functions of ViDis) and its design principles (e.g., contrast, repetition, and alignment of

verbal and visual information). Therefore, these findings echoed Yeh and Cheng's (2010) suggestion that visual literacy should be included in teacher education programs to develop pre-service teachers' visual literacy knowledge and skills and facilitate their competence in teaching visual literacy. Researchers further recommended that teacher education programs should provide training on visual design principles including the use of color, font, and screen layout in instructional materials, so that pre-service teachers can develop their own instructional texts for different learning targets (Sosa, 2009; Yeh & Cheng, 2010).

Moreover, a majority of pre-service teachers recognized the advantages of using ViDis, as they mentioned that using ViDis would facilitate students' engagement, and help teachers to differentiate and clarify their instruction. These findings paralleled previous studies on K-12 students which revealed that using ViDis can generate children's learning interests (Williams, 2007) and allow teachers to use more concrete examples in content instruction (Lopatovska et al., 2016). For example, Williams (2007) found that primary-grade students were excited and intrigued when they were asked to create their personal stories using paintings. We believe that these alignments between our study and previous research, to some degree, support the notion that it is essential to provide explicit visual literacy instruction in K-12 classrooms to engage students and help them become visually illiterate.

Additionally, we found that a majority of pre-service teachers highly valued pedagogical content knowledge and instructional strategies of teaching visual literacy. Specifically, they reported that they would teach ViDis to facilitate students' comprehension and analysis of information; however, only a few of them mentioned that they would address higher-order thinking skills (e.g., create or produce new information). This finding is consistent with previous studies (Coleman et al., 2011), which revealed that elementary teachers were less frequently apt to utilize ViDis to the fullest potential in content areas, especially in helping students achieve the highest level of Bloom's taxonomy (e.g., apply knowledge in new situations and create new information). Based on these findings, we recommend teacher educators model how to use ViDis to facilitate learners' higher-order thinking. One way to achieve this learning target is using higher-order questions (Moodley, 2013). For example, when guiding secondary students how to process multimodal texts, teachers can facilitate students' reasoning skills by asking them to evaluate the presentation of the illustrations and design principles with sophisticated prompts (Moodley, 2013). Similarly, we recommend teacher educators to model how to develop clear, specific questions that can help learners to analyze, evaluate, and critique visual information, so that pre-service teachers can mimic effective instructions.

Finally, when asked to report what further exploration our pre-service teachers would like to do, a majority of them mentioned that they would seek for more visual literacy strategies to teach K-12 students. A few of them also reported that they still felt somewhat unprepared to develop effective visual literacy instruction. Interestingly, recent research (Brugar and Roberts; 2017) revealed that not only novice teachers felt unprepared to engage students with ViDis (i.e. maps, tables, timelines, captions), but veteran teachers also needed more instructional support to integrate visual literacy and social studies instruction in a meaningful way. For example, when observing a group of elementary teachers' classrooms, Brugar and Roberts (2017) noticed a veteran teacher rarely incorporated ViDis in social studies lessons, so they developed five intensive professional development sessions to support teachers to develop more effective visual literacy instruction. After completing the session, the veteran teacher could successfully help students make inferences by integrating ViDis and verbal text (captions).

Compared to Brugar and Roberts's (2017) study, it should be noted that we developed only one short session to facilitate pre-service teachers' understanding of ViDis and visual literacy instruction. Although a majority of pre-service teachers gained a better understanding of visual literacy instruction, their responses also indicated that one session of intensive instruction was not sufficient to cover all important topics of visual literacy. To improve our teacher education program and to promote visual literacy, we should offer more long-term, well-structured courses that integrate visual literacy and content instruction. For example, we could provide opportunities to support pre-service teachers to develop lesson plans that align with their teaching tasks in their field placement (Moodley, 2013), so that they will be able to teach visual literacy in an authentic context. Moreover, more studies are needed to explore how we can more effectively assess pre-service teachers' visual literacy knowledge and skills as well as their competency to develop instructional strategies, so that we can tailor our instruction based on their needs.

## Conclusion

Considering the preponderance of visual information students may encounter nowadays, teachers should provide more intentional and explicit instruction of visual literacy. In our literacy methods class, we provided a one-session intensive workshop on visual literacy instruction to develop their visual literacy knowledge, skills as well as instructional practices. Findings revealed that a majority of pre-service teachers generated a positive attitude toward visual literacy instruction as

well as developed a deeper understanding of visual literacy instruction. However, several teacher candidates still felt somewhat unprepared to integrate visual literacy and content instruction into their own lesson planning. Future research is needed to further explore the instructional needs of pre-service teachers and in what ways teacher educators can better support them.

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# SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING COMPETENCIES FOUND WITHIN CALDECOTT BOOKS: AN INVESTIGATION OF THE AWARD WINNERS FROM 2016 – 2020

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## **Abstract**

*There is a strong trend toward incorporating Social Emotional Learning (SEL) into elementary education. Shared reading lessons are prime places for SEL experiences (Fettig, Cook, Morizo, Gould & Brodsky, 2018). Harper (2016) states picture books are an effective vehicle for engaging young students in SEL. With this in mind, this study investigates the Caldecott Award winning texts from the past five years for their inclusion of social emotional learning competencies within their narratives and illustrations.*

As a seasoned elementary school educator employed as a reading specialist, I am invested in finding ways to improve students' literacy skills, as well as their social and emotional learning skills. Throughout my years as a teacher of young students, I have come to understand the importance of social and emotional health and its impact on learning. My background has led to my belief that not only



are literacy skills and social and emotional learning skills critical, instruction in both can be integrated to the benefit of both.

The concept of social and emotional learning (SEL) which took hold in the 1990s has become mainstream today (Elias et al., 1997). Presently, many public schools across the nation include elements of social emotional learning into their curricula (Hawkins et al., 2004). There is a strong trend toward incorporating Social Emotional Learning (SEL) into elementary education.

The effectiveness of social and emotional learning has been researched throughout the 2000s. Several meta-analyses of SEL were conducted (Domitrovitch et al., 2017; Durlak et al., 2011; Dymnicki et al., 2012; Sklad et al., 2012). These studies showed social and emotional learning programming had positive effects on social conduct such as sharing, taking responsibility for one's actions, and showing concern for others, as well as academic performance.

The Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), which began in 1994, is invested in SEL research and school application. While the organization does not support any one particular SEL program, it disseminates research, informs policy, and brings those knowledgeable in the field together to advance practices. Currently CASEL partners with 21 school districts throughout the United States which includes 1.8 million students in grades K-12 (The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2021). The organization has been involved with ongoing research in SEL.

The practice of reading texts interactively with students within literacy instruction is an effective method of engaging in SEL in elementary classrooms (Britt et al., 2016). Further, dialogic reading is also a technique which can be employed to engage students in social and emotional learning (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006; Fettig et al., 2018). Finally, the use of picture books in elementary classrooms is a way to build SEL skills within young students (Harper, 2016).

Incorporating texts in the form of bibliotherapy within typical K-12 academic settings benefits the social and emotional learning of students (Sullivan & Strang, 2002). Using literature in this manner can help prevent social and emotional difficulties in students (Heath, 2017). Further, there is a link between literacy skills and social and emotional skills such as communicating and self-regulation, as well as respecting the ideas of others (Buckley, 2015).

This method of integrating SEL and literature raises the question, what literature should be used? Choosing quality literature to use with elementary level students is essential (Hoffman et al, 2015). In many instances, educators look to the American Library Association (ALA) as a source for finding quality children's literature. The ALA is one of the most prominent library associations in the world and is highly influential. It backs various esteemed awards, including

the Caldecott Medal and Honor Awards (Zeece, 1999). The Caldecott Award, established in 1937, is given to the most eminent children's picture book published in the United States for the previous year (Allen, 1998). In order for a children's book to earn the award, it must excel in both its art and its craft, including narrative storyline or information, theme, and mood. Caldecott Award winners capture readers with both their words as well as their pictures.

## **Purpose**

This study investigated the Caldecott Award winning texts from 2016 - 2020 for their inclusion of social emotional learning competencies put forth by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) within their narratives and illustrations. The two research questions asked were: 1) How are the five social emotional learning competencies exemplified in the five texts? 2) What are the trends in how the five emotional learning competencies are exemplified in the five texts?

## **Theoretical Framework**

Three theoretical frameworks were used to support the multimodal content analysis which was conducted. Each framework lent something unique and pivotal to the investigation. They were the social emotional learning competencies framework, Bandura's social learning theory, and the social semiotic theory of multimodality.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) put forth the social emotional learning competencies framework. It is the framework which underlies people's ability to control their behavior, have positive relationships, and make healthy decisions. The five competencies are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. There are benefits to these being taught and reinforced in school communities (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2021).

The SEL competency self-awareness includes understanding personal thoughts and feelings and how they are connected to behavior. Self-management involves being able to control and manage personal emotions. Social awareness is being able to understand and empathize with the feelings and thoughts of others. Relationship skills has to do with being able to create and maintain positive, healthy relationships with others. Responsible decision-making requires the ability to produce constructive decisions regarding one's behavior in various situations (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2021).

Bandura's (1974) social learning theory posits observing prosocial behaviors helps enable the ability to achieve social and emotional skills. Individuals are capable of gleaning knowledge from observational and vicarious learning (Hoover et al.2012). The environment has a large impact upon every individual's personal growth (Hawkins et al., 2004). Classroom examples of these methods include dialogic reading (observational) and read aloud (vicarious) experiences.

The analysis which takes place in the study is social semiotic in nature. Children's books tend to be multimodal, as they are usually created with text and images. Both the words and the images in multimodal texts have a part in the creation of meaning (Jewitt, 2017). The reader brings their schema to the text and the images, incorporating them all into the meaning making (Kress, 2010). Further, communication comes from within three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and compositional (Halliday, 1975). This approach to multimodality informed the research by ensuring the elements and metafunctions were taken into account.

## Methodology

In order to answer the two research questions, an evaluative instrument was created and used to analyze the texts through qualitative multimodal content analysis. Content analysis is the methodical investigation of words and illustrations in order to analyze the meanings within. It allows the researcher to quantify and examine concepts within text (Saldana, 2011). It is an important type of research, as it allows the researcher to study words and pictures that are intended to be seen, read, and interpreted (Krippendorff, 2018). The use of multimodal content analysis ensures the study of the ways all elements of text are created, laid out, encountered, and assimilated (Serafini & Reid, 2019).

An evaluative instrument (Appendix) was developed by the researcher as a coding tool for the study. Because a social semiotic multimodal content analysis approach was taken, both the textual and visual grammars of each book were analyzed. An initial design of the evaluative instrument included compositional, ideational (also known as representational), and interpersonal 36 metafunctions for studying the visual and textual grammar of each book. The use of all three of these multimodal metafunctions allows for a complete examination of a book (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Reid & Serafini, 2018; Serafini, 2014). Compositional metafunction observes what is actually on the page, and how it is arranged, as well as color, and the location of the items on the page (Bang, 2016). Ideational/representational metafunction includes narrative structures within the illustration. It interprets the actions taking place and studies the characters, as well as

patterns or commonalities across the images (Serafini, 2014). The interpersonal metafunction investigates the relationship between the viewer and the book. It studies the relationship between the observer and the characters within the illustration (Serafini, 2014; Serafini & Reid, 2019).

In order to test the initial evaluative instrument, a pilot study using two children's picturebooks was completed over the course of three weeks. The texts, *Dragon Night* by J.R. Krause (2019) and *Art and Max* by David Wiesner (2010) were chosen for the pilot study. Upon completion of the pilot study, the interpersonal metafunction column was deleted because it was not present in the texts within the pilot study. The researcher reconfigured the template, placing the compositional and ideational metafunctions on the left side of the table, along with questions to help guide the researcher in making observational notes. Along the top of the template the researcher placed the words "Description (what I see)," "Notes (what I think it means)," and "Competency (competency and why)." These revisions to the template enabled the researcher to organize observations and notes more efficiently.

When the evaluative instrument was finished, the researcher began analyzing each spread of each text in the sample. Beginning with the earliest published text, a photograph of each spread of the book was taken and placed into the upper left corner of a template. The words found on the spread were typed verbatim into the box at the top of that same template, beneath the page numbers of the spread.

Once the templates for the spreads of a text were completed, analysis of the words and illustrations began. Initially, the researcher completed notes on what she saw or read within the spread. Observations on the compositional and ideational metafunction elements were written. After taking notes on what was seen and read, the researcher studied what they meant. She considered the notations made regarding what was on the spread and inferred meaning from them. The final component of the template involved the researcher determining if one or more of the SEL competencies was evident in the spread. Using the compositional and ideational metafunction elements notes, the researcher determined if one or more of the five competencies was exemplified. The competency descriptions as provided by CASEL were studied alongside the notes on the spread, and a decision was made as to whether a competency was exemplified. If a competency was illustrated, it was noted on the template, with an explanation of how the competency was being shown. Further, if the researcher found the converse of the SEL competency was being illustrated, this was also noted in the template. For instance, if a character in a text exhibited poor decision making, this was noted and labeled a non-example of the SEL competency responsible decision making.

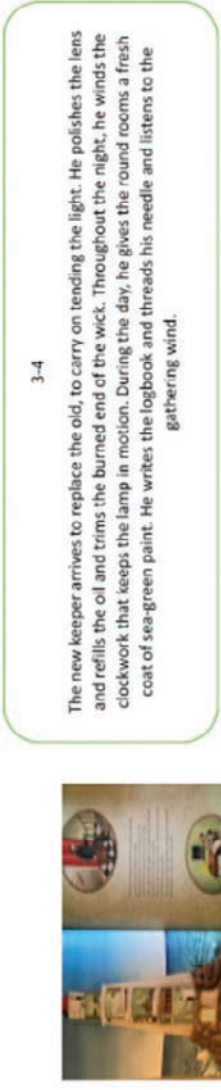
The non-examples were included in the SEL competency coding process. For example, a non-example of responsible decision making was coded as an illustration of that SEL competency. The data were then organized and analyzed in order to answer the two research questions addressed in the study.

## Findings

The sample contained five Caldecott Award winning texts between the years 2016 and 2020 which were read, coded, and analyzed through the use of the evaluative instrument created by the researcher. The first research question addressed was, *How are the five social and emotional learning competencies exemplified in Caldecott Medal Award - winning books?* In order to answer this question, every spread from each of the five texts was analyzed using the evaluative instrument. Approximately 50 pages of raw data were gathered using this method. While including all the data was prohibitive, two template exemplars are included and discussed.

Figure 1 shows the completed template for the spread found on pages three and four of the text, *Hello Lighthouse*. The researcher's observations and notes for both the compositional and ideational metafunctions are present. The researcher noted examples of SEL competencies, self-management and responsible decision-making within the spread. As noted in the template, the lighthouse keeper works night and day in a disciplined manner in order to keep the structure functional. The character must be self-motivated and self-disciplined in order to do this, as he is alone on the job. These are signs of *self-management*. Further, the lighthouse keeper must make many decisions throughout the day and night in order to keep the lighthouse working properly. Deciding on the upkeep of the building is imperative, and requires hard work. These are the hallmarks of *responsible decision-making*.

Figure 2 shows the complete template for the spread found on pages 25 and 26 of *Radiant Child: The Story of Young Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat*. Records of the compositional and ideational metafunctions have been made. Now that examples of two of the SEL competencies have been displayed, a non-example can be illustrated. Displayed in this template is the non-example of responsible decision-making. It is noted as a "lack of" within the template. For instance, in *Radiant Child: The Story of Young Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat*, the main character decides to spray paint graffiti throughout the city. While it is very creative, and draws attention to the artist, it is also illegal and shows a disregard for societal and social norms. It is therefore coded as a non-example of *responsible decision-making*.



3-4

The new keeper arrives to replace the old, to carry on tending the light. He polishes the lens and refills the oil and trims the burned end of the wick. Throughout the night, he winds the clockwork that keeps the lamp in motion. During the day, he gives the round rooms a fresh coat of sea-green paint. He writes the logbook and threads his needle and listens to the gathering wind.

| Element  | Description (what I see)   | Notes (what I think it means; infer)   | Competency (competency and why)  |
|--|--|--|--|
| <p><b>Compositional:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How is text/illustration used/represented (e.g., color, position, font, size and style, location, position)?</li> <li>Design elements: Where are things on the page, framing, type of illustration?</li> </ul> <p><b>Ideational:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who is represented? How are they posed?</li> <li>What actions are represented?</li> <li>Interaction between characters and setting?</li> <li>What objects are included?</li> <li>What might they represent?</li> <li>What vectors are observed?</li> </ul> | <p>Choose ink<br/>watercolor<br/>Precise, detailed images<br/>Persuaded blue, green, grey waves<br/>Solitary feeling throughout<br/>Curvilinear borders of the lighthouse<br/>Compact pictures<br/>Close up pictures of the keeper and wife<br/>Portland shape frames<br/>Aerial views<br/>Isolated, circular, intimate<br/>No borders, no white space<br/>One image across the spread</p> <p>Our cut of the light focus on the left page, blue waves below. Hook on pole hanging off the island over the ocean, rainbow hanging on a book on a pole on the left of the island.<br/>Exclamation has two tasks: blue liquid on the left, brown liquid on right, the first floor has black and white tiled floor, curved staircase, maroon painting the wall, sea green. Next floor up is curved staircase, old fashioned stove, table and chair. Next floor up is bed, window, shelf with books on it, dresser. Top floor deck with chair, window, paper, ink bottle. Very top is the lighthouse light in the glass top. The man at the top has his hand on it. Right page: top circular panel has black and white ink, curved staircase, man is standing with one hand on the light.</p> | <p>The curvilinear that show the inside of the lighthouse allow for the viewer to get a good inside view of what goes on inside. The lack of white space and the continuation of the ocean and sky across the entire spread give the reader a feeling of the vastness of each.</p> <p>The text and image show that the new light keeper has arrived and is working on fixing up the lighthouse by painting it, and polishing the light. He has job of specific jobs such as winding the clock, keeping the lamp in motion and writing in the logbook. It is clearly a full time all day and night job.</p> | <p>Responsible decision making- the lighthouse keeper works hard night and day to ensure the lighthouse does its job. It requires responsible decisions in order to do this.</p> <p>Self management- the lighthouse keeper is self motivated and self disciplined.</p> |

Figure 1 Template from the Text, *Hello Lighthouse*, Illustrating the SEL Competencies, Self-Management, and Responsible Decision-Making.

P25-26

At night, Jean-Michel spray-paints the walls downtown with poems and drawings that catch the eye of artists, gallery-goers, and passersby. Under his art, he signs the name "SAMOO" instead of "Jean-Michel." Everybody wants to know "Who is SAMOO?"



| Element  | Description (what I see)  | Notes (what I think it means; infer)  | Competency (competency and why)   |
|--|---|---|---|
| <p><b>Compositional:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How is text/illustration used/represented (e.g., color, position, font, size and style, location, position)?</li> <li>Design elements: Where are things on the page, framing, type of illustration?</li> </ul>   | <p>Art is meant to imitate Basquiat's style. Includes some of Basquiat's motifs/symbols such as skulls and flowers. Rich texture, imperfections, expressive, vibrant, "messy". Collage style, painted onto found wood, found objects jig-sawed together, then into collages, with photos over parts. Graffiti and collage in addition to traditional painting techniques. Scenes are painted over textured backgrounds. One large image across the spread, no white space, text is typed at the bottom of both pages in white, and the words Samoo (twice) are in caps and handwriting font.</p>  | <p>The word Samoo (twice) is in caps and hand writing text for emphasis</p>   |   |
| <p><b>Ideational:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who is represented? How are they posed?</li> <li>What actions are represented?</li> <li>Interaction between characters and setting?</li> <li>What objects are included?</li> <li>What might they represent?</li> <li>What vectors are observed? divide people and/or objects</li> </ul> | <p>Basquiat is crouched behind a green structure (mailbox?) and is spray painting a picture of a face and the word Samoo on it. He is in all black. There is a man in jeans, blue shirt, blue baseball cap and shades leaning against it on the side. He is looking straight ahead, not at Basquiat. There are trash bags on the ground behind Basquiat. There is a blue New York City taxi cab parked in the street. There is an art gallery behind the blue car with the words Fun Gallery above the door. There are many people in various poses around it. The text explains that Basquiat spray paints walls downtown with the word Samoo on them.</p> | <p>Is this what Basquiat's plan is to become famous? He is definitely getting people to notice his art as he spray paints it near galleries. It seems to be an effective way to get the attention of the art world. He is obviously doing this illegally. He seems willing to break laws in order to become that famous artist.</p> | <p>Lack of Responsible Decision-Making. Spray painting graffiti is illegal, and shows a lack of concern for ethics, and social norms.</p> |

**Figure 2** Template from the Text, *Radiant Child: The Story of Young Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat*, Illustrating Non-Example of the SEL Competency: Responsible Decision-Making



### Analysis of the Frequency Data

Table 1 gives a compact view of the data. The text titles appear chronologically in the left most column along with their publication year, and genre. The five SEL competencies are located at the top of the table. However, rather than listing the individual page numbers upon which an SEL competency is illustrated, the total number of pages upon which the SEL competencies are illustrated appear next to each text title. Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of SEL competencies which are non-examples out of the total number of SEL competencies found in the text. For example, in the text *Radiant Child: The Story of Young Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat*, under the SEL competency relationship skills, there are a total of seven instances, and one of them is a non-example. Thus, the table reads: 7 (1).

**TABLE 1**  
**Instances of SEL Competencies Found in each Text**

| Text   | Self-Awareness | Self-Management | Social Awareness | Relationship Skills | Responsible Decision-Making | Total |
|--|----------------|-----------------|------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|-------|
| Finding Winnie<br>2016<br>Non-Fiction              | 0              | 0               | 2                | 6                   | 5                           | 13    |
| Radiant Child<br>2017<br>Multicultural Non-Fiction | 5              | 6               | 1                | 7(1)                | 1(1)                        | 20    |
| Wolf in the Snow<br>2018<br>Wordless Fiction       | 0              | 0               | 5                | 6                   | 1                           | 12    |
| Hello Lighthouse<br>2019<br>Historical Fiction     | 0              | 4               | 1                | 4                   | 3                           | 12    |
| The Undeaten<br>2020<br>Multicultural Non-Fiction  | 12(4)          | 12(4)           | 11(5)            | 11(5)               | 11(5)                       | 57    |



The total number of SEL competency instances is listed in the far -right column of the chart. This total includes both the examples and the non-examples of each SEL competency.

Table 1 is illuminating in that it gives a clear picture of the number of SEL instances in these five texts. The non-fiction text *Finding Winnie*, wordless fiction text *Wolf in the Snow*, and historical fiction text *Hello Lighthouse* have similar numbers of instances with a total of 13, 12, and 12 respectively. Each of these texts also have no instances of the SEL competency *self-awareness*. Of the three, only *Hello Lighthouse* has examples of the SEL competency *self-management*. While each of the three texts had examples of social awareness, the numbers were relatively low, with two, one, and one respectively. When it came to relationship skills, each of the three texts had a larger number of examples than any of the other SEL competencies with six, six, and four instances. Interestingly, the text *Finding Winnie* had a larger number of instances of the SEL competency *responsible decision-making*, coming in at five over *Wolf in the Snow* with one and *Hello Lighthouse* with three.

On the other hand, the two multicultural fiction texts *Radiant Child* and *The Undeclared* presented much larger numbers of SEL instances at 20 and 57 respectively. Further, they are the only two texts which included non-examples of any of the SEL competencies. There were five instances of *self-awareness* present in *Radiant Child*, and there were 12 instances of the same competency in *The Undeclared*. Of those 12, four were considered non-examples. When it came to *self-management*, there were six instances in *Radiant Child*, and 12 in *The Undeclared*. Of the 12, four were considered non-examples. Further, there was 1 instance of *social awareness* seen in *Radiant Child*, while there were 11 found in *The Undeclared*. Five of the 11 were non-examples in this case. There were seven examples of *relationship skills* found in *Radiant Child*, and one of these was a non-example. There were 11 instances of relationship skills in *The Undeclared*, and five of them were non-examples. Finally, when it came to *responsible decision-making*, there was one instance found in *Radiant Child*, and it was a non-example. On the other hand, there were 11 instances of the SEL competency found in *The Undeclared*, and five of them were non-examples.

The frequency data show that the least likely SEL competency to be found was *self-awareness* with 17 instances, followed by *social awareness* at 20 instances, *responsible decision-making* at 21 instances, and *self-management* at 22 instances. The most prevalent SEL competency within the texts was *relationship skills* with 34 instances.

The second research question addressed was: *What are the trends in how the five emotional learning competencies are exemplified in the five texts?*

One trend which can be seen in the frequency data is that the SEL competency *self-awareness* was found less frequently across the board in each of the texts. The range being from zero instances to 12. On the other hand, the SEL competency *relationship skills* was found the most frequently across the sample. The range being from four instances to 11.

Another trend can be seen when it comes to the multicultural fiction texts. Both *Radiant Child* and *The Undeclared* are in this genre. When looking at the data, it is apparent that these two texts contain a substantially larger number of SEL competency instances than the other three texts in the sample. *Radiant Child* contains 20 SEL competency instances, and *The Undeclared* contains 57 SEL competency instances. Each of these two texts had at least one instance of each of the five SEL competencies as well.

It is also noteworthy that the text *The Undeclared* has such large numbers of each SEL competency. Even when compared to the other multicultural fiction text *Radiant Child*, the large quantity of examples and non-examples of each competency is clear. Possible reasons for this will be addressed in the Discussion section of this article.

Further, these were the only two texts which included non-examples of any SEL competencies. *Radiant Child* contained one non-example of *relationship skills*, and one non-example of *responsible decision-making*. *The Undeclared* contained four non-examples of *self-awareness*, four non-examples of *self-management*, five non-examples of *social awareness*, five non-examples of *relationship skills*, and five non-examples of *responsible decision-making*.

## Discussion

A limitation of this study is the small sample size of the texts used to analyze the social emotional learning competencies found within the text and illustrations of each book. Future research could include a larger data corpus. While the sample of texts studied is undeniably small, it stands out that the two texts within the multicultural genre contained a large number of SEL competencies in comparison to the texts in the other genres. Multicultural texts include characters of color as well as characters with a minority point of view, and actively illustrate the values of the culture being depicted. Further, they do not include stereotypical representations, and are historically accurate (Edward, 2022). Multicultural literature can give readers the possibility of making connections to the stories of characters culturally similar to themselves, or allow for a view into individuals, communities, or situations different from their own (Linder, 2021). Texts which are in the multicultural genre can offer readers the chance at self-reflection, as

well as work toward understanding others with myriad backgrounds, perceptions, and beliefs (Morrell & Morell, 2012). In short, multicultural texts can be chock full of opportunities for social emotional learning.

The texts *Radiant Child* and *The Undefeated* fit into the multicultural genre. Additionally, they are also examples of great storytelling, as both won the Caldecott Honor Medal. The two texts include exemplary illustrations which support the well-told stories, and contribute substantially to the meaning created by the reader.

The book *Radiant Child* depicts the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat navigating a tumultuous childhood with the conviction that he will become a world-famous artist when he grows up. The reader observes Basquiat handling a very serious childhood injury, as well as the difficult emotional and logistical changes brought about by his mother's mental illness. Basquiat's relationship with his mother, as well as himself are at the forefront of the text. The circumstances rendered in the text and illustrations provide a plethora of SEL competencies to be depicted. The main character exhibited great self-awareness as he embraced behaviors which propelled him into the art world in new and unique ways as a young person. It was only through great self-awareness that he was successful here. Further, because the text focuses on the artist's need to have the self-discipline to continue with his artistic endeavors while being engulfed in many unstable situations, it is no surprise that there were many instances of the SEL competency *self-management* throughout the book. Further, as Basquiat negotiated sometimes difficult relationships throughout his childhood and adolescence, the SEL competency *relationship skills* was frequently exhibited.

On the other hand, the text *The Undefeated* is a multicultural book of a different nature, but it too provides myriad SEL competency instances. The book itself is poetic in nature, and a testimonial to Black Americans who have overcome immense adversity. With sparse prose, it touches upon the indescribable evils of slavery, the passion of the civil rights movement, and the tremendous strength and endurance Black Americans have exemplified as they became unforgettable heroes throughout U.S. history. While the text itself does not delve deep into the details of the lives of the people celebrated, there is a supplement at the end of the book which explains and describes the individuals and historic events illustrated with the text. This encourages discussion surrounding the SEL competencies the individuals in the text exhibited in order to achieve their accomplishments.

Notably, the numbers of each SEL competency within the text, both examples and non-examples, are remarkably similar. This is largely because the individuals featured in the text manifested many, if not *all* of the SEL competencies in order to become such heroic people. It is impossible for example to imagine a

Martin Luther King Jr. who does *not* embody self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. At the same time, they each faced adversity which exemplified non-examples of a large number of SEL competencies as well. For instance, the Jim Crow Laws faced by so many Black Americans, including the first Black world heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson were the epitome of non-examples of all five of the SEL competencies on the part of those in power.

While each of the five texts in the sample allow for lessons in social emotional learning, the two multicultural books are rife with instances which can be used in SEL lessons. When making decisions regarding how to use the two texts with students, educators may want to consider that while *The Undeclared* has more instances within its pages, *Radiant Child* may be an easier book to begin studying social emotional competencies with novices in understanding the SEL competencies. This is because unlike *The Undeclared*, *Radiant Child* offers more explicit, observable instances of the competencies within its pages. Due to this, grasping the essence and nature of each competency may be less challenging for students new to the process. On the other hand, once students have a more astute comprehension of the characteristics of the five competencies, *The Undeclared* may be an excellent choice for study. It provides a multitude of complex men and women worthy of a deep dive into the SEL competencies which helped make them the heroes they are. A level of more complex inferential thinking, as well as a bit of research may be required in order to truly appreciate the SEL instances evoked in *The Undeclared*. However, such work could bring profound understanding.

Recent Caldecott Honor Medal Award winning texts are good sources of social emotional learning instances which can be used within SEL- literacy lessons with students. While each of the texts within the sample provided opportunities for students to study the competencies, the two multicultural texts furnished a larger array of instances for evaluation. It would benefit literacy educators who are interested in infusing their lessons with SEL opportunities to look into these award-winning books.

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# APPENDIX

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## EVALUATIVE INSTRUMENT TEMPLATE

Spread Image

Page Numbers and Text

| Element  | Description (what I see) | Notes (what I think it means) | Competency (and why) |
|--|--------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|
| <b>Compositional:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How is text/illustration used/represented (e.g., color, position, font, size and style, location, position)?</li><li>• Design elements: Where are things on the page, framing, type of illustration?</li></ul>   |                          |                               |                      |
| <b>Ideational:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Who is represented? How are they posed?</li><li>• What actions are represented?</li><li>• Interaction between characters and setting?</li><li>• What objects are included? What might they represent?</li><li>• What vectors are observed? How do they connect or divide people and/or objects?</li></ul> |                          |                               |                      |





# POETRY AS A VEHICLE TO LITERACY LEARNING IN A KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM: AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY DURING PANDEMIC TEACHING

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## **Abstract**

*Building on decades of research that argues that young children's literacy development is enhanced through the incorporation of poetry, nursery rhymes, and songs (Certo, 2016; Concannon-Gibney, 2021; Elster, 2000; Nichols et al., 2018; Rasinski, 2015, Smith, 2000; Perfect, 1999), this mixed-methods action-research study explored how integrating poetry through reading, writing, listening, and performance in a Kindergarten classroom influenced children's literacy learning during a year of pandemic teaching (2020–2021). The findings from this study reveal that in a time when most students experienced learning loss, the kindergarten students (N=16) in this study met expectations for growth in reading level and exceeded expectations for growth in foundational literacy skills. Furthermore, the qualitative findings reveal that intentional inquiry aided the teacher-researcher in balancing pedagogical tensions, adapting instructional strategies, adjusting curricular pacing, and reflecting on practice during pandemic teaching.*

*Keywords:* poetry, action research, literacy development, pandemic teaching

## Introduction

The genre of poetry is powerful because it enhances the reciprocal nature of reading, writing, and oral language (Dymoke, et al., 2013). The brevity and familiarity of poems makes them more accessible for young children, and the rhythmic nature invites emergent readers to actively participate and engage in the literacy experience. Poetry is not only beneficial for the literacy learning of young children, but also increases engagement and overall love of reading (Nichols et al., 2018). Unfortunately, the genre of poetry has been seriously neglected in classrooms and the research community, yet it has great potential to positively influence the literacy learning of young children.

As an experienced Kindergarten teacher, Ms. O'Neal, launches the school year by immersing students in poetry, including nursery rhymes, songs, rhyming picture books, and short poems. Since students enter school with a variety of previous literacy experiences, she found it necessary to begin with familiarity to encourage emergent reading skills, such as print awareness, phonemic awareness, and overall engagement with literacy. This launch with poetry cultivates an environment where all students can thrive the moment they enter the classroom because of the opportunities for differentiation possible through poetry.

This article reflects a portion of a larger study conducted using university-awarded grant funds in a university partner school. The first author, Dr. Macie Kerbs, served as the primary investigator of the study and the second author, Mrs. O'Neal, was a teacher-researcher. While our intended research methodology was a typical control and treatment group experimental mixed-methods study, the coronavirus diseases of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic shifted us toward an action-research study as we were faced with unfamiliar pedagogical situations, such as balancing both in-person and remote learning experiences for students.

We decided to approach the school year as an opportunity to learn, adapt, and grow both as teachers and researchers. So, we employed mixed-methods action research to design meaningful and interactive instruction in one Kindergarten classroom, with curriculum enhanced through the integration of poetry. The questions guiding our action research included:

- What effect, if any, will incorporating poetry to existing literacy instruction have on student literacy learning?
- How does regular collaboration between a university researcher and classroom teacher influence the planning and delivery of literacy instruction?

The aim of this article is to share the process of integrating poetry across a school year and the subsequent findings on both student and teacher learning as a result of the integration. Thus, this study not only adds to a growing body of literature on poetry in a literacy classroom and the possibilities for stronger university-classroom partnerships, but also their effects during pandemic teaching.

## **Poetry, Nursery Rhymes, and Songs in Primary Classrooms**

Literature related to poetry, nursery rhymes, and songs in primary classrooms was essential to best support the design of our research study and answer our research questions. The rhythmic nature of poetry welcomes engagement in the literacy experience by reading, writing, listening, and performing the poem, which are essential elements of emergent literacy classroom experiences. For the purpose of this article, we draw on the definition of poetry by Nichols et al. (2018) to include “all forms of English rhythmic language that are intended to be read orally and silently, such as traditional poetry nursery rhymes, song lyrics, jump rope chants, cheers, and even nonsense forms of language” (p. 389). That is, the term *poetry* encompasses multiple forms of lyrical language, including nursery rhymes and songs, and poems.

Poetry is more accessible than other curricular texts because “from a visual standpoint, poems are less intimidating” (Rasinski, 2015, p. 2). Poems, nursery rhymes, and songs are usually short, fulfill a young child’s cognitive need for pattern, and are packed full of meaning (Bland, 2015; Concannon-Gibney, 2021; Nichols et al., 2018). Perfect (1999) contended, “Children who had been reluctant to read prose willingly volunteer to read the shorter passages that typify most poetry” (p. 730). Poetry can be easily integrated across the school day, through morning greetings, playground games, and transitions between activities, which immerses children in language. Furthermore, this immersion in poetry of all kinds helps make poetic language “familiar and provocative” (Perfect, 1999, p. 734).

Poetry begs to be read aloud and performed, which aids in developing a student’s oral language, fluency, and comprehension as they engage in multi-modal learning experiences, such as repeated readings and use of gestures, visuals, and props (Concannon-Gibney 2021; Nichols, et al., 2018; Rasinski, 2015). Poems, nursery rhymes, and songs should be read, reread, and performed because repetition increases a young child’s exposure to language, which positively influences their literacy development (Concannon-Gibney, 2021; Elster, 2010; Gillon, 2018; Rasinski, 2015). The integration of poetry in primary classroom

is especially beneficial to children who are learning English as an additional language. Concannon-Gibney (2021), explains “Nursery rhymes are a meaning-centered instructional activity, and the use of visuals, gesture, and props allows the lesson to be comprehensible to all levels of language learner” (p. 48).

Not only is there an academic benefit to use of poetry in a primary classroom but inviting children to play and interact with language through nursery rhymes increases motivation and engagement (Concannon-Gibney, 2021; Nichols, et al., 2018). Poetry is naturally engaging because they are “laced with humor” and use playful language (Raskinski, 2015, p. 2). Because poems, nursery rhymes, and songs bring joy to the classroom, they should be integrated regularly and as much as possible (Certo, 2016). Children also need opportunities to write poetry as much as possible (Certo, 2016; Smith, 2000). Opportunity to compose poems, nursery rhymes, and songs helps reinforce beginning literacy skills like alphabetic knowledge, print awareness, phonological awareness, phonics and word identification (Nichols, et al., 2018; Smith, 2000)

Students also need exposure to high-quality poems and anthologies to provide the necessary link between reading, writing and oral language (Certo, 2004; Elster, 2000; Rasinski, 2015). Because of the brevity and musical quality of poems, specific foundational skills, such as phonological awareness and fluency, are easily developed through the genre (Nichols, et al., 2018; Rasinski, 2015). While the foundational reading skills are vitally important, they are not the sole factor for a child’s ability to learn how to read and write, and students deserve to have exposure to good poetry for an aesthetic experience (Certo, 2004; Elster, 2010). In fact, Elster argues “to reduce poetry to a tool for learning about sounds would be a disservice to poetry and to children’s learning needs” (p. 55). Thus, the integration of poetry can “fulfills functions of pleasure and social bonding as well as language play” (Elster, 2010, p. 49).

## **Methodology**

This study was grounded in practitioner inquiry as we continuously strove to “alter curriculum, challenge common school practices, and work for social change by engaging in a continuous process of problem posing, data gathering, analysis, and action” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 40). Using mixed-methods action research as our methodology allowed us to collaborate as teacher researchers, building our own university-school partnership as a research community, and positioning inquiry as our stance. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 40). That is, as a research team, we met regularly to engage in intellectual work around classroom practice in an effort to design instruction that was meaningful, engaging, and in response to individual student needs.

Mixed-methods action research involves self-reflection and inquiry in order to improve practice, understanding of the practice, and the situation in which the practice takes place (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Ivankova, 2015). The design of this study required us, as researchers, to adapt, modify, and adjust continuously based on the data collected with the goal to be better teachers (Taber, 2013). Mixed-methods was most beneficial to this study because it allowed us to better triangulate our findings through the use of both quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, 1994).

Before designing this study, we first identified a practical problem and potential solution. First, schools were forced with altered instructional practices due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including social distancing preventing small group work with manipulatives, quarantining policies removing students from school for extended periods of time, and alternate instructional delivery modalities where some students in the class opted to learn remotely from home. Next, the state legislature approved House Bill (HB 3), which required primary grade teachers to not only complete over 60 hours of modules on the science of reading (SOR), but also begin to implement a phonics-based approach to reading. At the time, Mrs. O'Neal, was not given any curricular resources to support remote learners or phonics. Therefore, we designed a solution that included the integration of poetry across the school year with the goal to not only bring joy to the classroom that was facing so many unexpected obstacles, but also to teach foundational skills in meaningful and authentic manners.

We approached this research with two overarching questions: 1) What effect, if any, will incorporating poetry to existing literacy instruction have on student literacy learning? 2) How does regular collaboration between a university researcher and classroom teacher influence the planning and delivery of literacy instruction?

## **Participants**

The setting for this research was a Kindergarten mixed-ability classroom (N=16) and their teacher in a suburb north of a large metropolitan city in Texas. Out of the 16 students, five (31%) were identified as English Learners (EL) and three (19%) received speech services. Additionally, the whole class experienced a two-week quarantine at two different points across the year, and four students quarantined two additional weeks independently. Finally, out of the 16 students, four (25%) received remote instruction all or part of the school year.

The campus where this study took place has one teacher per grade level, so the students in the class were the only students in kindergarten at that school. The teacher-researcher, Mrs. O'Neal, is the second author of this manuscript and

played a vital role in the design and implementation of this yearlong study. As the sole Kindergarten teacher on her campus at a district without a structured curricular scope and sequence, Mrs. O’Neal typically plans her instruction and locates instructional resources independently. In addition to working full-time as a classroom teacher, Mrs. O’Neal is also a doctoral candidate in a local public university. At the time of this study, Mrs. O’Neal was entering her eleventh year of teaching.

## Design

Drawing on existing literature about meaningful integration of poetry, the teacher-researcher designed and implemented poetry activities throughout one school year. Prior to this study, poetry was used during unit-based instruction and through various transitions or holiday celebrations. For this action-research study, we designed a yearlong curriculum that embedded poetry into daily learning activities to explore what effect, if any, it had on student literacy learning.

**TABLE 1**  
**Instructional Planning Considerations**

| Consideration                     | Description  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Types of Texts                    | Purposeful integration of a variety of children’s literature including picture books with strong rhyming patterns, poetry anthologies, and single poems to highlight a beginning reading skill (Certo, 2016; Nichols, et al., 2018; Rasinski et al., 2015.).     |
| Balance of Skills                 | Intentional instruction to highlight both genre-specific characteristics of poetry (Certo, 2004, 2016, 2017; Elster, 2000, 2002, 2010), as well as foundational literacy skills (Bland, 2015; Concannon-Gibney, 2021; Gillon, 2018; Smith, 2000; Wilfong, 2008). |
| Across all Literacy Contexts      | Integration of poetry across all areas of literacy, including read aloud, shared reading, shared writing, small group instruction, phonics, word study, and literacy centers (Nichols et al., 2018; Rasinski et al., 2015)                                       |
| Across all Content Areas          | Integration of poetry across other subjects, including science, math, and social studies (Vardell, 2017; Vardell & Wong, 2014).  |
| Invitation to Families            | Meaningful extensions home to incorporate poetry beyond the classroom (Certo, 2016).   |
| Opportunities for Remote Learners | Structured virtual experiences for remote learners including both synchronous and asynchronous video lessons (Fisher et al., 2021)   |

The table below captures the planning considerations we made for integrating poetry throughout the school year, along with supporting literature.

For instance, Mrs. O’Neal used a poem for repeated reading each day during shared reading to reinforce the rhythmic nature of language and focus on specific foundational literacy skills, such as rhyming (see Figure 1). Using the familiar structure of nursery rhymes, she taught students how to create their own by altering some words through repeated shared writing experiences (see Figure 2). To provide students with repeated exposure to nursery rhymes and practice with retelling, she also implemented a storytelling center with nursery rhymes,

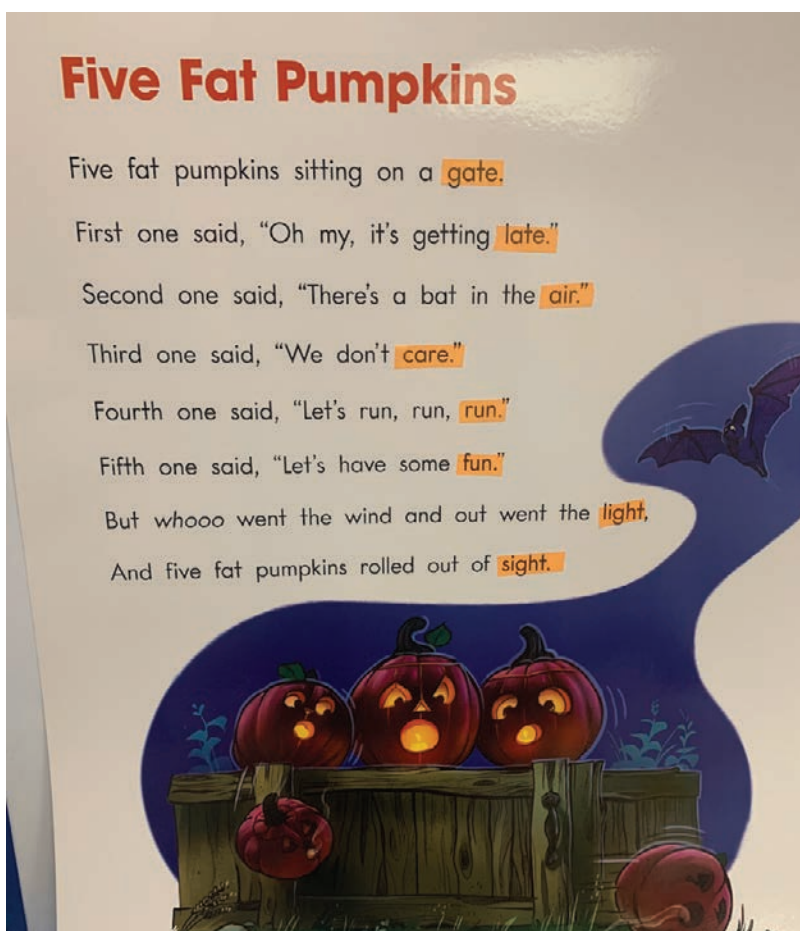


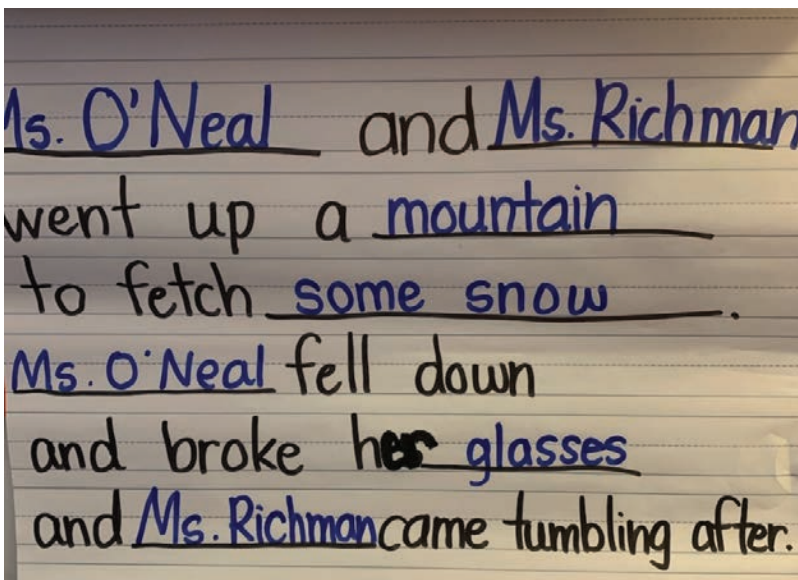
Figure 1 Shared Reading from Words that Sing (Fountas and Pinnell, 2018)



rotating the stories and types of props weekly (see Figure 3). While students worked collaboratively at literacy stations, they had options to listen and read along to hear the rhythm of familiar nursery rhymes (see Figure 4). Finally, the students also had access to picture books for independent reading that they added to their book box each week (see Figure 5 for example titles). The collaborative planning of this process ensured that there is at least one element of poetry and song woven throughout literacy instruction each day. Resources, including books, listening centers, and phonics manipulatives, were provided to the teacher using funds awarded from an internal grant received by the primary researcher.

### Data Sources

Quantitative data collection included literacy assessment data from mCLASS by Amplify and the Benchmark Assessment System (BAS) by Fountas and Pinnell. mCLASS is a digital assessment tool administered by a teacher to individual students at the beginning of the year (BOY), middle of the year (MOY), and end of the year (EOY) to monitor student progress in foundational literacy skills developmentally appropriate for each grade level. In Kindergarten, mCLASS assesses the following literacy skills: letter names, phonemic awareness, letter sounds, decoding, and word reading. A composite score is given to synthesize the



**Figure 2** Shared Writing adapting the nursery rhyme, Jack and Jill



**Figure 3** Retelling Station with props for the nursery rhymes, Jack and Jill and Itsy Bitsy Spider

child's overall foundational literacy development. The BAS is an individual reading assessment to gather data about a child's reading behaviors and instructional reading level using leveled texts, reading records, and comprehension prompts. Because students entering Kindergarten are not yet able to conventionally read print, this assessment is only given MOY and EOY.



**Figure 4** Listening Station using Nursery Rhymes and Sing-Along Songs with CDs (Priddy, 2006, 2009)

The sources of qualitative data collected included individual interviews conducted at three points across the school year (see Appendix A for Interview Protocol) and relevant artifacts from literacy teaching. Throughout the entire study, the primary researcher kept a reflexive journal to separate any observations from interpretations. The following graphic captures the process of action research conducted across a single school year, along with the data collected over time.

## Data Analysis

Because this action research study was emergent and unfolding across the year, data analysis was ongoing and recursive. Therefore, we met regularly to discuss and analyze the data collected, making meaning from what we were observing and to further the design of the study.

We first explored our quantitative data, looking specifically at the literacy learning occurring at each point in the school year. Then, we examined student



Figure 5 Poetry book collection (sample)

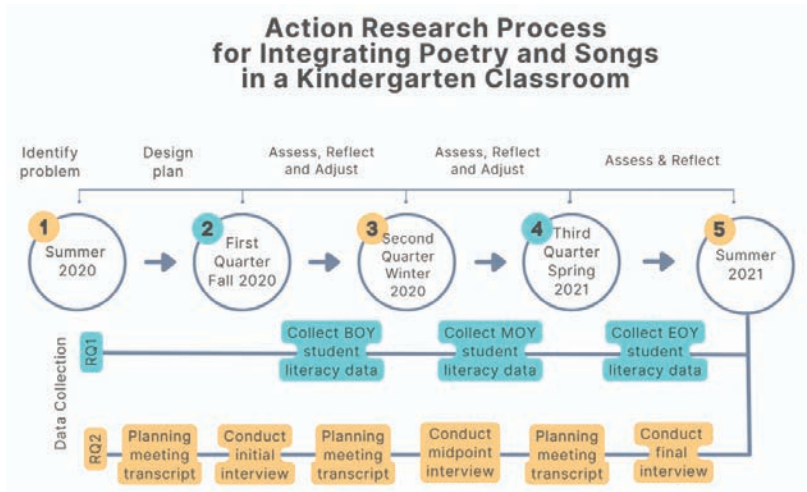


Figure 6 Action Research Process



artifacts, such as formative assessment measures taken by the classroom teacher, to notice what the students could do as readers and writers. We discussed the student results and designed instruction across all contexts in response to the literacy data every grading period.

At the end of the study, we analyzed the quantitative literacy assessment data collected on the students in an attempt to answer our first question: What effect, if any, will incorporating poetry to existing literacy instruction have on student literacy learning? For each assessment tool, we documented the expected benchmark for BOY, MOY, and EOY. Then, we calculated the difference between each child's score for each assessment with the benchmark score for each checkpoint. We also calculated the overall growth across the year for each student and calculated the difference between their individual growth and the benchmark. Finally, we totaled the average of student growth across the year.

Then, we used open-coding techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to look for initial patterns and themes in the data. We coded all interview and meeting transcripts in response to our second research question: How does regular collaboration between a university researcher and classroom teacher influence the planning and delivery of literacy instruction? After combing through our data using open-coding, we collapsed our codes into categories, which allowed us to pull the data into more meaningful units of analysis. Finally, we used our qualitative findings to provide the story of our quantitative results to converge our data.

## Results

In this section, we describe the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative results to answer our two research questions.

### Research Question 1

Each student in Mrs. O'Neal's Kindergarten class was given a battery of literacy assessments throughout the year to track growth in both reading level (BAS) and foundational reading skills (mCLASS) in an attempt to answer our second question (What effect, if any, will incorporating poetry to existing literacy instruction have on student literacy learning?). The tables below reveal students' scores and the overall growth over one school year as compared to the benchmark expectations set by the district.

As noted in table 2, the average growth in reading levels for the class was 2.06, which is consistent with the benchmark expectations. That is, students were expected to grow at least two reading levels between the MOY and EOY checkpoints and on average, the students met that expectation. Additionally,

**TABLE 2**  
**Student Reading Level (BAS)**

| <b>Student Code</b> | <b>MOY</b> | <b>EOY</b> | <b>Growth</b> |
|---------------------|------------|------------|---------------|
| <b>Benchmark</b>    | <b>B</b>   | <b>D</b>   | <b>2</b>      |
| 1                   | E          | G          | 2             |
| 2                   | C          | E          | 2             |
| 3                   | A          | B          | 1             |
| 4                   | E          | J          | 5             |
| 5                   | A          | C          | 2             |
| 6                   | A          | C          | 2             |
| 7                   | C          | E          | 2             |
| 8                   | C          | E          | 2             |
| 9                   | B          | C          | 1             |
| 10                  | E          | G          | 2             |
| 11                  | C          | E          | 2             |
| 12                  | C          | C          | 0             |
| 13                  | C          | E          | 2             |
| 14                  | C          | E          | 2             |
| 15                  | E          | H          | 3             |
| 16                  | D          | G          | 3             |
| <b>Average</b>      |            |            | <b>2.06</b>   |

there were three students who did not meet expectations and three students who exceeded expectations for growth.

Table 3 captures the growth made in foundational reading skills, which was the focus of instruction during the integration of poetry. The average growth for the composite score on mCLASS was 136.5, which exceeds the expected benchmark of 114. While some students were still below level compared to the benchmark, every student made growth across the year. Some students made significant gains as they started the year below benchmark and ended the year above the benchmark, such as student six.

These quantitative findings reveal that integrating poetry across a school year had positive effects on student literacy learning regarding growth in reading level and foundational skills across one school year in a kindergarten classroom.

**TABLE 3**  
**Student Foundational Reading Skill Composite Score (mCLASS)**

| Student Code         | BOY        | Difference | MOY        | Difference | EOY        | Difference | Overall Growth |
|----------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|----------------|
| <b>Benchmark</b>     | <b>306</b> |            | <b>371</b> |            | <b>420</b> |            | <b>114</b>     |
| 1                    | 308        | 2          | 415        | 44         | 460        | 40         | 152            |
| 2                    | 276        | -30        | 362        | -53        | 417        | -43        | 141            |
| 3                    | 265        | -43        | 331        | -31        | 382        | -35        | 117            |
| 4                    | 372        | 96         | 401        | 70         | 463        | 81         | 91             |
| 5                    | 253        | -12        | 349        | -52        | 394        | -69        | 141            |
| 6                    | 243        | -129       | 352        | 3          | 423        | 29         | 180            |
| 7                    | 243        | -10        | 351        | -1         | 409        | -14        | 166            |
| 8                    | 243        | 0          | 329        | -22        | 372        | -37        | 129            |
| 9                    | 255        | 12         | 387        | 58         | 431        | 59         | 176            |
| 10                   | 288        | 45         | 369        | -18        | 428        | -3         | 140            |
| 11                   | 254        | -1         | 380        | 11         | 426        | -2         | 172            |
| 12                   | 303        | 15         | 377        | -3         | 416        | -10        | 113            |
| 13                   | 275        | 21         | 361        | -16        | 421        | 5          | 146            |
| 14                   | 316        | 13         | 382        | 21         | 418        | -3         | 102            |
| 15                   | 316        | 41         | 382        | 0          | 440        | 22         | 124            |
| 16                   | 326        | 10         | 380        | -2         | 420        | -20        | 94             |
| <b>Average 136.5</b> |            |            |            |            |            |            |                |

## Research Question 2

Several themes emerged after analyzing the qualitative data in response to our second research question (How does regular collaboration between a university researcher and classroom teacher influence the planning and delivery of literacy instruction?). The table below captures the four themes and examples from the data to illustrate our findings.

**Balancing Pedagogical Tensions.** Because this study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, Mrs. O’Neal faced many challenging obstacles as a result of juggling in-person and remote learners as a Kindergarten teacher. The conversations we had during our planning meetings and interviews revealed pedagogical tension in the decisions she had to make as a teacher. This tension saw a peak as the class was quarantined twice between Thanksgiving and Winter

**TABLE 4**  
**Themes and Examples from the Data**

| Theme                             | Examples from Data  |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Balancing Pedagogical Tensions    | "I don't believe in what I'm doing but it's what I have to do because of the Covid policies...they're missing the basic social experiences they normally get in Kindergarten" (Midpoint Interview)          |
| Adapting Instructional Strategies | "I'm trying to figure out how to do [stations] because they aren't allowed to share materials" (Initial Planning Session)   |
| Adjusting Instructional Pacing    | "Right now we're just doing CVC words. We haven't even done blends or digraphs...I'm way behind from where I was last year in phonics" (Midpoint Interview)   |
| Reflection on Practice            | "When we were reviewing that math, science, social studies concept later, [the students] were able to recall that song and it really helped them understand and learn the content better" (Final Interview) |

break. Mrs. O'Neal was forced to move all instruction to a remote learning platform with two options for families: with or without technology. Because the school did not provide devices for each student, families could not access learning from home through digital platforms. Thus, Mrs. O'Neal was required to create packets of worksheets for students to do at home. She felt great tension on this decision because she typically did not use worksheets as an instructional tool. Our conversations helped guide Mrs. O'Neal's planning decisions as she strived to strike a balance between what she believed was right pedagogically and what was necessary during pandemic learning. We also found that the genre of poetry helped us better navigate these pedagogical tensions because of the numerous possibilities to read, write, and perform poetry without requiring digital devices.

**Adapting Instructional Strategies.** Along the same lines, our conversations throughout the school year focused on how to adapt instructional strategies to meet the required policies to reduce exposure and the spread of the Coronavirus. As a Kindergarten teacher, Mrs. O'Neal was used to teaching through a collaborative and hands-on manner in literacy stations. Students would typically work in small groups or pairs with manipulatives to practice various literacy skills, such as puppets to retell stories or magnetic letters to practice making words. However, not only were there not enough manipulatives to provide each child their own set, but they were also not allowed to work in small groups while socially distanced. So, to be in compliance with the safety protocols



at her school, Mrs. O'Neal had to modify her instructional strategies to include more independent work. Our conversations throughout the year served as necessary brainstorming sessions to adapt instructional strategies as needed. Poetry folders became the most useful instructional adaptation because each student had copies of class poems that they could reread, perform, and illustrate. Poetry required very little shared materials and resources, so it was easier to stay in compliance with safety protocols.

**Adjusting Instructional Pacing.** Another common theme that arose from our conversations was the need to adjust instructional pacing. The students entering the kindergarten classroom came with increasingly more diverse learning differences because the pandemic shut down schools the previous year. Many students came to kindergarten without any prior school experience and several needed either EL or Speech services. Combined with the frequent quarantine periods, Mrs. O'Neal had to slow the pacing of foundational skills, specifically in relation to the phonics patterns. Compared to previous years, the pacing of decoding and encoding was at least one grading period behind. Our conversations through interviews and planning sessions guided not only the pacing of the curriculum, but also the differentiation that needed to occur with the diverse learners in her classroom. Nursery rhymes, poems, and songs were intentionally chosen to highlight specific phonics and phonological awareness skills to differentiate for students in both whole group and small group settings. Even though the instructional pacing was slowed, the genre of poetry allowed us to be more responsive to the students' individual needs.

**Reflection on Practice.** Finally, because we met so frequently throughout the year, the conversations served as platforms for reflection on practice. Mrs. O'Neal anecdotally highlighted the growth she saw in student learning, both as a group and individual. She named the specific practices that students found enjoyment through, such as listening to nursery rhymes and writing poetry. When stress was high due to the pressure and demands on classroom teachers, our reflective conversations helped ground us in what mattered most: the students. Additionally, because she was enrolled in doctoral coursework, these reflective conversations often referenced existing literature and research, leading to more congruence between theory and practice in her classroom.

## Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore the literacy learning in a Kindergarten classroom as a teacher-researcher and university professor collaborated to infuse poetry across a school year. This discussion will converge the quantitative and

qualitative findings to highlight the impact of this study as it relates to teaching in a pandemic.

This study embedded poetry at the heart of all learning experiences for kindergartners. This genre was used to transition between activities, welcome students to the classroom, celebrate holidays, capture nature, learn complex concepts, and teach foundational literacy skills. Through reading, reciting, and writing poetry, students were able to play during a time when all other activities required masks, social distancing, and frequent sanitization. Nichols et al. (2019) contend, “an arguable perception of poems and nursery rhymes is that they are the beloved rights of childhood” (p. 390). This form of expression, both as readers and writers, is even more important when so many other elements of typical school experiences for children were stripped away. Poetry invites imagination, play, and performance- all pieces of classroom instruction removed due to the pandemic.

Not only did the students in this study experience growth in their literacy learning when many others around the world experienced learning loss (Bielinski et al., 2021; Engzell, 2021; Kuhfield et al., 2020; Skar et al., 2021), the students and their families were also highly engaged in the learning experiences. Since this study took place during a global pandemic, it was even more important that this genre of beautiful language was highlighted across the year. Rasinski (2015) said:

When teachers intentionally blend poetry into literacy instruction, it sparks enthusiasm for the written word as well as a model or scaffold for students to structure their own writing, while simultaneously providing another gateway to reading success for less confident and competent readers (p. 4).

The results from our study align with this statement in that students not only made growth in their literacy development, but the teacher reported high levels of engagement when reading and writing poetry. Amidst a global pandemic, students became confident and skilled readers and writers because of the infusion of poetry across the curriculum and school year. Poetry was the genre that helped facilitate student literacy learning, but it was the ongoing inquiry that contributed to the intentional decision-making throughout the year. In each interview, the teacher-researcher named engagement in literacy and a solid foundation in emergent literacy skills as her main priority throughout the year. Despite the challenges that arose from the COVID-19 pandemic, the conversations and collaboration between the two researchers helped ground the instructional decisions.

Overall, the quantitative and qualitative data from this study reveal that collaboration between a university professor and classroom teacher with the goal of embedding poetry across the school year serves as a vehicle to student growth in literacy learning. Not only did we see growth in students, but we also grew ourselves as teachers and researchers. This partnership demonstrates possibilities when a junior faculty and doctoral students early in their coursework collaborate. Because the teacher-researcher was also in doctoral coursework, our conversations often led to the research process, class assignments, and future scholarship goals. A natural and reciprocal mentorship emerged because of our engagement in this study. Thus, there is potential in structuring doctoral programs with mentorship in research early on in the program between faculty and students who share common research goals. The partnership we developed was mutually beneficial as two emerging scholars in the field.

### Limitations

Across this yearlong study, several limitations existed. First, this study took place at one school with a small sample size of students and a single classroom teacher. While we intended to collect data from a control group to compare results, too many variables from the COVID-19 pandemic created inequity across classroom contexts, so our control group was not a reliable control. Likewise, this study relied on frequent adaptations to curriculum due to unpredictable quarantine periods and safety protocols, which make the results less likely to be generalizable to classrooms receiving typical school instruction.

### Acknowledgements

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# APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

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## Initial Interview Questions

1. The state standards call for an integrated approach to teaching literacy. What does that mean to you?
2. How would you define balanced literacy?
3. Talk me through a typical day of your literacy block. Now how would that progress across a week? What about a month?
4. Do you currently use poetry and/or songs in your instruction? If so, how and how often?
5. What is most important to you as a literacy teacher?
6. What do you consider when planning for literacy instruction?
7. What have you noticed about your students' literacy learning so far this year?

## Midpoint Interview Questions

1. Talk me through a typical day of your literacy block.
2. Do you currently use poetry and/or songs in your instruction? If so, how and how often?
3. What is most important to you as a literacy teacher?
4. What do you consider when planning for literacy instruction?
5. What have you noticed about your students' literacy learning so far this year?

### **Final Interview Questions**

1. Talk me through a typical day of your literacy block.
2. Do you currently use poetry and/or songs in your instruction? If so, how and how often?
3. What is most important to you as a literacy teacher?
4. What do you consider when planning for literacy instruction?
5. What have you noticed about your students' literacy learning so far this year?

# INFORMATIONAL TEXT: A SIGNIFICANT LEARNING CURVE FOR NEW IN-SERVICE ALTERNATIVE CERTIFICATION SEEKING STUDENTS

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## **Abstract**

*Among new, in-service alternative certification seeking educators there often is a lack of understanding of informational text including an explanation, by identifying characteristics, structures, and purposes, the types, and instructional reading comprehension strategies utilized with these texts in K-12 classrooms serving diverse populations. This article serves to broaden the knowledge of various educational stakeholders in efforts to assist alternative certification seeking educators in the context of informational text instruction.*

*Keywords:* Alternative certification, informational text, alternative certified teachers

## **Introduction**

In today's classrooms, teachers, including new in-service alternative certification seeking educators, are constantly encouraged to utilize informational text with students. This emphasis often stems from state education standards as well as the Common Core State Standards. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (2010) and Brown and Kappas (2012) accentuates the significance of informational text for a variety of reasons including:



1. There is strong data that suggests if students struggle to read complex texts upon graduation they will read less in general.
2. Informational texts are a powerful source of knowledge.
3. If graduates cannot grasp informational text structures, they could enter the world as less cognizant citizens and consumers.
4. Research indicates to be fully college and career ready graduates must possess the skills to independently read complicated informational text across many disciplines and topic areas.
5. Most of the complex text adults confront in college and/or the workplace is informational, and typically there is minimal scaffolding to aid the reader navigate the multifaceted structure and content of informational text.

Maloch and Bomer (2013) indicate with these understandings, educators in all disciplines should enhance their own discernment and use of informational texts in classroom instruction to move students forward toward successful comprehension. For informational text, it is paramount for teachers to create learning environments that ensure students recognize the features, the varieties, and operative reading strategies that contribute to wide-ranging comprehension. This comprehension should also be aided by active student engagement instructional activities. In turn, this teaching approach is germane as diverse student populations come to classrooms with broad educational experiences and learning styles (Reutzel et al., 2016; Young & Goering, 2018). New teachers, especially those in alternative certification programs who have changed careers to become educators, often have limited proficiencies in understanding and effectively instituting informational text instruction while meeting the needs of those in their classrooms.

In the mid-1980's alternative certification programs were crafted to as response to a teacher shortage in the United States. The United States Congress as well as numerous state education agencies assert the teacher shortage is still prevalent nearly forty years later and continue to look for solutions (House Committee on Appropriations, 2022). While these programs are effective in placing teachers in classrooms, newly alternative certified teachers frequently have a steep learning curve because of the fast-tracked teacher preparation circumstances within alternative certification programs. This hastened approach can often leave teachers feeling under-prepared for effective instruction which can influence student achievement (Lewis-Spector, 2016; Page, 2021; Rose & Sughrue, 2022).

The purpose of this qualitative, grounded theory study is to investigate the understanding and usage of informational text by in-service, new alternative

certification seeking educators that teach disciplines across grades (kindergarten-twelfth). The research questions guiding this study include (1) What informational text knowledge do newly alternative certified teachers display? (2) How comfortable are these teachers in using informational text in their instruction? And (3) What reading comprehension strategies do they use with informational text in their classrooms?

This study has implications for educational stakeholders at varied levels. Study data is relevant to new, in-service alternatively certified seeking educators, instructors/professors that teach in university-based or for-profit alternative certification programs, and those at the school level that guide and train new teachers. Particularly, the data findings notably have the potential to enhance informational text instruction and student engagement in classrooms every day. These instructional actions can also contribute to the present and future student success in school, the workplace, and society. To meet these demands, it is significant to grasp what new in-service alternative certification seeking teachers know about informational text, specifically the characteristics, structures, purpose, and types, as well as if these teachers are comfortable using informational text as a teaching resource, and what reading comprehension strategies are used with informational text in the classrooms of these teachers.

## **Literature Review**

In classrooms today, teachers, including new, in-service alternative certification seeking educators, are expected to recognize and successfully teach informational text. This instruction in across all grade levels can be challenging specifically when educators do not fully understand aspects of informational text and effective pedagogy, including informational text reading comprehension strategies. Many educators are challenged when asked to offer an informational text knowledge including the characteristics, structures, and purposes, the types, and instructional reading comprehension strategies to use with informational text in K-12 classrooms. Specific attention on new, in-service alternative certification seeking educators in the context of these aspects of informational text is the focus of this study.

## **Alternative Certified Educators**

Beginning in the mid-1980s two states, New Jersey and Texas, created alternative teaching programs. Alternative or non-traditional teacher certification programs were originally conceived to create more teachers to address a decline in the number of students seeking an education degree. This decline in numbers

contributed to an educator shortage. Soon, many states embraced alternative teaching programs to combat the nation-wide teacher shortage. Development of these programs received a major boost with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. Provisions within this Act identified alternative teacher certification programs as an effective means to train teachers. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and Title II of the Act addressed the preparing, training, and recruiting of highly quality teachers. A key aspect of this approach was to recruit qualified professionals from other fields and provide them with effective alternative routes to teacher certification (Mikulecky et al., 2004).

At present, the alternative certification route to teaching serves to address teacher shortages, but these programs also serve to recruit individuals who have keenness for teaching but did not pursue a traditional, institution of higher education (IHE) undergraduate teacher preparation program. As alternative routes to teaching certification have become more accepted, all states and the District of Columbia have developed various types of programs. These programs can be accomplished in many forms. Three popular methods include a) Practitioner Teacher Programs, b) Master's Degree Programs, or c) Certification-Only Programs. These programs can be online, in person, or can be in hybrid-form, which includes a combination of online and in-person classes. The programs can also be accomplished at universities with alternative certification programs, school districts working in conjunction with a university, for-profit operators outside institutes of higher education, or certification-only operators which are often for-profit. Practitioner Teacher Programs are streamlined routes to teacher certification that merge intensive coursework and full-time teaching. Master's Degree Programs comprise a concentrated path to a master's degree as well as alternative education certification in a specific area or areas of interest and/or need often with the student full-time teaching but not always. Certification-Only Programs are for persons focused on the alternative certification only and not seeking a master's degree. The individuals in these programs often work full-time as a teacher or perhaps an education paraprofessional, depending on the state education agency guidelines. Participants also must have a bachelor's degree and realize the programs are an accelerated route to teaching, typically completed in one to two years, depending on the program. Many of these programs also grant a transitional or provisional teaching certificate. This certificate enables these individuals to teach while completing their teacher preparation program. These programs likewise can lead to a post-graduate teaching certificate(s) or a master's degree (Teacher Certification Degrees, 2022).

According to data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 2015–2016, about 18% of public-school teachers earned their teaching license through an alternative certification program. In the most recent NCES report which collected data on the 2017–2018 school year, the percentage of public middle and high school mathematics, natural science, and other teachers who entered teaching through an alternative program included 23.5% of math teachers, 30.1% teach the natural sciences, and 22.4% teach other disciplines (NCES, 2021). Furthermore, alternative certification programs enroll an elevated percentage of students of color than traditional teacher preparation programs, but white students still make up the majority of enrolled students in all varieties of teacher preparation programs (Yin & Partelow, 2020).

Alternative certification programs offer those who have not taken the traditional path to becoming an educator the means to a license to teach. During this undertaking, education coursework within these programs are centered on educator certification standards. Within these standards, certification seeking individuals are expected to become skilled in instruction, content mastery (their own and that of their students), and creating effective opportunities for student application of this content, including instructional strategies for full comprehension. These same requirements are accomplished in traditional teacher preparation programs. Often state and national assessment data influences how and what pedagogy, content, and application of this content (Page, 2021).

## **Recent United States Reading Assessment Data**

For many years United States educational stakeholders have had concerns with students in their under-performance compared to students in other countries. Cross-national assessments offer data on students at certain ages and scores on certain discipline-specific tests. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which every three years measures reading ability, math, and science literacy and other key skills among 15-year-olds in dozens of developed and developing countries, including the United States (School In, 2020). The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), is another cross-national assessment that tests students in grades four and eight in math and science, every four years since 1995. Students in the US took the assessment conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics in 1995 and 2015 (Desilver, 2017). The most recent assessment results from both indicate US students trail students in other countries in these scores.

Within the United the States, scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) are often referred to as the “nation’s report card.”

NAEP is “the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment” of what US students understand and can accomplish in various subject areas, including reading, math, geography, economics, science, history, arts, writing, technology and engineering (NAEP, 2021, What is NAEP section). The 2019 NAEP data indicated the average reading score for twelfth-grade students was lower in 2019 compared to the last assessment in 2015. This is part of an almost 30-year trend that denoted the 2019 average reading score for twelfth-grader students was lower than the 2009 reading scores, not significantly different from 2002 scores, and lower scores than in 1992 which was the first assessment year of NAEP. The 2019 NAEP data also indicated there is a higher percentage of twelfth-grade students below the NAEP Basic Level as compared to 2015. The *NAEP Basic Level* includes lower performing students. Specifically, compared to the first reading assessment (1992), average 2019 reading scores at grade 12 were lower for several student groups. The 2019 scores decreased for White and Black students, male and female students, public school students, and students across parental education levels. Falling scores for these student groups were mostly among lower-performing twelfth-graders at the 10th and 25th percentiles (NAEP, 2020).

In the context of NAEP testing in reading, fourth grade and eighth students tested in 2017 and 2019 had lower reading scores at both grades than in previous years (NAEP, 2020a). Based on these same scores, NEAP (2020b) noted it is troubling that only about one-third of students in fourth and eighth grades reported they *definitely can* explain the meaning of something they have read, and about another one-third of students in fourth and eighth grades reported they *can probably* explain the meaning of something they have read. Also, in the 2019 NAEP reading assessment, students were asked about their confidence in doing a variety of reading-related tasks. A larger percentage of higher-performing students reported more confidence in their ability to do reading-related tasks compared to lower-performing students (NAEP, 2020a). This information is significant in pedagogy and engagement conversations and resulting actions for educational stakeholders.

As students move from twelfth grade and decide to attend college, many are deemed not scholastically prepared. According to NAEP (2020a) an estimated only 37 percent of twelfth-grade students were equipped, including knowledge and skills, for college in reading success, according to tabulations based on research funded by the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB). Beginning in 2008 the NAGB has been a NAEP sponsored research program. The NAGB examines the potential of NAEP at grade 12 to function as a gage of scholastic preparedness for college. “Students who are considered ready for college are expected to be academically prepared for entry-level college

coursework, without the need for remedial courses. The research results to date support inferences about NAEP performance and academic preparedness for college at the national level” (NAEP, 2020, p. 17). As indicated, NAEP scores are often viewed as a reflection of educational success for the United States (Center for Education Reform, 2018). Contributing to this success can include identifiers such as national and state education standards, teacher recruitment and training, classroom instruction, and student scores on state and national assessments, including NAEP.

As reading skills are the foundation for comprehension success in all disciplines, including those tested on international, national, and state assessments, educational stakeholders are consistently focused on student progress in reading, which often utilizes informational text.

## **Informational Texts**

There are two types of texts, fiction and non-fiction. Fiction is narrative literature that is invented or imagined, often referred to as a made-up story. Nonfiction is a type of literature offering opinions or conjectures in the context of facts and reality (Alexander & Jarman, 2018). There are several subcategories of fiction and nonfiction. Informational text is one of these subcategories of nonfiction (Common Core State Standards, 2010; Duke & Bennett-Armistead, 2003). Informational text understandings, skills, and experiences have the potential to broaden people’s erudition of the world and provide analytical skills necessary for success in the constant evolving information age. Ensuring students gain effective interactions with informational text across all disciplines can contribute to these attainments.

## **Types of Informational Text**

Within fiction and nonfiction there are differing sub-types; but in the context of nonfiction, some sub-types have become interchangeable. These include nonfiction, expository, and informational. With a simple Google search it is evident that the terms nonfiction text, expository text, and informational text are used frequently and interchangeably. Confusingly, the terms are also used in an exchangeable manner in educational textbooks, articles, and curriculums. Depending on what sources referenced, the types of informational texts also vary. Informational texts include nonfiction books, newspapers, magazines, atlases, and other reference materials. Informational texts also can also include newspaper and magazine articles, digital information, nonfiction trade books, textbooks, and reference materials (Beth & Bonner, 2013). The National Assessment of

Educational Progress 2009 Framework (2008) includes expository text, persuasive text, and procedural text as informational text. Common Core State Standards (2010) designate literary nonfiction, expository, argument or persuasion, and procedural as informational texts. As indicated the numerous types and names can perplexing to educators and especially new, in-service alternative certification teachers as they read various textbooks, research articles, and curriculums.

### **Informational Text Instructional Strategies**

The concerns about reading achievement, as with the NAEP data, and the national and state standard promotion of literacy skills within all disciplines have steered many exchanges between educational stakeholders about how to advance disciplinary literacy (Draper & Siebert, 2010; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Informational texts can be strong resources in classrooms leading to enhance student success, but if not employed more and with greater purpose students can suffer in subsequent grades, career, and life (White, 2016). Efforts to increase informational text interactions require teachers to appreciate and use instructional strategies and instructional activities to enhance student experiences and understandings. Instruction and activities used by teachers should have a strong focus on disciplinary literacy using reading comprehension strategies with informational texts. There are a multitude of reading comprehension strategies and connected activities that can be employed. Strategy and activity examples include, but are not limited to, text structure strategies, vocabulary, and activating prior knowledge, think alouds, re-reading, understanding text features, monitoring comprehension while reading, paraphrasing skills, ability to evaluate, summarize and synthesize, and the use of graphic organizers (Hedin & Condermam, 2011; Liebfreund, 2015; Oczkus, 2014; White, 2016). In the context of using reading comprehension strategies with informational text, teachers should also engross students in pertinent, appealing activities to assist in learning and application of the depth of knowledge gained. These learned skills can expand a student's understanding of society and further the skills necessary for success beyond a school-based setting.

### **Methodology**

This study utilizes a qualitative, grounded theory approach (Tarozzi, 2020) including triangulated data of an open-ended survey from participants identified as new, in-service alternatively certified seeking educators in their first year of teaching disciplines across grades (kindergarten-twelfth) in a southern United

States urban city, one audio-taped interview from six randomly selected participants (10% of participants), and researcher notes during each interview. The triangulation serves to enhance the reliability and validity of research findings and to create a more in-depth picture of research problem.

The sixty study participants are a convenience sample and include new, in-service alternative certification seeking educators within a university-based alternative certification program, who are in their first or second year of teaching in K-12 public schools in a large urban setting. Of the sixty participants, forty-eight identified female and twelve identified as male. Each participant in the program is also seeking a Master of Teaching graduate degree in a private university setting. The survey was given to students in a graduate foundational reading course that agree to participate. This course is the first of four graduate reading courses graduate students take as the alternative certified seeking participants pursue their degree. Six randomly selected students (ten percent of participants) also have one open-ended interview with researcher one-two weeks after the survey (See Table 1) . The researcher began each interview with a set of basic interview questions to initially guide the interview, but also realizes participant answers will be used to ask additional questions to garner in-depth understandings. These interviews were recorded and interviewer notes were taken. Each interview lasted thirty minutes.

Data from open ended surveys offer insight into how the participants understand and use informational text. Each of the six interviews generated data through open-ended questions which allows participants to discuss in depth knowledge and use of informational texts in their classrooms. During each taped interview the researcher took notes documenting visual dynamics of interviewees that may not be captured auditorily.

The specific data analysis process of the surveys, recorded interviews, notes taken by interviewer include the creation of a coding system to assign units of meaning to the information compiled. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) express that coding data supports the researcher in recognizing and re-contextualizing data, contributing to understanding. According to Miles & Huberman (1994) and Braun and Clarke (2013), this coding and categorizing system allows the researcher to assign units of meaning to the information compiled. The information is compiled in “chunks” of words, phrases, sentences, segments, or meanings significant to the study. Codes and categories are developed to retrieve and organize these “chunks” thereby drawing thematic conclusions from the data. These themes can become the underpinnings for theory development (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest the final step of this process includes documenting the findings in a comprehensive written manner.



**TABLE 1**  
**Descriptors of the Six Interview Participants**

|                                    | <b>Of the 2-Year Alternative Certification program, what year are you in?</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Prior career before being accepted into Alternative Certification Program</b> | <b>Grade(s) Level Taught</b> | <b>Discipline(s)/ Content Area(s) Taught</b>                      |
|------------------------------------|---|---------------|------------|--|------------------------------|---|
| <b>Interview Participant One</b>   | First Year  | Female        | 25         | Social Services  | 2nd grade                    | Self-Contained Classroom (Reading, Math, Science, Social Studies) |
| <b>Interview Participant Two</b>   | First Year  | Female        | 32         | City Services  | 2nd grade                    | Self-Contained Classroom (Reading, Math, Science, Social Studies) |
| <b>Interview Participant Three</b> | First Year  | Female        | 26         | Retail   | 3rd grade                    | Self-Contained Classroom (Reading, Math, Science, Social Studies) |
| <b>Interview Participant Four</b>  | First Year  | Female        | 30         | Social Services  | 4th grade                    | Reading and Social Studies  |
| <b>Interview Participant Five</b>  | Second Year   | Male          | 37         | Education Non-Profit   | 9th grade                    | Science   |
| <b>Interview Participant Six</b>   | Second Year   | Female        | 41         | Parish/ County Services  | 7th grade                    | Math and Science  |

Themes based on data are discussed in the following section. This data offers greater, detailed understanding of participants in a university-based alternative certification program and their informational text knowledge and usage in the classrooms they teach.

## Findings

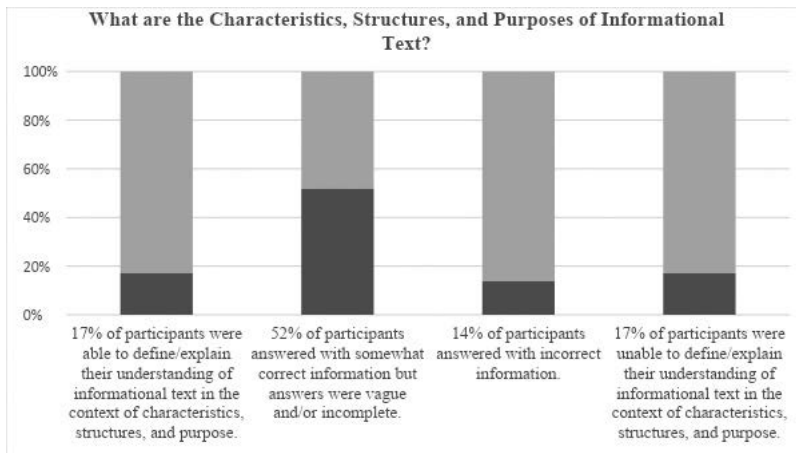
The purpose of this qualitative, grounded theory study was to investigate the understanding and usage of informational text by in-service, newly alternative certification seeking educators that teach disciplines across grades (kindergarten-twelfth). Data from surveys, interviews, and researcher notes indicate these new educators frequently grapple with distinguishing informational text attributes, identifying the types of informational text, and what informational text reading comprehension strategies to utilize in kindergarten through twelfth grade culturally diverse classrooms. Four survey questions guide the study to determine an in-depth insight of these educators and what is occurring in these classrooms. Six participants (10% of participants) were randomly selected for a follow-up, one-on-one interview to garner added acumen to each question. Tables 2–5 contain the percentages of responses for each question. The following sections explain teachers' knowledge of informational texts, understanding of the types of informational texts, their comfort in using informational texts in instruction, and finally the reading comprehension strategies employed with informational texts.

### Knowledge of Informational Texts

Data gathered regarding Question One of the surveys indicate 83% of survey respondents were (1) unable to define/explain their understanding of informational text in the context of characteristics, structures, and purpose, (2) or answered somewhat correct answers were but were vague and/or incomplete in answering the question, (3) or signified incorrect information to the question (See Table 2). Although participants in the study are seeking an alternative certification and are not fully certified, they teach in classrooms each day. This teaching is centered on state standards that include informational text. This elevated percentage of study participants that struggle with identifying the characteristics, structures, and purpose of informational text is valuable information. The follow-up interview with each of the six teachers corroborated these findings.

Interview Participant One and Five each indicated in their interview they did not fully know what information texts were and had not heard of the phrase “informational text.” Interview Participant Two indicated she was embarrassed that she left the answer blank on the survey but has since “looked up some information on Google because she should have known.” Interview Participant Three shared that she “guessed the answer to the first question and figured it was wrong, especially since it asked about the characteristics.” Interview Participant Four stated the survey “caught me off-guard and did not answer any of the questions about informational text, because I did not know anything what was

**TABLE 2**  
**Knowledge Informational Text**



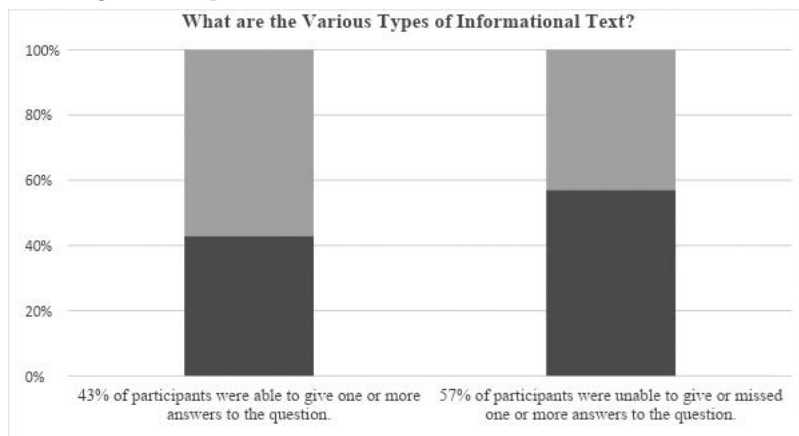
being asked.” Interview Participant Six declared she “remembers reading about informational text in the curriculum” she uses, and she did not know what it was initially but asked her mentor teacher about these texts and how they are used in the social studies curriculum and with students. She specified her mentor teacher helped her understand informational text, that is addressed on the science state standards, at a deeper level. Although participants in the study are seeking an alternative certification and are not fully certified, they are required to effectively teach students to meet required state standards. This efficacious teaching includes the teachers’ ability to identifying the characteristics, structures, and purpose of informational text. The pronounced percentage of study participants that struggle in offering their understanding of informational text is important information for educational stakeholders.

The survey data collected relating to types of informational text denoted the majority of study participants were unable to give or missed one or more answers to the question. (See Table 3.)

In identifying the various types of informational text, 57% of participants were unable to give or missed one or more answers to the question. 43% of participants were able to give one or more type of informational text. The higher percentage should be noted as germane to how teachers understand the types of informational text, which can influence how and what they teach using informational text.

During the interviews the participants offered greater insight into the answers offered to Question Two. Interviewees One, Two, and Five disclosed

**TABLE 3**  
**Knowledge of the Types of Informational Text**



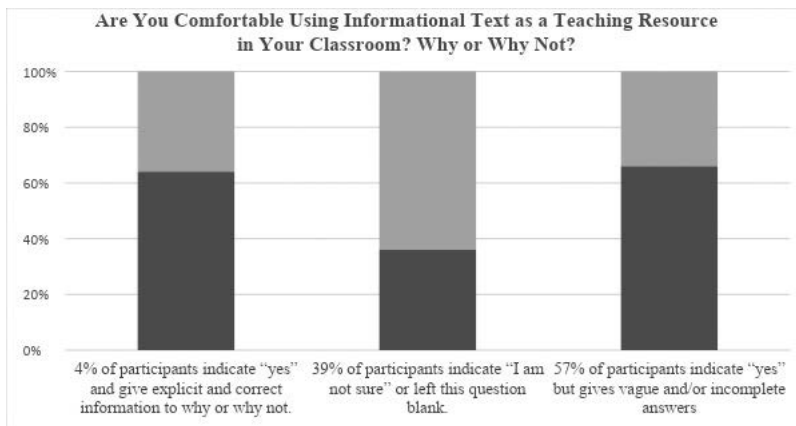
they did not know about information texts, as asked on Question One, they speculated or left the question blank on Question Two. Interview Participant Two did indicate she “now knows what information texts are, because I went and looked it up after the form we filled out” and verbally she then listed “newspapers, textbooks, curriculums, websites like CNN.” Interview Participant Three shared that she once again “guessed the answers to Question Two and hoped my two answers were right.” Interviewee Four again stated she did not answer any of the questions on the questionnaire. The researcher asked the interviewee a subsequent question to garner more information. When asked “Why didn’t you answer anything on the questionnaire?” the teacher stated she is extremely overwhelmed with teaching all day and coming to courses at night, all the while being expected to be an effective teacher. She indicated she “sometimes feels so frustrated” and “shuts down.” She went on to say, “Not knowing the answers on the survey you gave us made me once again wonder, as I do every day, if I am in the right job.” Interview Participant Four went on to say, “There is so much to learn; I want to be a good teacher, but there is so much to learn.” Interview Participant Six affirmed, “I listed six informational text examples on the survey thanks to my mentor helping me understand when I first started teaching a few weeks ago.” She went on to say, “Although while new to teaching, I try to specifically use current, appropriate informational texts several times a week. These texts are everywhere in the standards we have to teach, and I like to supplement my science curriculum with them.”

## Comfort Using Informational Text

The data collected concerning Question Three revealed 96% of survey participants wrote “I am not sure” or left this question blank or indicated “yes” but gave vague and/or incomplete answers. The high percentage offers insight to the uncertainty of the teachers with informational text. Based on survey comments, it is evident many lack a thorough understanding of informational text which affected their comfort level (See Table 4).

Participant interviews also disclosed that this discomfort influenced the teacher’s usage of informational text in their classrooms. Interview Participant One was asked during their interview about their comfort level using informational text in their classroom. She stated, “As I don’t really know what these texts are, I am not sure if I am uncomfortable or not. I figure when I figure it out, I will be good.” A follow-up question was asked concerning what instruction with informational text, per the state standards, is accomplished in the time between now and when the teacher does “figure it out.” Participant One answered, “I’m trying my best, but I don’t know.” Interview Participant Two stated, “Now that I went and researched what informational texts are I would answer that question differently. It’s interesting. Now that I know what they are, I am realizing how many informational text are out there. I had just never thought about different types of texts. I guess I knew this in school but forgot. I’m ready to use them in my class more.” When asked about their comfort level in using informational text with their students Interviewee Three stated, “I don’t feel comfortable at

**TABLE 4**  
**Comfort Using Informational Text as a Teaching Resource**



all, because there is more I feel I have to learn.” She continued, “I do think I remember seeing the term (informational text) in my curriculum or something at work but I skimmed over it because I didn’t know what it was.” As Interview Participant Four indicated she left her survey blank she asserted in her interview, “I just follow my curriculum and assume it is right. Our school is very focused on making sure we get everything covered by the end of the week. We cannot fall behind. So, I just do what they tell me.” When asked about her effective instruction and engagement with students she declared, “I assume my teaching is good because I am trying to follow the curriculum. The curriculum is ‘word for word’ and I read it to the kids. I do the stories in the curriculum.” In a follow-up question from the researcher, “When you work with the text in your curriculum how do you help students understand the difference in types of text?” she answered, “I really just follow my curriculum. I don’t do anything different. They [school administration] are always on us to use the curriculum, follow it, stay on schedule. I just read what the curriculum says. If it talks about different texts, I read that to the kids.”

Interviewee Five verified he left this answer blank on the questionnaire. The researcher asked why he did not answer, the teacher discussed his lack of knowledge about informational text. He stated, “I teach middle school science and don’t know where to use informational text in my class. I assume it is text that offers information, and I guess some of the stuff I use in my classes is informational and what you are asking about.” He went on to say, “I get some guidance with my textbook and lesson plans from my mentor. I guess what I am doing in class is ok.” A subsequent question from the researcher, “Are you comfortable using the texts in your science textbook with your students and ensuring your students fully understand these texts?” “Yes, I am comfortable. Either I read aloud to the students about the topics in the textbook or have them [the students] read the stories. Sometimes I let the students work together, read the stories, and do their assignments.”

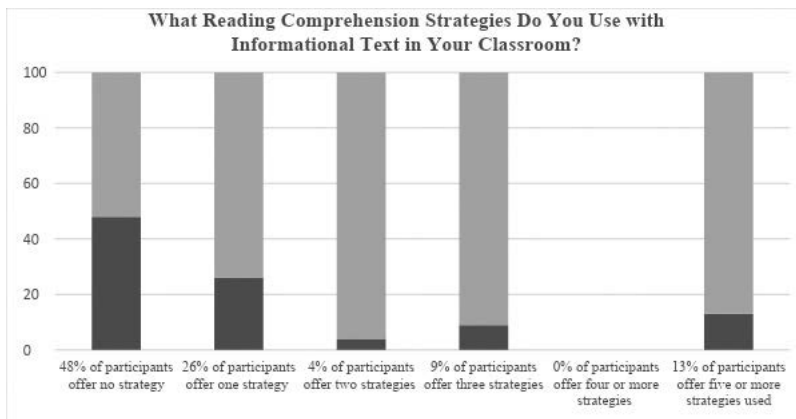
Interview Participant Six affirmed, “I know informational text is used a lot in upper grades and is on the VESTA test [pseudonym for state mandated assessment], so I try to find extra non-fiction books and articles beyond the curriculum. I supplement my science with a lot of informational texts. I don’t do it nearly as much with my math lessons.” A subsequent question from the researcher included, “Why don’t you use more informative texts with Math?” The Interviewee avowed, “I never thought of using them with Math—plus our curriculum doesn’t give much of a chance deviate from what is expected. But now that you have asked about it I could use more informational texts, especially with word problems.”

## Reading Comprehension Strategies with Informational Texts

Data from the survey revealed only 13% of participants used four or more reading comprehension strategies with students as they teach students to interact with informational text in the classroom (See Table 5). A variety of strategies offered included utilizing text features, making connections between texts such as text-to-text, text-to-self, text-to-world, making predictions, ascertaining purpose of text, underlining and/or highlighting important information, re-reading, paraphrasing text, chunking text to annotate and/or summarize, using context clues, and asking questions to clarify understanding. This low percentage continues to provide awareness of the challenges teachers face as they attempt to move students forward in grasping and effectively using informational texts to acquire knowledge. A greater concern is 48% of participants offered no reading comprehension strategy usage with students in the context of informational text activities in their classrooms. Of relevance also is only 26% of surveys indicated employing one strategy with students to enhance their understanding of text.

Interview Participants One and Five acknowledged they struggled to complete Question Four, because each also struggled in explaining informational text in previous questions. To acquire supplementary information during the interview Participant One and Participant Five were asked, “What sort of reading comprehension strategies are taught and/or used in their classroom to ensure comprehension of what is read, especially in the context of non-fiction text, keeping in mind that informational text are non-fiction texts that are used across

**TABLE 5**  
**Reading Comprehension Strategies Used with Informational Text**



all disciplines/content?” In her interview Participant One stated, “I have them sound out the words. I also tell them to re-read it.” Participant Five in their interview explained, “I tell them to think about ‘what is being said in the textbook’ and to slow down their reading. I also tell them to figure out the main idea of what they are reading.” An additional question asked to Participant Five by the researcher included, “What specific instruction do you offer students if they do not fully know or use reading comprehension strategies while reading, especially text that could perhaps be more difficult to understand like informational texts?” Interviewee Five responded, “As they are older I assume they should know how to understand what they read but if they don’t I will help them read it or read it to them. As I said I tell them figure out the main idea and slow down.”

The researcher asked Interview Participant Two, “Now that you have sought out some information on informational texts since you completed your questionnaire, would you now answer Question Four differently?” She stated, “Yes, what it made me realize is I am not really adding any informational text to my lessons or lesson plans. Learning more about the texts also made me realize I need to teach more reading strategies to help them understand what they are reading because the school tells us all the time we have to get them ready for third grade and the reading exam from the state.” She continues, “I talked to another teacher in my grade level and she told me to add more reading strategies to my lessons. She said she could help me too. I have also heard that we learn a lot about strategies in the reading courses here at Wintergreen University [pseudonym].”

While Interview Participant Three admitted she struggled with questions on the questionnaire, the researcher wanted to delve deeper into occurrence in the participants own learning experiences and in her present classroom. The researcher asked, “What reading comprehension strategies do you use when you have to read an article or website for your graduate courses? Texts like articles or websites, or information in textbooks are considered Informational Text.” She answered, “I guess I skim the reading. I take notes. I try not to get distracted while I read.” The researcher then asked, “What specific instruction do you offer your students if they do not understand what they are reading, especially if they are reading a non-fiction text like informational text?” The participant offered, “I think about how I learned to read and I tell them to sound out the words. I also tell them to think about the characters in the story, the setting, the plot.”

During the interview with Participant Four the researcher inquired, “You acknowledge that you follow your curriculum in reading and social studies. When using these curriculums, are there times when reading comprehension strategies are addressed and you explicitly teach them to your students?” Interviewee Four retorted, “I don’t remember seeing any in the Reading Teacher’s Manual.



I know there is not for Social Studies, because we don't have a curriculum. We look at the standards [State Standards] and go from there, which makes it hard and time consuming to try to do that." The researcher asked, "What specific instruction do you offer your students if they do not understand what they are reading, especially if they are reading a non-fiction text like informational text that can be in both Social Studies and Reading?" She answered, "I tell them to ask their partner. My mentor told me to set up partners in my class." A follow-up question from the researcher to gather further information was asked, "What if the partner cannot effectively assist their peer, do you offer specific reading comprehension strategies to guide the student?" She indicated, "I go to the student and help them read the text. I ask them questions about what they read to see if they can figure it out. But I end up going to every student, because they all want my help."

Interview Participant Six indicated she listed "about eight strategies" on her questionnaire. She said, "I consistently use these eight with my students as 'foundational reading strategies' and have them listed in my classroom for all students to reference." She continued,

My mentor teacher helped me think about these strategies and put them on several posters as a way to help them read, but also as a way to assist with classroom management. She told me, 'You've got to get the students to be in charge of their own learning, because they will want you to give them the answer as long as you let them.'

The researcher asked, "Are there any other there any other reading comprehension strategies you teach your students to use, especially those that help with informational text?" Interviewee Six stated,

I try to introduce more strategies, especially for science, but I know I don't do it enough. I need to continue to discover more strategies to use with my students, but many days I run out of time. I know that is an excuse, but it is true. I will say though that the survey we filled out has encouraged me to teach more strategies, because my kids do struggle with the reading and comprehending in Science.

The researcher inquired, "What about reading comprehension strategies used in Math? Are your students challenged with comprehension when they read math word problems?" Interviewee Six responded, "I've never thought about that."

Math is so numbers-driven I didn't think about them not comprehending with word problems.”

Survey and interview data of this study offers profound insight for educational stakeholders into alternative certification teachers' emerging discernment of the various properties of informational text in the context of characteristics, types, comfort in using in classroom, and reading comprehension strategies used with student in the classroom.

## Discussion

Study data revealed the majority of participants frequently struggled with informational text including the characteristics, structures, and purposes. A majority of the teachers also struggled to distinguish the types of informational text. A considerable number of participants revealed they struggle to identify and teach appropriate reading comprehension strategies as they work with students using informational texts in classrooms. With this data, it is not surprising that many participants indicated a pedagogical discomfort using informational text as a teaching resource. With these various challenges, conclusions suggested there also was limited productive informational text academic engagement with students these educators teach every day. Informational text can magnify learnedness of people, circumstances, and society while offering skills for a changing world. Assuring students gain relevant connections with informational text across all disciplines can contribute to these skills, making this issue imperative for teacher educators in alternative certification programs.

Written responses indicated a large percentage (83%) of survey respondents were (1) unable to define/explain their understanding of informational text in the context of characteristics, structures, and purpose, (2) answered somewhat correct answers were but were vague and/or incomplete in answering the question, (3) or signified incorrect information to the question. While the participants in the survey are seeking an alternative certification and are not fully certified, they are teaching in classrooms each day. This high percentage of study participants that struggle with an explanation of informational text, including characteristics, structures, and purpose is disconcerting. State standards across the nation and NAEP endorse and encourage the use of informational text in classrooms. In grade four it suggested that 50% of the text used for learning should be informational. In grade eight that percentage increases to 55%. By grade twelve, 70% of text used for learning should be informational (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010). This high percentage in the data is substantiated with evidence from the individual interviews. Five of the six participants interviewed revealed

they did not fully know about or understand informational text. This deficiency then of course adversely influences their instruction, as well as student use and engagement. On a constructive note, one interviewee acknowledged her teaching mentor helped her recognize and use informational text in her classroom. The same interviewee stated, with this mentor support, her informational text instruction and student engagement has benefited.

The majority of study participants in written and verbal responses denoted they were unable to give an answer, guessed for the answer, or missed one or more answers when asked about the various types of informational text on Question Two. As discussed, state education standards in numerous disciplines require teachers to use informational text in classrooms. Having a lack of knowledge to the types of informational text is problematic for these teachers in meeting this requirement. Interview data supported this supposition. Interviewees One, Two, Three, Four, and Five revealed they either did not know the types of information texts, guessed, or left the question blank. This lack of knowledge negatively affects how comfortable these teachers are using informational text in classrooms, including instruction and student engagement with informational text.

In discovering the comfort level of using informational text in the classroom as a teaching resource while offering information to why or why not, 96 % of study participants indicated on the survey that they were not sure, left this question blank, or denoted “yes” but gave a vague and/or incomplete answer to the question. Participant interviews gave more insight into this extraordinarily high percentage. Several interviewees acknowledged their lack of informational text knowledge influenced their comfort level in using these texts as a teaching resource. In this context, participants admitted they have more to learn. One interviewee conceded this knowledge “will come” but did not offer insight into what informational text instruction is presently happening in the classroom. Several interviewees also revealed they heavily rely on curriculums, discipline-based textbooks, mentor lesson plans, mentor guidance, or a discipline-specific scope and sequence. While this reliance is understandable for new teachers, some interviewee answers revealed specific challenges while using these resources in the context of pedagogy and student engagement. Some insight from interviewees revealed they follow the textbook and/or curriculum with trust and assumptions that the learning needs of all students are being met with no or minimum supplementation of the teaching.

In the context of Question Four, 48% of survey participants revealed they use no reading comprehension strategy instruction when informational text is used in the classroom. 26% of participants acknowledged they use or teach only one strategy. Combined percentages show a shocking 74% of respondents are

very limited in the instruction of reading comprehension strategies with informational text.

Follow-up questions during interviews garnered additional understanding. Several interviewees shared they try to assist students with the comprehension of texts used in the classroom. Based on what was shared, nominal direction was given to students. This direction included some teachers telling students to reread, skim, or determine the main idea. While these strategies can be effective in reading, they are also basic comprehension strategies. Of note, the teachers also “told” the students to use the strategies assuming the students understood the strategy. No additional instruction was offered to the students. Some teachers also performed actions that were assumed to be reading comprehension strategies (ask a partner, slow down, sound out the words). One interviewee shared they encouraged students to determine the characters, setting, and plot “in a story.” This statement suggested the teacher was unsure of the difference between informational text that is non-fiction and a story that is often fiction and have characters, setting, and plot. Other interesting details during the interviews conveyed some teachers get ensnared in a cycle of reading the text to a student or helping them to read, then many other students wanted help with the reading. In this same context, some teachers shared they “teach the way I was taught.” This comment specified a reliance on experienced pedagogy that may be limited. A content area teacher of ninth grade students shared that his students are older and should already understand and know the appropriate reading comprehension strategies to use while reading. These assumptions can limit comprehensive learning, including information text.

Educational stakeholders can be disheartened to think about the survey responses and interview comments disclosed in this study, especially in the context of acknowledging that the in-service, new alternative certification seeking educators have a significant deficient understanding of informational text. As addressed alternative certification programs can be accomplished in many forms. Whatever alternative program is chosen participants need to feel secure they are gaining content mastery and successfully engaging in application of content knowledge activities. This coursework approach is especially relevant for those teaching within these alternative certification programs. Program instructors/professors cannot make assumptions of the knowledge level of the alternative certification-seeking teacher. While it is understood many of these educators come to teaching from another career and there can be a significant learning curve, state education standards across the nation require teachers at the commencement of their teaching to understand the content being taught, effectively teach, and engage students. This expectation is very relevant to this study as education standards stress fully utilizing informational text to gain knowledge.

Discussions, based on this investigation data, should involve specific procedures to enhance the informational text understandings of educators that teach across all disciplines. Data reveals a majority of teachers in the study struggle to distinguish the types, characteristics, and strategy usage with informational text. One action to assist this struggle could include Alternative Certification Program instructors/professors across all disciplines fully understand these aspects themselves. Experiences indicate not all course instructors/professors in alternative certification programs fully recognize that reading is the foundation to all disciplinary learning. A review of disciplinary literacy, including specific reading comprehension can occur during peer-based meetings before program coursework begins. This information should include informational text which is used across all discipline courses (Page, 2021). This effort by all program educators is pertinent because many teacher preparation program accreditation entities, as authorized by state education agencies, stress that instructors/professors that teach disciplinary courses to understand the ability to read is the foundational success in all disciplines (Page, 2021).

Another action could include all instructors/professors informally assessing program participants in their fiction and non-fiction text awareness with a specific focus on informational text knowledge. This is typically accomplished by a reading/ literacy instructors/ professor that teaches the required reading/literacy courses within the alternative certification program. Simple informal assessing in all discipline courses can inform the instructors/professors to the level of understanding of non-fiction text, including informational text used in program courses. This data can drive more specific non-fiction and informational text instruction in these courses. Informal assessment data can also indicate the comfort level of these teachers when using informational text with students in their own classrooms. Instructors/professors could also informally assess what reading comprehension strategies the certification seeking educators use themselves with informational text and what comprehension strategies, or lack thereof, these teachers use in their own teaching of informational text. As instructors/professors discover, through assessment, what informational text knowledge is known, they can then adjust their disciplinary literacy instruction to offer greater discernment of the dynamics of informational text. These adjustments can include communicating more explicit foundational content knowledge, including the utilization of the various types, characteristics, structures, and purpose of informational texts. Modifications to coursework could also include more overt application of knowledge activities with a focus on informational text reading comprehension strategies. Consistent informational text pedagogy across all courses would not

only promote increased understanding, but could also foster a greater sense of comfort using informational text as a learning tool and resource in classrooms.

In this context, teachers must also have a multitude of opportunities during program coursework to show strong pedagogical understandings to assist their students gain essential knowledge. As noted by Shannon and Shannon (2012), disciplinary literacy includes literacy instruction that comprises teacher understandings and effective usage of the methods of reading, including reading comprehension strategies for all types of texts. This worthwhile teaching is significant for all students, including those with varied learning styles and from diverse communities. Based on data from this study, teachers in the program initially have limited learning and proficiencies to effectively institute reading comprehension strategy instruction while meeting the diverse needs of those in their classrooms. If alternative certification program professors/instructors extend their disciplinary literacy instruction to include explicit reading comprehension strategy instruction in all courses the teachers will enhance their own understanding and usage. This insight can then be shared with the students these educators teach.

While meeting these demands may seem demanding for all disciplinary instructors/ professors, addressed accreditation entities that evaluate Teacher Preparation Programs stress that all discipline courses embrace the importance of reading comprehension. This requirement should bring about discussions across all disciplines within alternative certification programs. An extension of these discussions should incorporate instructor/professor reflections and development of specific goals for content mastery instruction of informational text, including the creation of engaging informational text activities that demonstrate application of text knowledge. This triangulated connection between discussions, reflections, and goals offer opportunities for instructors/professors teaching within alternative certification programs to enhance their teaching while increasing the depth of knowledge and comfort levels of the teachers in these programs. This deliberate contemplation is vital to program advancement, enhanced erudition for teachers within these programs, and the students these teachers educate (Page, 2021).

While generalizations from this study cannot be made, a deeper discernment can be garnered. This study offers insight for educational stakeholders, especially new, in-service, alternatively certified seeking educators and those who teach these educators in certification programs. It is significant to grasp what these teachers know about informational text, including their knowledge of the characteristics, structures, purpose, and types, as well as, if teachers are comfortable using informational text as a teaching resource, and what reading

comprehension strategies are used with informational text in their classrooms. For continued understandings with similar study participants, it is suggested that other researchers expand on this investigation in the context of new in-service alternative certification seeking teachers, alternative certification programs, and disciplinary literacy taught in discipline-based courses within these programs.

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# 20/20 VISION: CLEARLY SEEING WHAT WORKS IN AN ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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## **Abstract**

*This qualitative study was designed to identify successful aspects of an online Summer Literacy Program for school aged students seeking extra support in literacy that took place at the start of the pandemic. The reflective essays of four novice teachers seeking advanced certifications in Literacy and Special Education were analyzed along with data from other pertinent qualitative sources to identify what worked in online learning during the pandemic. Looking to a time when COVID will no longer necessitate fully online learning, findings from this study identify online instructional practices that can and should continue. Findings indicate that beyond a steady focus on high-quality literacy practices, teachers need to be open to the opportunities technology affords them, consider the social and emotional needs of their students, and remain responsive to each student's culture and lived experiences.*

*Keywords:* Online instruction, novice teachers, technology, lived experiences

## Introduction

Online learning, that is instruction conducted mainly via the Internet, has been used for decades to further facilitate the learning of students of all ages. However, prior to 2020 most elementary school instruction in the United States was conducted in person while online learning was used as a tool to extend learning by enabling students the chance to practice skills independently (Watson, 2007). For example, young learners were often afforded time online to complete activities that enable them practice with the letter sounds or early sight words (Watson, 2007). In spring 2020, COVID-19's presence demanded that educators pivot quickly from mainly in-person instruction to fully online learning. With the advancement and affordability of new technologies such as Google Classroom and Zoom platforms, many schools adopted some form of remote learning that included time spent face-to-face with instructors (synchronous instruction) as well as time spent working independently on thoughtful assignments provided by teachers (asynchronous instruction). Although online learning is synonymous with other popular 2020–2021 terms such as virtual learning and e-learning (International Association for K-12 Online Learning, 2011 p. 7), in this study online learning is defined as any instruction, synchronous or asynchronous, that is planned by the teacher with the students' learning as the goal. For example, teachers may plan to work with groups of children face-to-face using a video platform to focus on a particular strategy, then send students offline to practice the skill independently while working with others.

The immediate response to such an abrupt switch to online learning was faced by mixed reviews (Kuhfield, Tarasawa, & NWEA, 2020) especially when considering the academic development of students who need extra support (Schuck & Lamber, 2020). Many parents, educators, and students were happy that school could continue, but the various online learning opportunities available were not considered to be as effective as in person instruction and the hope to return to in person learning remained high throughout the school year (Horowitz, Igielnik, & Pew Research Center, 2020). However, it quickly became clear that many summer programs needed to be placed online as well. Our Summer Literacy Program for elementary and secondary level students, which serves as the final supervised practicum for our graduate candidates seeking advanced certifications in either literacy or special education, was one of those programs that needed to plan for online instruction. During the practicum, our candidates provide essential literacy instruction to school-aged students within a comprehensive literacy curriculum under the supervision of professors of special education and literacy. After enduring three months of online instruction that was challenged by the lack of preparation time and the general lack of

teacher preparedness regarding online learning, insufficient technology, and the stressors felt by all living through a pandemic, an initial concern over whether our summer program could be successful was shared by the supervisors and the graduate candidates—many of whom were exhausted classroom teachers who just finished three months of online teaching. Though we, the faculty supervisors of the Summer Literacy Program, did believe that working with students in need of extra help in an online environment was not ideal, we believed, and we conveyed these beliefs to our teachers that when necessary, online learning can be successful if the components of a comprehensive and engaging literacy environment are maintained as the ideal. This study sought to examine and document the experience of the teachers of the summer reading program as they planned and implemented reading and writing instruction in an on-line environment.

As professors and supervisors of a well-established summer practicum for elementary and high school aged students who need extra support in literacy, we realized that we were afforded the opportunity to investigate what teaching strategies and formats were deemed most successful by the teachers, students and their families. Furthermore, looking to a time when COVID would no longer necessitate fully online learning, we sought to identify online instructional techniques that could continue to enhance classroom learning. Therefore, not only did we work collaboratively to develop a successful online summer literacy program, we designed a cohesive research study to examine and document the educational successes of our online Summer Literacy Program. This article shares the results of our research regarding how best to maintain a high level of literacy instruction in an online learning environment.

## **Literature Review**

### **Qualities of a Literacy Learning Environment**

As we transitioned to online learning, we remained true to our core principles of providing a comprehensive literacy environment within which each of our young learners could develop. Our comprehensive literacy environment provided a balance of explicit literacy instruction with opportunities for our young tutees to engage with enriching content in an effort to support an intrinsic interest in literacy learning (Allington, 2013; Copeland & Keefe, 2019; Hwang & Duke, 2020). Too often struggling readers and writers are provided curricula that focus solely on skill development and not on the engaging content to which their peers are privy (Allington, 2013). Our candidates were tasked with the goal of developing online learning experiences that included a strong emphasis on foundational skills of phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension

(Armbruster et al., 2001; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1993; Duke & Pressley, 2005); access to high quality literature including texts from multiple cultural perspectives (Cindy & Fleming, 2019); ongoing individualized assessments that inform instruction (McKenna & Stahl, 2015); opportunities for our tutees to view and listen to various genres of content (Kimmel & Carlone, 2018); supportive writing experiences that allowed students to experiment with content as they improved their use of conventions (Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2016); and word study (Bear, et al., 2020). Confident that our candidates understood the importance of research-based best practices, we knew that our school-aged tutees would have the opportunities necessary to learn timely curriculum content within a supportive learning environment; it just had to be done online. Creating the type of environment that supports all of the above requires intentionality and responsiveness.

### **Elements of a Responsive Environment**

Successful curricula need to be inclusive and representative of all students, their culture, their language, their learning resources, and their interests (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lucas & Villegas, 2011, 2013). Our online learning environment had to recreate what we took for granted in the physical environment—a safe, supportive learning space that would thoughtfully engage each learner in meaningful, individualized, and collaborative learning (Morrow et al., 1999). Our candidates were encouraged to work collaboratively with parents (Paratore, 2005) as each child’s home was the main physical environment and to include each student’s funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992). By emphasizing each student’s funds of knowledge, that is their unique knowledge that developed out of their own lived experiences, and melding that knowledge with the candidates’ expertise in literacy instruction, we hoped that students would thrive (Moll et al., 1992). Responsive teaching in an online environment requires a willingness to work flexibly with a student and to consider each student’s resources and needs within their home environment.

Hollie (2011), the executive director of the Center for Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching, offers a metaphorical definition of cultural and linguistic “responsiveness” (referred to as CLR) that he uses with practicing candidates:

CLR is going to where the students are culturally and linguistically for the aim of bringing them where they need to be academically. Metaphorically, CLR is the opposite of the sink and swim approach to teaching and learning. It is jumping in the pool with the learner,

guiding her with the appropriate instruction, scaffolding as necessary, and providing the independence when she is ready. (p. 2)

Our candidates were asked to jump in the pool with their tutees in an online environment to help students maintain a sense of school connectedness that enables students to bond with their tutor and thus, feel like what they are doing is indeed important (Hollie, 2011). In addition to principles of cultural responsiveness and high-quality literacy, our candidates were required to consider the social and emotional learning of each tutee.

### **Social and Emotional Learning**

Prior to the 2019–2020 school year, the need to address Social-Emotional Learning was becoming a paramount concern. The term Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Denham, 2018). SEL is a broad and encompassing category made up of multiple competencies including self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision making, self-management and relationship skills. This focuses on the wellbeing of the whole child, and not just academic needs. In a study conducted by the Emerson Public School district, researchers “noted that many of the students not flourishing academically were facing social emotional challenges both at home and in school” (Opperman, 2021, p. 31). Findings suggest that before children can reach academic success, they need to have the tools and support to be emotionally healthy. In the online environment, “there is a greater possibility for a sense of loss among learners—loss of contact, loss of connection, and a resultant sense of isolation” (Palloff & Pratt, 2007, p. 31). Students’ self-reports of increased anxiety and depression during the pandemic may, in part, reflect these losses and the broader effects of social isolation (Jones, 2020). While attention has focused on schools’ struggles to provide quality instruction and close the technology gap (Dorn et al., 2020), limited research has examined how schools addressed students’ social and emotional needs for care and connection amid the pandemic.

### **Research Question**

With minimal research and support materials available regarding how best to teach literacy online during a pandemic, candidates were encouraged to explore

online tools such as Jamboard and Virtual Classrooms as well as learning resources such as Storybook Online and RAZ-Kids Plus to address literacy skills; to remain open to the possibilities that only online instruction could afford; and to jump in and swim with their tutees daily to keep them emotionally afloat and ready to learn. Therefore, we posed the following question:

RQ: When reflecting upon their online teaching, what educational practices did the candidates highlight as most impactful regarding student engagement and learning in an online learning environment?

## Methodology

A qualitative study was designed to understand the perceptions and perspectives of the candidates who taught during the online reading program. Fittingly, Merriam (2009) explains, “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experience” (p. 5). This study fits well with this definition because our primary goal was to understand how candidates not well-prepared to teach in an online learning environment interpreted their experience and the learning experience of their tutees. As will be discussed below, the main forms of data generation were candidate reflective essays. These were then correlated with information gathered via supervisor observations, an exit survey, and document data such as lesson plans.

## Site of Investigation

As previously discussed, the culminating course for our graduate candidates seeking advanced certifications in literacy and special education, The Practicum, provided the site of investigation for this study. This program is typically held on the campus of our small liberal arts college in New York State four mornings a week through the month of July and is targeted to students who struggle with reading and writing who are not eligible for an extended year under the IDEA (sec.300.106) at minimal costs to parents. About two-thirds of the students who attend the program have a documented disability. However, unlike previous years the *site* was a virtual one in that all candidates, supervisors, and tutees were online.

## Participants

All eleven candidates in the summer program were in their early twenties and enrolled in the Masters of the Science of Education program pursuing additional

**TABLE 1**  
**Participants' Who Shared Reflective Essays and Their Tutees**

| Candidate     | Gender/Age         | Degree Program     | Teaching Experience | Tutee         |
|---------------|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------------|
| Cindy Clark   | Female/<br>Mid 20s | Special Education  | 2 Years             | Liam          |
| Philip Parker | Male/Mid 20s       | Special Education  | New                 | Stephen       |
| Mary Marston  | Female/<br>Mid 20s | Special Education  | 3 Years             | Brianna/Nikko |
| Nicole Monroe | Female/<br>Mid 20s | Literacy Education | 3 Years             | Panjabi       |

certification in either Literacy or Special Education. All were invited to participate in order to offer plenty of “information rich” perspectives as deemed necessary by research (Creswell, 1998, p. 204) in terms of their ethnicity, teaching experience, schools of employment, gender-identification, and age. Seven candidates responded to the exit survey and identified themselves as female (71.4%) or male (14.3%) and described their ethnicity as white (85.7%). Four volunteered their reflective essays for coding (see Table 1 for more details).

### Study Overview

Data collection for this qualitative study was conducted from June through early August 2020. Candidate reflective essays—pertinent document data—provided the main sources of information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Essays discussed their lesson planning, successes and challenges, the growth of their tutees, and their own personal learning and growth in the areas of assessment, instruction, and decision making during the practicum. To support their deep reflection, the candidates compiled a portfolio which included assessments, lesson plans, student work samples, and teaching materials. These essential documents helped to verify what was detailed in individual reflections (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Supervisor observations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) that is focused, predetermined time dedicated to watching the candidates in their already established settings (e.g., the online summer reading program) enabled a firsthand look at each candidate and tutee as they worked through lessons. Each candidate was observed 3 times via Google Meet over the course of the 4-week program. Additional data was collected using survey data completed by



the candidates (i.e., *Summer Reading Program (2020) Exit Survey*). All data gathered and analyzed combined to give a rich understanding of the successes found within the online literacy program. Furthermore, to ensure that this study was a credible contribution to the field, several research-based, time-proven protocols to build trust in the overall findings were enacted.

### ***Internal Validity, Positionality, and Accountability***

We sought IRB approval. All participants were voluntary and could withdraw from the study at any time. We remained transparent about our own positionality and research objectives, established a group of “critical friends,” triangulated our data, and employed the technique of member checking. First, as critical friends (Appleton, 2011) we took on a role similar to what Creswell and Poth (2018) referred to as “peer debriefers” in that we “played Devil’s Advocate” for each other (p. 263). We monitored our work to ensure that we were remaining true to the research intentions and working to minimize the impact of our positionality (Appleton, 2011). Second, we triangulated our data by using multiple data sources—surveys, individual responses to open-ended questions, and observations were used to verify what was found in candidate written reflections. By comparing data across sources, referred by some as qualitative “triangulation” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 245), we were able to build trustworthiness in our study outcomes. Finally, we also employed a strategy referred to as “member checking” in that we “solicited feedback on [our] emerging themes” from the participants to ensure that we were not misrepresenting them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246). Our goal in conveying trustworthiness was to demonstrate that this study was worth reading (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### ***Data Analysis***

Qualitative data from reflections, observations, and extended responses on the surveys were analyzed using Saldaña’s (2021) method for basic coding. Each data bit that was relevant to our research question was assigned a notation that enabled us to locate pertinent data and draw connections to other data bits (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 204). The same coding method was used for all forms of data. This enabled connections to be made across the data sources. A second cycle of coding focused on refining initial codes into categories (Saldaña, 2021). Second and third readers were asked for their input to ensure that the connections across sources were corroborated, thus building confidence in emerging categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Once a third cycle of analysis was completed, more established categories were used to make connections and develop themes across all data in relation to the research question and then presented as findings.

## Findings

Three themes emerged through coding and analysis that shed light on the nuances of online learning and potentially aspects of the process that should be replicated in future online literacy learning environments. The first theme discussed and the most relevant to online literacy instruction is as follows:

- A flexible use of technology enabled comprehensive literacy instruction.
- Two other themes based on the educational practices identified by our candidates as impactful also emerged. As themes specifically relate to social and emotional learning and remind, they are shared as reminders to educators that as we educate, online or in person, we must consider the whole child: Though they are not the primary focus of this literacy study, they did prove relevant enough to summarize for our readers. They are as follows: Intentional focus on social-emotional well-being promoted focus and engagement.
- Responsiveness on the candidates' part established a positive, safe learning environment.

### **A Flexible Use of Technology Enabled Literacy Instruction**

Comprehensive literacy instruction indeed survived and thrived during online learning with the help of learning platforms such as Google Meet. By using Google Meet sessions, candidates were able to conduct pertinent lessons that began with individualized reading and included skill work (Armbruster et al., 2001; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1993; Duke & Pressley, 2005), and guided writing (Calkins & Ehrenworth 2016). However, these well-known, research supported literacy practices had new looks. The screen was the new page; the text highlight features the new pointer; a text box the new post-it; and Google Docs the new writers notebook. More specifically, Word Walls were created using Google Docs and Slides. *Do Nows* were introduced via email and graphic organizers were shared via Pear Deck (Cindy, personal communication, August 3, 2020; Philip, personal communication July 30, 2020; Mary, personal communication July 30, 2020; Nicole, personal communication August 3, 2020). Google Docs was used to complete daily formative assessments, such as exit tickets (Nicole, personal communication August 3, 2020) and check-in questions (Mary, personal communication July 30, 2020). Explicit skills instruction (Duke & Mesmer, 2019) was conducted with the help of Jamboard and Google Docs

(Mary, personal communication, July 30, 2020). Guided reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012) was enabled by Raz-Kids Plus materials and read alouds (Wright, 2019) were conducted via Google Meet and Storyline Online (Cindy, personal communication, August 3, 2020; Philip, personal communication July 30, 2020; Mary, personal communication July 30, 2020; Nicole, personal communication August 3, 2020). To clarify just how a comprehensive literacy environment was maintained online, a typical day for Cindy and her student Liam was compiled from her notes that helps to demonstrate how she would run her sessions online and maintain the highest level of literacy learning.

A typical session for Cindy had the same daily structure. After sending Liam his *Do Now* typically focused on a word study skill via email, she would log on and set up his Virtual Classroom by quickly updating the Guinness Book of World Records link with another *cool* fact she knew would spark conversation with Liam. Cindy's Virtual Classroom included a Bitmoji of herself and Liam standing in a typical-looking classroom with a dry erase board and other familiar school furnishings such as a desk, books, and educational charts. Each image linked to a learning opportunity or important information for Liam. The trophy icon linked to the Guinness Book of World Records fact of the day. The bookshelf linked to Storybook Online where Liam could select a read aloud to enjoy. The alphabet poster linked to the phonics rule of the week. Knowing Liam would finish his word-study-related *Do Now* and begin exploring the latest World Record information, Cindy would set up for her lesson by first planning to *check in* with Liam to see how he was feeling. Once ready, she would ask him to share what he learned about the World Record Fact of the day and what he was able to figure out with his Word Study *Do Now*. From there, she would introduce the book of the day using Raz-Kids which was at the instructional level for Liam and provided a chance to practice the skill he addressed during the Do Now. After doing a picture walk and previewing tricky words, Liam would start reading and Cindy would chime in with gentle support as she highlighted the words to support Liam's tracking. After reading the book once, they would talk about the content and discuss comprehension questions. Liam was then guided to reread the book more independently aloud and to stop and jot using the Text Box feature when he found more detailed evidence for the ideas he came up with during their discussion. After deeply reviewing the word skills and comprehension skills addressed by the leveled book, Cindy would introduce the writing skill and/or prompt of the day. Cindy would share her screen and present a Google Doc page that they had been working on. After rereading their work from the previous day, Cindy would introduce the goal of the day. Over the course of their time together, they worked on writing complete paragraphs

using the structure of a lacrosse game to help him organize his writing. Cindy often provided visuals by dropping them into the Google Doc. They often took frequent breaks during which time Liam would chat about his daily plan, friends, and family. They even would snack together via Google Meet. Each session typically ended with a word game based on his skill of the week and a read aloud. Some days they used Jamboard to create a list of words that included the skill of the week. Other days they used online games such as Quizlet. After the word game they would then add the tricky words to his Google Slideshow called “My Word Wall.” Cindy would vary the closing read aloud. Some days she would read from the Guinness Book of World Records because Liam enjoyed them so much and would easily talk about what she read. Other days she would continue their chapter book together by Dan Gutman. Although the structure for Cindy was fairly consistent, she would “jazz up the day” with some fun learning videos or online stories (Cindy, personal communication, August 3, 2020). Like Cindy, each participant had their own rhythm which they believed kept their young ones engaged and focused. However, as seen below Cindy and the others stressed the importance of being flexible.

Importantly, much of the above was enabled by flexible use of technology. For example, writing was aided by speech to text features of Google Docs and this was a technique our candidates were not taught about, but figured out (Philip, personal communication July 30, 2020; Nicole, personal communication August 3, 2020). Nicole saw flexibility as key to helping her student, Panjabi, write online. Nicole (2020) wrote:

It quickly became apparent that typing on an iPad screen while working on her bed was not easy for Panjabi. Her typing was slow, and the keyboard would disappear at random times. She was allowed then to dictate her writing, which I would then type into a Google Doc that we were both viewing. This eased her stress and allowed us to work continually and focusing on content without her getting discouraged or frustrated by typing (Nicole, personal communication, August 3, 2020).

By reducing the cognitive stress of trying to type on an ever-fading iPad keyboard, Nicole was able to increase Panjabi’s idea generation and focus on her overall writing organization and development. Similarly Philip (2020) wrote:

Steven struggled with technology. This meant that most of the tech work would be done on my end. We used googledocs speech to text

function frequently. While it is not a perfect science, it worked well enough for us to get his ideas on paper then edit and fix mistakes along the way. What it did do, was facilitate editing opportunities. Every time we did this exercise we had to edit, there was no way around it (Philip, personal communication, July 30, 2020).

Therefore, not only did Philip reduce Steven's cognitive stress by relieving him of the typing process, but he also created a unique learning experience in which Steven was reading back and editing his own work, therefore using much of the skills he was learning with Philip.

By keeping the learning goals in mind while remaining flexible and responsive, each candidate creatively adjusted the tools that the students were using to learn specific skills and by doing so reduced unnecessary stress and increased learning time. Flexible use of Google Meet, screen sharing, RAZ-Kids materials, and Google Docs and Slides enabled quality literacy practices to continue in a remote learning environment (Cindy, personal communication, August 3, 2020; Philip, personal communication July 30, 2020; Mary, personal communication July 30, 2020; Nicole, personal communication August 3, 2020). However, beyond the candidates' discussion of their literacy successes, there was a preponderance of evidence regarding the need to focus on the social-emotional learning of each tutee as well as a need to be responsive. These unexpected findings provide further insight into our findings for they speak to how important it is to keep the humanity in teaching even when online.

### **Social-Emotional Focus**

Numerous times throughout their reflective essays, the candidates spoke of how a focus on social-emotional well-being during the experience promoted engagement among participants (Cindy, personal communication, August 3, 2020; Philip, personal communication July 30, 2020; Mary, personal communication July 30, 2020; Nicole, personal communication August 3, 2020). Mary stated, "Similar to being in person, the student's feelings would affect their performance in class" (Mary, personal communication July 30, 2020). Mary went on to explain that there was little separation between the emotions of home and school so working through some of the *family stuff* became a part of their school day, so that Brianna could settle into learning (Mary, personal communication July 30, 2020). Cindy wrote about similar experiences with her student, Liam, who according to Cindy seemed *quite emotional* from the start of their work together. She noted: "I was able to start each morning with a check-in. This allowed me to see how Liam was feeling. If Liam is mad he may

not be able to focus on learning about organizing his writing” (Cindy, personal communication, August 3, 2020). Cindy emphasized the need for Liam to calm himself before learning (Denham, 2018) and to take time when learning became stressful to bring his emotions under control (Cindy, personal communication, August 3, 2020). The importance of social emotional well-being for students was reflected upon by Philip in regard to his student Stephen who often became frustrated by his learning challenges. A great success to Philip was the fact that his social-emotional work with Stephen was helping Stephen outside of their learning time together: “His mother mentioned that he had brought this into other aspects of his daily life, most often when his younger brother aggravated him” (Philip, personal communication, July 30, 2020). Stephen was self-regulating independently.

The candidates witnessed a range of emotions in their students. When considering the social and emotional well-being of the children who were dealing with pandemic related issues, the candidates exhibited flexibility and empathy, and developed strategies such as mood meters and breathing techniques to help students regulate their emotions. Prioritizing the social and emotional wellbeing was considered an essential part of their online instruction (Denham, 2018). Each candidate was responsive to the social and emotional state of each child and this enabled learning.

## Responsive Teaching

Far from a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching, these candidates made concerted efforts to not only understand their students’ social and emotional state each day, but also their home life, their culture, and their online learning behaviors. By doing so they were able to scaffold instruction in ways that would *connect* with students across the internet. Nicole’s experience exemplifies the essential need to be responsive to students’ lived experiences. After several sessions passed during which time Panjabi was compliant but *hard to read* Nicole asked Panjabi to talk about her culture. This led to a surprising sharing session that continued to be their daily routine. Nicole reflected:

She [Panjabi] would send me a link to a different Bollywood music video every day that we would watch together, which she eagerly looked forward to. This is one way that I was able to acknowledge and celebrate her cultural background: it was a point of pride for her to be able to translate what was being said, or to talk to me about what Indian food her mother had made that day (Nicole, personal communication, August 3, 2020).

Nicole went on to explain how important it was for her to take the time to view and share what Panjabi shared with her. Responsiveness not only helped Panjabi feel safe enough to take risks in her learning, but by understanding Panjabi's unique funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), Nicole was able to plan vocabulary lessons that took into account Panjabi's unique language skills.

Responsiveness on the part of the other candidates was not only based on culture but based on the whole child. When working with Liam, Cindy was responsive to his particular interests and knowledge, "When first introducing a graphic organizer to Liam, I was able to compare it to the times of a lacrosse game, which is one of his favorite sports. I used the quarters of the game to represent the different parts of the paragraph" (Cindy, personal communication, August 3, 2020). By tapping into Liam's lived experiences (Moll et al. 1992), Cindy was able to help him scaffold his writing in a way that was more organized. Plus, it provided a tool that he could use independently long after the summer program. Mary wrote that she changed her plan of group instruction to one-on-one instruction after learning of Brianna's anxiety with reading, "[Brianna's father] revealed that she becomes nervous and frustrated when reading in front of her classmates and would rather complete the program one on one" (Mary, personal communication, July 30, 2020). Therefore, she adjusted her previous planning to focus mainly on one-on-one instruction which enabled Brianna to feel safe as she practiced her reading skills. Philip grew more in tune with Stephen as their sessions continued. After realizing that Stephen was a bit *beaten down* from all of his academic struggles, Philip wrote: "His self-confidence is lacking, a big percentage of what we worked on was showing him that he is a good reader, that he can read, and if he uses the right strategies he can be a great reader" (Philip, personal communication, July 30, 2020). All four candidates were flexible and able to meet students' learning needs in the on-line environment. As each of our candidates figuratively jumped in the pool to help each student swim as Hollie (2011) suggested in regard to being responsive, the candidates needed to be flexible and to adjust to what the tutee needed in terms of social emotional support as well as academic support.

## Discussion

This study revealed that in order to be successful teaching online teachers need to embrace the flexibility technology affords and consider the social-emotional aspects of learning and remain responsive to each student as well as the unique opportunities technology can afford. With the use of Google Meets, Slides, and

Docs each teacher was able to develop and conduct literacy lessons that should always be part of a comprehensive literacy environment such as instruction in the foundational skills of phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (Armbruster et al., 2001; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1993; Duke & Pressley, 2005); the writing process (Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2016); and word study (Bear, et al., 2020). As the candidates worked diligently to build connections between students' knowledge and literacy content, there was a strong emphasis on responsive teaching. For example, Cindy saw Liam's lacrosse playing as an important aspect of his funds of knowledge and enabled Liam to understand the structure of good writing. Although Mary's students were the same age, they needed very different instruction and benefitted from the one-on-one tutoring. As Moll et al (1992) emphasized, taking the time to understand student knowledge and working to infuse new content with that knowledge enables students who would otherwise be seen as *not knowledgeable* as indeed *knowledgeable*. By seeking to understand Panjabi's knowledge base by watching culturally relevant videos and asking her about her language skills, Nicole demonstrated a developing orientation as a culturally and linguistically responsive candidate as discussed by Lucas and Villegas (2011; 2013). Candidates, like Nicole, need to consider students' unique culture and language in order to appropriately address their learning needs. Philip's work with Stephen exemplified what research says regarding the need to address the emotional state of students as they are trying to learn (Brackett, 2016). When Stephen was upset or anxious, learning was at a standstill, but by taking the time to engage with him and enable him to discuss his mood, work through his emotions, and settle, Philip was able to support Stephen's learning (Brackett, 2016).

Overall, the online summer program was a success. Liam improved his reading level by one and his writing was more organized thanks to Cindy's use of a lacrosse game graphic organizer (Cindy, personal communication, August 3, 2020). Steven displayed growth in writing and decoding certainly in part due to Philip's emphasis on Steven's self-confidence (Philip, personal communication, July 30, 2020). Nikko learned to use parts of speech when writing and Brianna improved her ability to decode and encode words with long vowels (Mary, personal communication, July 30, 2020). Panjabi's focus on the etymologies of words helped her vocabulary development (Nicole, personal communication, August 3, 2020). As for the candidates, they each learned that planning for instruction involves much more than completing an assessment, identifying a standard, and writing up a lesson plan. The candidates had to consider the social and emotional well-being of their tutees as well as each tutee's individual resources and needs when planning (Cindy, personal communication, August 3,



2020; Philip, personal communication July 30, 2020; Mary, personal communication July 30, 2020; Nicole, personal communication August 3, 2020). Finally, they had to be open to the technological possibilities and benefits.

## Limitations and Implications for Research and Practice

This study clearly has limitations in that the findings cannot be generalizable due to the fact that the participant pool was small and the program occurred at a very specific time in our history. However, the results do promote discussions about how to thoughtfully engage students in remote learning situations. The findings push educators to continue to think about the student as a whole when planning learning opportunities and the need to embrace a more responsive online pedagogy. Educators need to be willing to seek and accept the knowledge of their students in order to offer specific instruction in a remote setting that is of high-interest to the student for this increases engagement and therefore, opportunities for learning success. Equally apparent is the fact that the current emphasis on mindfulness and social and emotional learning is not meant simply for in-person work, but also for any and all types of learning environments. In regard to future research this study supports the need to continue gathering evaluative data on remote and online learning opportunities from all impacted parties—teachers, students, and parents. Such a study would benefit from the inclusion of student academic data that would enable researchers to identify student learning outcomes and growth. Remarkably, even during a pandemic online learning can be successful when teachers focus on supporting the whole child through the learning process.

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