



Critical Issues for Teacher Educators and Literacy Specialists: A View from Higher Education in New York

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines five critical issues for teacher educators and literacy specialists in New York State. Intended to raise issues and share recent policy decisions, the article provides background and conversations about current policy. Readers are encouraged to make decisions about how to participate in the current conversations across the state.

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Virginia Goatley is Vice Dean in the School of Education and Associate Professor in the Department of Reading at the University at Albany-SUNY. Her research and teaching interests include literacy learning difficulties, integrated instruction, and teacher preparation.

As an Associate Dean for the past five years, I have had the opportunity to bring my knowledge of literacy instruction, teacher education, and best practices to contribute to state-wide conversations from the perspective of both a literacy educator and an administrator. I regularly attend conferences and meetings involving representatives from other higher education institutions, the New York State Education Department (NYSED), State University of New York (SUNY), Independent Colleges and Universities, K-12 educators, superintendents, and so forth. In 2007, as part of a panel presentation at the New York State Reading Association (NYSRA) conference, I shared my current perspectives on critical issues in reading. Several colleagues from across the state urged me to share this knowledge with a wider audience, so I decided to do so.

With a focus on teacher education issues for literacy educators, I write this article with the intent to provide information about policy, raise issues to consider, and offer challenges on how each of us might be involved in the process. I organized this article around several key issues intended to provide discussion points, not simply answers. In reality, all of these issues have several paths they may take and we need to be sure our literacy voices are a part of each path.

Issue 1: New York Teacher Supply and Demand Data

In response to requests from teacher educators and to provide insights into teacher shortages, the New York State Education Department started providing teacher supply and demand data across the state. This information is available in PDF format from the website for 2004-05 (<http://www.highered.nysed.gov/tsdregents052006.htm>) and for 2005-06 (<http://www.highered.nysed.gov/tsd2007.htm>)



The supply and demand data is quite useful for many reasons. It provides an overview of the range of certificates, indicating potential shortages in the upcoming years. With this data, administrators from both higher education and public school districts are in a better position to offer career information to potential teachers and to discuss the data in P-16 collaborative sessions. However, for the literacy certificate, there are a few points to consider.

The 2004-05 NYSED data (published in 2006) indicated many shortages of Literacy Specialists across the state. In this data collection period, NYSED analyzed the supply/demand based upon the number of initial certification applications. This led to indications of shortages in literacy certificates across many regions in the state. This finding is not surprising given that teachers applying for literacy certification must already have initial certification in another area. Thus, the data captured only those applicants, primarily pre-service teachers, who received two initial certificates in the same time period.

In contrast, the 2005-06 data (published in 2007) indicated a surplus of literacy educators in most regions. In the data analysis, NYSED addressed the concerns raised by community members the previous year and the data analysis to account for literacy certificates differently. In 2007, NYSED counted all literacy certificates – not only those teachers who were receiving a certificate from their pre-service program, but also those who pursued it as a second initial certificate (toward their professional certificate). Not surprisingly, the data now shows an oversupply of people with literacy certificates since one person could be represented in three different categories: initial certificate area (e.g., Childhood), Literacy B- 6, and Literacy 5-12. For colleges/universities with dual programs that lead to both literacy certificates, one person automatically represents two people in the literacy counts.

Further, in certain areas of the state with surpluses (e.g., Albany area has more graduates with literacy certificates than the New York City area), there are many students graduating with the literacy certificate who never teach as a literacy specialist. Some school districts are in the enviable position of being able to hire teachers with literacy certificates to teach in the general elementary classroom. Thus, when we look at that component of the data, we need to remember it is a certificate count, not a one-one match of practicing teachers. Within the report, there is a second data collection/analysis based on current teachers in school districts, with indications of continued shortages of literacy specialists in New York City and Rochester.

It is useful, informative, and helpful for NYSED to collect and share this data. The reality is that the current means of collecting this data is difficult. Therefore, educators need to understand the methodology used, the limitations of that methodology, and respond to it with our voices in the interpretation of the data. NYSED responded to the first set of concerns voiced by the literacy educators in the 2006 data set. I have certainly appreciated the opportunities when NYSED asked for feedback and then acted on it. This kind of exchange can only be beneficial to our education system.



New government initiatives, such as Chapter 57 of the Laws of 2007 to study the evaluation of teacher preparation, have the potential to greatly improve this type of data collection through projects including the Teacher Quality Data Center and improvements to the TEACH system (see <http://www.highered.nysed.gov/regentsaction.htm>). I anticipate it will become easier to capture many aspects of this data to inform educators. Again, these efforts are built upon collaborative conversations among teacher educators, NYSED representative, SUNY administrators, and K-12 educators.

From my viewpoint, a pressing issue in the supply and demand data is the shortage of Library Media Specialists. Those of us in the literacy field recognize the need for strong librarians in our schools who have high-quality coursework to make sure our collaborations are most productive for students. A review of the NYSED Inventory of Registered Programs shows only 8 colleges/universities with programs leading to initial certificate as Library Media Specialists. That compares with 66 institutions offering Literacy B-6 degree programs and 48 institutions with Literacy 5-12 certificate degrees (compiled from the website <http://www.nysed.gov/heds/irpsl1.html>).

Issue 2: New Literacy Certificate

In 2004, New York State retired the “Reading Teacher K-12” certificate and replaced it with two options: “Literacy Birth – 6” and “Literacy 5 – 12.” With NYSED suggesting it is time to start thinking about changes to the certification structures, it is an appropriate time to step back and ask, “Are we producing and effectively preparing two groups of literacy specialists?” Based on my conversations, there are four key areas to discuss.

First, let’s talk about the name. We used to be able to say Reading Teacher and have two words together that provided a particular job title, supported by the certificate name. In the new certificate, literacy stands alone. However, many educators started adding the word “specialist” in the development of these programs to indicate this certificate as a degree similar to the “Library Media Specialist” – recognizing it is an advanced certificate. I have always been cautious of the term “Literacy Teacher” because all teachers are, in fact, literacy teachers (though they may not identify themselves as such). This certificate needs to be considered a specialist and appropriately titled. I am sure a few of my colleagues will be surprised to learn it actually does not include that term since that is what we’ve always called it!

Second, what is the job market for the middle school and high school teachers who receive the 5 – 12 certificate? We need to make sure we are successfully preparing sufficient numbers of 5-12 literacy educators who have the specialized skills and knowledge for the upper grade levels. When students with the new job titles went on the market in 2004, I remember visiting with district level administrators at our local Education Expo job fair and reminding them about the certification shifts. Many were not aware of this change (and I still encounter some even three years later). In the midst of Reading First, many of the literacy positions have been at the elementary level. With the possibility of a Striving Readers initiative at the secondary level, do we have the 5-12



literacy specialists we need? Further, we need to make sure school districts recognize the need for these specialists and have jobs targeting these grade levels.

Third, we need to think about the roles assumed by those who pursue the literacy certification. What roles are they assuming in schools and are they prepared to take a leadership role? Many students are at the beginning of their careers, some moving directly from their pre-service program without any additional teacher experience. In some cases, these students then graduate and are automatically placed in leadership positions (e.g., coaches, school-wide literacy expert). It is asking too much of a beginning teacher to have both roles. It seems like we need a separate system in place – one that provides for literacy certification and a second that supports the leadership skills needed for positions such as coaching. At Rutgers University in New Jersey, entrance into the Reading Certification program requires two years of teacher experience prior to admittance. While we do not have the luxury of such a requirement in New York, given the master's degree requirement within five years, this type of delineation between initial certificate and advanced certificates is a useful issue to pursue for upcoming revisions.

Fourth, with the new certificate, New York initiated a requirement for a new Content Specialty Exam in Literacy. I have been in numerous conversations about the exam. From one perspective, it seems to be an “easy” exam with a 99% pass rate. Of course, if the intent of the exams is for everyone who is qualified to pass them, maybe this particular exam is close to reaching that goal. One concern is that the exam includes a strong emphasis on Reading (as indicated by the various sections that include “reading” rather than “literacy”), with limited questions/content on aspects of writing or literacy more broadly defined.

A second concern is that while the certification shifted to two areas (B-6, 5-12), there is only one exam that covers all grade levels. To really have specialized knowledge, it makes more sense to have the exam match the grade areas, similar to the Assessment of Teaching Skills in which candidates take either the elementary or secondary exam, depending upon their certification grade level. Or, at least make it so the extended response portion covers the 5-6 grade level that is common to both certificate levels. Currently, there are some B-6 specialists required to write about eighth-grade examples and 5-12 specialists writing about third grade examples. My greatest concern is that we have our newest teachers taking a high-stakes exam that they recognize as having validity issues. This, in turn, leads new teachers to question all the exams (student and teacher) and not put a great deal of trust in the system.

Issue 3: New York P-16 Partnerships

In the past couple of years, the concept of “P-16” is a hot issue. We now have a “Senior Deputy Commissioner of Education P-16”, an “Assistant Provost for P-16 Education” at SUNY, and a Regents Action Plan on P-16 Education (<http://usny.nysed.gov/summit/p-16ed.htm>). Given our requirement for a master's degree to receive a professional certificate in teaching and the importance of the doctoral degree



toward the preparation of teacher educators, I tend to think of it as a P-20 Initiative. Regardless, anything that promotes conversation across critical members of the educational community is a step forward. The question to ask: How is the literacy field participating in the P-16 partnership conversations across the state?

NYSED and SUNY initiated a taskforce on P-16 Education, setting up regional partnerships intended to improve teacher quality. These meetings will have a range of conversational topics, most likely to include discussion of the supply and demand data, placement location for student teachers, and issues related to the local area. According to the information distributed to the Deans of Institutions of Higher Education, a primary goal is to, “to enhance the relationships between P-12 education and higher education to ensure that every child has certified, highly qualified and effective teachers.” (letter written by Joseph P. Frey, on January 8, 2008).

Similarly, at the December 2007 Board of Regents meeting, conversations highlighted several P-16 partnerships across the state. The NYSED website included video presentations from the meeting featuring a Science and Technology program with Mercy College, the College Now program at Lehman College, the University at Buffalo/Buffalo Public Schools partnership, and the Utica College Young Scholars program (see www.nysed.gov).

With these topics being privileged across the state, we need to think about how we want literacy education represented and who might represent literacy interests. Certainly, we need to think about how the supply and demand data is used, interpreted, and represented. It might be a great time to remind everyone of the 5 -12 certificate and how that specialized knowledge could contribute to high quality teaching. The New York State Reading Association is a wonderful example of a P-16 partnership that has many benefits for educators at all levels. What has been particularly helpful in the NYSRA organization that might be useful to the broader state-wide partnership efforts? We need to remember, all of us do not need to be at the gatherings, but we do need to communicate our thoughts about literacy topics to those in our community who are participating.

Issue 4: Perspectives from College Reading Educators Group

In an effort led by Mary Drucker from Utica College and Kathy Hinchman from Syracuse University, the New York State Reading Association has again activated the College Reading Educators Group. This is certainly a community where teacher educators can share ideas and discuss the issues we need to solve. In meetings during NYSRA 2006, a summer gathering in July 2007, and a follow-up session at NYSRA 2007, this group identified three key areas of concerns for Reading Educators in New York State. – Literacy Coaching Concerns, NCLB Impact on Literacy Education, and Shortage of Literacy Professors in New York.

While writing about these three concerns would be an article in itself, coaching is a clear topic of discussion as we consider how to include preparation for coaching in our literacy specialist programs and appropriate recognition in the accreditation process. There is no doubt that coaching is a growing and vital part of the public school



community (see Dozier, 2008). Similarly, the impact of NCLB is a key topic of conversation as we sort through new assessments, modes of instruction, best practices, scientifically-based research, high-quality teachers, and so forth. As a group, it is productive to identify these issues and consider the impact on teachers and students.

The re-registration of teaching certification degrees and the new certificate titles in 2004 led to program changes. For example, all initial teaching certification programs, rather than only some, required six credits of literacy instruction. New York State required all teacher preparation programs to have 50% of courses taught by full-time faculty until fully accredited by either the national or state accreditation agencies (e.g. TEAC, NCATE, RATE). This increase in the number of literacy courses taught combined with requirements for full-time faculty, led to many college educators raising concerns about their ability to hire faculty, noting year after year that those positions were becoming more difficult to fill. Whether or not this is a perceived problem or an actual one will likely require an extended survey of Institute of Higher Education across the state, but the initial conversations certainly indicate this as an area to problem solve and improve.

Issue 5: Critical Literacy and Informed Specialists

Too often, literacy instruction seems to be prompted by a series of quick fixes (see Allington & Walmsley, 2007). In order to move beyond this, we need to think seriously about how our literacy courses are appropriately preparing teachers to be critical consumers and producers of research articles, opinion pieces, and literature reviews. Without doubt, the program revision and accreditation process in the last few years facilitated many conversations about improvements to program curriculum, as well as concern about restrictions placed on academic freedom of faculty members.

For example, with the inclusion of the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment in most of the Reading First schools, many preparation programs started teaching about the DIBELS (<http://dibels.uoregon.edu/>). This led to factual knowledge of how to administer and score the assessment. But, do literacy specialists also have the opportunity to read articles on the appropriate uses for the assessment and the critical misuses of and problems with it? Are we preparing them to be informed decision-makers about literacy instruction and materials, rather than simply jumping on the bandwagon similar to teenagers who purchase a new CD each month to be like their peers?

Recent efforts such as the What Works Clearinghouse (see <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>) and position statements by the International Reading Association (<http://www.reading.org/association/advocacy/index.html>) are places we might go to start conversations about the benefits and limitations of various programs and instructional methods. As a start, the discussion will help our new literacy specialists to think critically and learn how to become informed on many sides of a topic in order to have a voice in the decision-making.



Similar to other educators, as teacher educators, we have to make difficult decisions about how to spend our instructional time in teacher preparation courses and how these courses fit together to make a unified whole. It is also an issue for the six-credit literacy coursework in pre-service programs and for extra literacy preparation for special education teachers. Many conversations have occurred as to how to incorporate International Reading Association Standards for Reading Professionals into program curriculum(http://www.reading.org/resources/issues/reports/professional_standards.html). With a process already underway to revise the ELA standards in New York, we will need to incorporate those changes into our coursework as well. In the end, we need to continually return to discussions with each other about how to make the best use of coursework to prepare teachers with informational knowledge of best practices AND a professionalism to make critical decisions in an informed manner.

Concluding Thoughts

At this point, you might be thinking – “how do I ever keep up with all of this, or find a place to share my voice?” Let’s start with the first part. You can keep up with current issues by continuing to read information that comes your way – Francine Stayter’s Advocacy updates in the NYSRA publications, newsletters/website updates from NYSED and Regents meetings, and local efforts to distribute information. When we contribute to sharing what we learn, we all benefit. The best place to start sharing your voice is with your local colleagues and administrators. Find out who represents you at various meetings and conferences. If you share your literacy ideas/issues with those colleagues, they will be in a better position to then understand those concerns and raise issues as necessary. Without your viewpoint, they may not realize the ramification of these policy decisions. Have you shared your voice today?



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