

# **Pre-service Teachers' Self-Assessed Proficiency for Working with Struggling Readers**

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Pre-service educators should enter a classroom confident in their ability to deliver literacy instruction for all learners. To determine pre-service educators' level of understanding and confidence in implementing effective early literacy instruction, this study used the 15 principles for working with struggling readers created by McCormick and Zutell (2015) to analyze pre-service teachers' perceptions of their ability to teach reading. The mixed method study includes data collected through an online survey using Likert scale and open-ended items. This article details the results of pre-service educators' self-assessments after they completed an early literacy methods course. Results indicate that the two lowest rated principles include enlisting parental involvement and letting research guide instruction.

*Keywords:* literacy instruction, pre-service teachers, struggling readers

Teacher preparation programs for elementary education have the daunting task of providing pre-service teachers with not only the general education content knowledge for elementary grades, but also with the necessary tools to teach literacy skills to a varying degree of learners as well. Effective literacy skills are essential for promoting student achievement in all content areas. Providing new teachers with guiding practices to help them make confident instructional decisions is paramount to promoting academic growth for students. McCormick and Zutell (2015) created 15 principles for working with struggling readers. This study utilized these principles to create a self-assessment for pre-service educators to reflect on their own proficiency for working with struggling readers. The study was completed with elementary pre-service educators at two different universities to facilitate a way for new educators to identify areas of strength and weaknesses for teaching literacy skills. Pre-service educators' reflections about their own confidence with teaching literacy skills is essential to improving their ability to deliver literacy instruction and can better inform instructional practices for literacy educators.

### **Literature Review**

There are many theories or explanations for approaches and best practice in working with struggling readers (Allington, 2009, 2012; McCormick & Zutell, 2015; Morrow & Gambrell, 2019). With continued levels of students labeled as underperforming in regards to reading ability (National Education Association, 2017), teacher preparation programs must address strategies for improving reading instruction with struggling readers. In an attempt to prepare pre-service teachers to meet the needs of their learners, higher education literacy programs need to determine what their students' perceptions and confidence levels are when working with struggling readers after participating in early literacy courses. We aimed to determine gaps between what we

currently know about effective teaching practices for delayed readers and the self-assessed ability of pre-service teachers' in planning and implementing instruction for struggling readers.

Literacy method courses focus on preparing teachers to assist students in developing literacy skills. Effective literacy instruction has been the topic of research for many years. The debate between explicit phonics instruction and whole language has subsided as educators recognize the need for a more balanced literacy approach (Pearson, 2004). Chai, Elston, and Kramer (2020) noted the continuous need to evaluate current materials and practices as school systems work toward implementing a balanced literacy framework. In their recent study, there continued to be inconsistencies and misalignment with the implementation of a balanced literacy framework with practicing teachers showing the need for professional development in this area. Various researchers and documents break down literacy using different terms. For the purpose of this study, we will use the breakdown of literacy skills as outlined by the national standards. The national standards (*Common Core State Standards*) refer to the components of literacy instruction as English/Language Arts and Literacy. Common Core State Standards further separate the skills to be taught into the four literacy domains of reading, writing, speaking, and listening (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Literacy methods coursework in teacher education preparation courses should provide pre-service teachers with the theoretical knowledge and application-based opportunities needed to provide effective literacy instruction in their future classroom for all four domains.

There continues to be an achievement gap in literacy performance. This gap is due in some regards to demographic factors such as socioeconomic status, healthcare access, access to libraries and museums, and educational funding (National Education Association, 2017). The

previously mentioned factors are those outside of the school's control, but there are factors within the school's control that impact the achievement gap. When looking at factors within the school's control, we can shift our mindset and look at this situation as an opportunity gap.

“Blanket statements about the low performance of certain groups of students in our schools without mentioning the underlying causes may reinforce prejudices and stereotypical images” (Flores, 2007, p.30). Being knowledgeable about the needs and background of our students as well as what strategies to use to assist them in setting manageable expectations is more helpful than continuing to highlight the achievement gap by making concluding or stereotypical comments about certain populations. Teachers need to focus on possible improvements to our teaching practices and opportunities we have as educators to address the opportunity gap.

One within-school factor leading to the achievement gap identified by the National Education Association (2017) is poor teacher preparation. At-risk students who are struggling with reading need to be provided with additional interventions by reading specialists, expert reading professionals, or classroom teachers who have received additional professional development in reading instruction (Allington, 2012). Although our first-year teachers will not be reading specialists or have a substantial amount of professional development related to reading instruction, they will have struggling readers in their classes and therefore, we should address strategies for working with struggling readers, identifying struggling readers, and providing resources for struggling readers within our teacher preparation coursework.

Teacher preparation occurs at higher education institutions. These programs are provided state-level matrices to document how they meet requirements for teacher licensure and also through accrediting organizations to demonstrate coursework that meets high standards. In preparing students within these programs to be effective teachers, students generally complete

rigorous coursework related to elementary specific content which includes methods courses combined with internship experiences. These experiences provide evidentiary data of the pre-service teachers' ability to apply the strategies and content in addition to their ability to manage a classroom and deliver effective instruction. Effective strategies for working with struggling readers is addressed in many texts utilized in higher education teacher preparation programs. McCormick and Zutell (2015) outlined 15 principles as described in the earlier introduction for working with delayed readers. Allington (2009) noted the importance of providing multiple positive and high-success experiences when working with struggling readers.

Above the four core literacy domains outlined in the state standards (reading, writing, speaking, and listening), new literacy instruction demands continue to develop. Critical literacy in which “students learn to evaluate and think critically about information and its source(s)” (Morrow & Gambrell, 2019, p. 31) is a necessary twenty-first century skill. Digital literacy skills including “the ability to understand and use information in multiple formats from a wide range of sources when it is presented via computer” (Gilster & Glistler, 1997, p. 1) is another form of literacy critical to today's learner. These new literacy skills will need to be met by providing more rigorous instruction in pre-service programs of the four core literacy domains of reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

With regards to literacy methods courses, the focus is on the instruction of these core literacy skills outlined in state standards and usually implementing literacy instruction to students within a practicum in a classroom setting. Instruction includes reading comprehension strategies such as visualization, making connections, and determining the main idea which are addressed in textbooks focused around providing effective literacy instruction at the elementary level (Harvey

& Goudvis, 2007; Serravallo, 2015). Frameworks are included for providing this instruction through models such as guided reading, whole group instruction, and writing workshops.

With teacher preparation being identified as one of the achievement gap factors that is within the control of schools, the current study focused on surveying pre-service teachers after their completion of their literacy methods coursework to determine areas of literacy instruction in which they felt confident teaching or identified as an area of improvement. By analyzing this survey data, conclusions can be drawn about ways to strengthen literacy methods courses in an aim to provide pre-service teachers with the confidence and skills to become more effective literacy educators.

### **Methods**

Over time, as the researchers taught the literacy methods courses that were focused on the instruction of early literacy skills, we wondered what students' perceptions were of their ability to work with struggling readers after completing these literacy methods courses. Principles for working with delayed readers are outlined by McCormick and Zutell (2015) within one chapter of their textbook. Using these 15 principles, we developed a survey instrument in which students were to rank their ability to address these 15 principles. At the end of the survey, there were three open-ended items asking students to identify and explain a principle they consider a strength, a principle they would identify as an area of improvement, and any other information they prefer to provide. A guiding purpose of this mixed methods study including the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative survey data was to improve the teaching practice of each of the authors within their early literacy methods courses with pre-service teachers. Because all concepts addressed within the principles are necessary in developing early literacy skills and should be covered in early literacy methods courses, the authors surveyed their students at the

end of the semester to determine which of the principles needed more attention within the methods course. With this guiding purpose, there was no clear hypothesis for which principles students would rank lower or higher than others. Instead, the authors developed a guiding research question to focus the study and the results in an effort to identify strengths and areas of improvement for early literacy methods courses. The guiding research question is as follows:

1. What are pre-service teachers' self-perceptions of their ability to work with struggling readers?

To collect data and answer the research question, the authors used a quantitative survey research design to investigate pre-service teachers' self-perceptions using Likert-scale items.

### **Participants**

The study included 113 participants from state universities in the southeastern part of the United States. Of the participants, 19 were graduate students and 94 were undergraduate students. All participants were full-time students enrolled in an initial teacher licensure program and completed both methods courses and field placements for elementary licensure.

### **Data Source**

A survey tool was created to collect data for the study. The survey was created using *Google Forms*. After IRB approval, the survey link was provided to students at the completion of their early literacy methods course within their teacher preparation program. Students completed the survey using the link provided on the *Google Form*. Completing the survey was voluntary. Within the survey directions, there was a statement reminding students that the survey was voluntary and informing students of the purpose for collecting the survey data. There was also a statement informing participants that consent was given by the act of completing and submitting the survey. All surveys were anonymous with the only demographic question asking whether the

student was an undergraduate or graduate student. With surveys being completed anonymously, the professor had no way to identify students with their survey information. The results of the survey or act of completing the survey had no potential risk hazards to participants and took approximately twenty minutes to complete. Survey directions explained the four-point Likert scale (Likert, 1932) students were to use in rating their ability to use each principle in planning instruction and applying the key principle within the classroom. Following the directions, 15 items on the survey included a brief summary of each of the 15 key principles for working with delayed readers that were outlined by McCormick and Zutell (2015). This tool was chosen for this study because it included a list of effective strategies for working with delayed readers and also included strategies related to in-school and out-of-school practices. Students were instructed to read the principle title and brief description and then rate their ability to apply this in the classroom setting. The final three items on the survey were open-ended. One open-ended question asked students to identify the principle they felt the strongest in applying and why. Another asked students to identify the principle they would label as an area of improvement and explain why. Lastly, students were asked if there was any other information they wished to provide which allowed students to include extensive or non-related comments they wanted to share. The purpose for completing the survey was to collect data on pre-service teachers' self-assessed ability to work with delayed readers after completion of their early literacy methods course.

### **Data Analysis**

After all participants completed the survey, individual response data was downloaded from the *Google Form* as a spreadsheet. Ranges and means were calculated for each principle.

The survey included the following fifteen principles (McCormick & Zutell, 2015) for working with delayed readers:

- Begin Early
- Consider the Benefits of One-to-One Tutoring
- Taking into Account the Teacher's Instructional Actions During Group Learning
- Provide Opportunities for Collaborative Learning
- Consider the Implications of Independent Work
- Consider Time on Task
- Let the Student READ
- Thoughtfully Match Text to Reader
- Encourage Outside Reading
- Incorporate High-Quality Literature into the Program
- Model Effective Reading Behaviors
- Stimulate Motivation and Engagement
- Cooperate with the Classroom Teacher
- Enlist Parent Involvement
- Let Research Guide Your Instruction

Principles with the highest and lowest means were identified for determining implications for instructional needs within an early literacy methods course. The highest and lowest identified principles based on means are those clarified in detail in the discussion section.

Statements for the final three open-ended items on the survey were analyzed separately by each researcher. We read through each response and coded statements to align them with a key principle. We then met to discuss our analysis of all statements. After coding each statement

with a key principle, the amount of statements recorded as strengths and areas of weakness were calculated. Students' responses to the open-ended items also served as a way to further understand opinions expressed by their ratings for each principle.

### Findings

Results from the survey are represented in Table 1 and show the range and mean for each of the key principles for working with delayed readers (McCormick & Zutell, 2015). Data from the key principles will be reported and explained in this section.

**Table 1**

*Ranges and Means of Pre-service Teachers' Self-perceptions of Working with Delayed Readers*

Principle	Graduate		Undergraduate		All Participants
	Range	Mean	Range	Mean	Mean
1	1-4	3.11	1-4	3.25	3.32
2	2-4	2.95	1-4	3.30	3.24
3	2-4	3.47	2-4	3.47	3.47
4	2-4	3.42	1-4	3.34	3.36
5	2-4	3.26	1-4	3.29	3.29
6	2-4	3.47	1-4	3.26	3.29
7	1-4	3.16	1-4	3.42	3.38
8	1-4	3.44	1-4	3.17	3.21
9	1-4	3.42	1-4	3.32	3.34
10	1-4	3.37	1-4	3.39	3.39
11	2-4	3.53	1-4	3.47	3.48
12	1-4	3.21	1-4	3.42	3.39
13	3-4	3.53	1-4	3.40	3.42
14	1-4	2.95	1-4	3.02	3.01
15	1-4	3.16	1-4	3.07	3.08

As can be seen in Table 1, pre-service teachers' self-perceptions for most principles ranged from one to four. Principle thirteen (cooperate with classroom teacher) had the smallest range of 3-4 within the graduate student participants. This principles' mean was also among the highest for participants overall. Graduate student participants rated principles two (consider the benefits of one-on-one tutoring) and fourteen (enlist parent involvement) as the lowest with means below three. Undergraduate student participants rated principles fourteen (enlist parent

involvement) and fifteen (let research guide instruction) the lowest with means just over three. Both graduate and undergraduate participants rated principle eleven (model effective reading behaviors) as one they were most easily able to apply. On a positive note, when looking at the overall data, all means were above three.

**Table 2**

*Amount of Statements in Pre-service Teachers' Open-ended items based on Key Principles*

Principle	Strength Statement	Area of Weakness Statement
1	1	3
2	3	2
3	9	5
4	7	0
5	0	4
6	0	3
7	3	1
8	3	4
9	5	4
10	3	2
11	3	3
12	8	1
13	10	1
14	3	19
15	4	5

Statements from the last three items were analyzed as a whole. The number of statements aligning with the different principles can be seen in Table 2. As is recorded in the table, principle thirteen (cooperate with classroom teacher) was commented on as a strength most often by the pre-service educators. Other strengths according to open-ended answers included applying principles three (teacher's role in group learning), four (provide opportunities for collaborative learning), and twelve (stimulate motivation and engagement). When looking at the number of statements students wrote expressing areas of improvement, principle fourteen (enlist parent involvement) is significantly higher than all other principles. Note: The amount of statements is

less than the number of participants because not all surveys included answers for open-ended items.

## **Discussion**

### **Cooperation with Classroom Teacher**

Cooperation with the classroom teacher was something graduate students felt confident about based on the range of scores. Scores for this principle were larger for undergraduates with some participants rating this principle with a one. Based on the mean from both graduate and undergraduate participants, this key principle was an overall strength for both groups. The difference in range could be the result in age differences in graduate versus undergraduate students or structural differences of the internships within the methods courses. Looking at the open-ended items, participants also included more comments about this principle as a strength than any other principle. Comments regarding this principle from the open-ended items included statements about the positive relationships and conversations students had with their cooperating teacher. Teacher preparation programs appear to be meeting expectations for this requirement with their pre-service educators.

### **Enlisting Parent Involvement**

Enlisting parent involvement was the key principle rated lowest by both graduate and undergraduate participants. With a mean of less than three for graduate students and an overall mean from all participants of 3.01, this was obviously the principle for working with delayed readers that participants were least comfortable addressing. Qualitative data from the open-ended item regarding this principle, noted the limited interaction pre-service teachers have with parents. Parental involvement is often limited within the scope of many teacher education programs although it has been related to higher student achievement (Uludag, 2008). Literacy methods

courses are meant to focus on the application of theoretical knowledge related to the developmental stages of literacy in order to plan and assess students' continual growth of literacy skills and determine instructional needs. Focus in literacy methods courses tend to center around teacher responsibilities within the classroom with parental involvement addressed in internship courses.

Some organizations related to early childhood programs include standards and resources addressing parental involvement. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NACE) includes building family relationships as a standard for early childhood programs and breaks down this expectation to include knowing, understanding, supporting, and involving parents in their child's development and learning (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2011). The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) also notes the significance of family engagement and offers an online mini-course for faculty and students within educator preparation programs to increase knowledge of the importance of family involvement and ideas for promoting involvement and communication between parents and teachers (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, 2015).

With enlisting parent involvement as the lowest ranked principle for working with struggling readers, it is clear that literacy methods courses need to incorporate this topic into the course content. Involving parents and working to build a school-home relationship and collaboratively take responsibility for a child's literacy development is addressed in some ways under the term family literacy and can result in many positive outcomes (Purcell-Gates, 2000). In a study by Warren and Young (2002) that examined home literacy practices, it was determined by survey results that "parents perceived their role as nurturing and encouraging" (p. 223) and view "teachers' roles as following the curriculum" (p. 223). The view of teachers towards

parents was clarified by the lack of teachers acknowledging or showing value to learning that could occur outside of the classroom in their interview remarks (Warren & Young, 2002). This is a misconception on both sides that needs to be addressed in teacher preparation programs.

Knowing that students' education begins at home before they ever step foot into a classroom, educators and schools need to find effective methods for understanding family literacy and working with parents to value and capitalize on all of life's learning experiences. In regards to the current study, the survey data clearly identifies enlisting parent involvement as a weak area for pre-service teachers. To improve upon this finding, literacy methods courses could begin to incorporate ideas for parent conferences, family literacy and other ways of working to build relationships with families to work collaboratively to help a child's literacy growth.

### **Let Research Drive Instruction**

Using research to guide instruction is the focus of principle fifteen. This was the second lowest ranked principle according to survey data with an overall mean of 3.08. The mean for this principle was lower with undergraduate students than with graduate students, but was overall lower than the other principles. Literacy methods courses generally require students to purchase a textbook to provide students with theoretical knowledge of literacy development along with classroom curriculum and activities. Some courses also require students to read articles in addition to the required textbook. These are examples of ways in which pre-service teachers are exposed to research as they begin to prepare for their teaching career. Lesson plans are often required in methods courses and are extensive. In looking at the open-ended items focused on principle fifteen as a weakness, one student commented, "Being in college I have been given resources and research to support our learning but when I start teaching I may not be provided this same type of research." Another concern shared was, "If I am provided with the research

from the resource staff then I can certainly implement it into the classroom but finding it myself is the challenge.”

Based on the quantitative survey data and comments from the open-ended items, it appears that students are comfortable reading and implementing research; however, there is a concern for this type of information being provided once starting their career. One issue leading to the research-to-practice gap is teachers' ability to access the research such as information on evidence-based practices (Kretlow & Blatz, 2011). Williams and Cole (2007) also note access as an issue for educators providing research-based instruction as well as time to search for the research. If the desire is to have teachers implementing the latest research-based or evidence-based instruction, how to manage searching for and accessing this information as a career teacher is a necessary skill to be included in teacher preparation programs. Providing educators with information about professional organizations, journals, and resources to continue using research-based practices would be beneficial.

### **Model Effective Reading Behaviors**

Principle eleven focuses on modeling effective reading behaviors. This principle had the highest mean (3.48) among all principles on the survey. In reading comments from the open-ended items, one student shared, “I learned from my professors modeling effective strategies.” With early literacy, modeling is a critical part of instruction. This occurs as teachers use instructional strategies such as think-alouds in which the teacher verbally explains the thought process for using a strategy being taught to students. Reading in the early grades includes complex comprehension strategies such as visualization and making connections. Textbooks are often chosen to assist students in better understanding these reading strategies and ideas for teaching the strategies. Strategy textbooks are often used in literacy methods courses and focus

on the understanding that the goal of reading is comprehension which entails more than a literal understanding of a text and instead proceeds to the level of acquiring knowledge and developing insight as a result of individual interactions between a reader and the text (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Serravallo, 2015).

With modeling reading behaviors being a key component of literacy methods courses and a key focus in textbooks chosen for these courses, it is not surprising that students rated this principle highly. The comment in the paragraph above (related to principle eleven) illustrates the importance for teachers of methods courses to model these strategies in class as one way of increasing students' self-perception of their ability to model these strategies as a future teacher. Modeling *for* pre-service educators enables an easier transition for their own ability to model *for* students in their future classrooms.

### **Teacher's Role in Group Learning**

Principle three was the second highest rated principle according to the means from the survey data. This principle focused on the role of the teacher during group learning including the ability of the teacher to plan curriculum-based targeted instruction for small groups of students with similar instructional needs. The overall mean for principle three was 3.47. This principle had the highest amount of comments in the open-ended question about students' strengths. Student comments regarding this principle noted that small group instruction is used daily at this level of instruction and therefore, students are seeing this modeled in their internship classrooms as well as having opportunities to engage in practicing effective small group teaching strategies more consistently.

Literacy instruction at the elementary level often includes guided reading or small skill-based instruction in which various components of literacy are taught within a lesson to a small

group of students. This type of reading instruction allows teachers to differentiate reading and target specific literacy skills. There are books to assist students in understanding guided reading components such as intentional planning of instruction, grouping of students, continued assessment to determine progress, time management, and lesson plan formats for this type of instruction (Diller, 2007; Richardson, 2016).

### **Conclusions and Implications**

In looking at the survey results overall; it appears that pre-service teachers' self-perceptions of their ability to enlist parent involvement is an area identified as a concern. Incorporating ideas for developing school-home partnerships and assisting students in developing ways to encourage parental involvement in their child's education could be added as a learning objective to literacy methods courses to better prepare pre-service teachers for developing positive school-home relationships when they start their career. These opportunities could be tied to activities like creating a literacy night for parents and students or as simple as participating in parent teacher conferences.

Based on the inclusion of students from multiple semesters, various instructors, and both undergraduate and graduate level programs, we feel that the conclusions drawn can be generalized to students in elementary programs. Limitations to the study include sample size and the inclusion of only participants from two universities. Further research collecting data from elementary teacher preparation programs from multiple universities could provide more conclusive and generalizable conclusions.

Although not rated as low as enlisting parental involvement, the survey results indicate that letting research guide instruction was the other lower rated principle. To address this deficiency, instructors for methods courses could assist students in determining ways to access

data after beginning their career as a teacher. Discussing participation in educational organizations, conference opportunities, and following organizations on social media are some ways in which pre-service teachers could begin searching for research on their own and then continue these habits as they begin their career. Providing positive experiences to collaborate, communicate, and research with other teachers and peers might also improve confidence with utilizing ongoing research throughout their teaching career. This study continues to add to the body of research supporting the need for implementation of a balanced literacy framework (Chair, Elston, & Kramer, 2020; Pearson, 2004). Bingham and Hall-Kenyon (2013) found varied implementation of components of balanced literacy within the teachers in their study as well. This shows the continued need for instruction regarding a balanced literacy framework for both pre-service and practicing teachers. In looking specifically at preservice teachers, Clark, Helfrich, and Hatch (2017) found the participants of their study to have strong knowledge in regards to components of literacy instruction such as phonemic awareness and phonics; however, there were differences in knowledge of content and pedagogy based on the amount of methods courses completed by the participant. The studies mentioned here support the need for a strong focus in literacy methods courses with regards to literacy content and pedagogy. The results from this study add to the need for methods courses to include instruction related to developing relationships and providing assistance in parental involvement and school-home connections as well as providing students with ideas for how to stay up-to-date and let research guide their instruction once in the field as a practicing teacher.

Further research could bring insight into pre-service teachers' self-perceptions of these principles by repeating the survey after modifying methods courses to include more deliberate instruction on lower-rated principles (parent involvement and research-driven instruction). Also,

recruiting more pre-service teachers to participate, including more universities, and reviewing literacy methods course syllabi could provide more data to further inform the instructors of literacy methods courses in order to improve pre-service educators' confidence with the various principles of literacy instruction for all students. Improving literacy instructional practices and confidence in pre-service educators will ultimately improve opportunities for all students.

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