

RESEARCH BRIEF

Right to Knowledgeable and Qualified Literacy Educators

Children have the right to knowledgeable and qualified literacy educators: Teachers matter more to student achievement than any other school-related factor, but teachers and their students cannot be successful without the supports of other knowledgeable and qualified school personnel, such as principals, reading/literacy specialists, literacy coaches, and literacy coordinators. These professionals must complete high-quality, rigorous, and standards-based preparation programs that provide opportunities to learn foundational knowledge, quality curricula, evidence-based instructional methods, and literacy assessment and evaluation methods. These programs must also prepare teachers to design literacy learning environments, both face-to-face and virtual, that meet the needs of all students. Those needs include being taught by educators who respect, acknowledge, and appreciate the identities of their students and their colleagues—teachers who understand marginalizing forces in schools and have the courage, conviction, and competencies to name, challenge, and dismantle those forces.

—*Children's Rights to Excellent Literacy Instruction*

Although there may never be consensus on whether great teachers are born or made, there is more than enough evidence pointing to the latter that any discussion on excellent literacy instruction must begin with those charged with providing that instruction. How were they prepared to enter the field? What is the breadth, frequency, and quality of their ongoing professional learning? Do they have awareness of the cultural and societal factors that impact students and educators and an ability to navigate and dismantle oppressive forces?

Literacy Professional Preparation

In the past several decades, scholars have studied teacher preparation programs, especially those related to preparing teachers of literacy, to determine those characteristics necessary in any quality literacy teacher preparation program. In 2008, Risko and colleagues conducted a comprehensive review of empirical research about literacy teacher preparation and drew the following conclusions: Teacher education candidates need opportunities to apply what they are learning, see demonstrations of practice, and receive explicit explanations and examples of effective literacy instructional practices. In other words, those learning to teach must be given opportunities to practice what they are learning in simulated and real classroom situations.

In *Literacy Teacher Preparation*, a joint research advisory of the International Literacy Association and the National Council of Teachers of English, four critical quality indicators of

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effective programs were identified: an emphasis on depth and breadth of knowledge, coherence across the program, preparation to teach culturally and linguistically diverse students, and opportunities to apply teacher knowledge in authentic settings.

In the research previously described, there is a call for candidates to gain extensive knowledge about literacy. *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017* (Standards 2017; International Literacy Association, 2018) provides specific information about what that knowledge should be in seven overarching standards:

1. *Foundational knowledge*: Candidates demonstrate knowledge of the theoretical, historical, and evidence-based foundations of literacy and language and the ways in which they interrelate and the role of literacy professionals in schools.
2. *Curriculum and instruction*: Candidates use foundational knowledge to critique and implement literacy curricula to meet the needs of all learners and to design, implement, and evaluate evidence-based literacy instruction for all learners.
3. *Assessment and evaluation*: Candidates understand, select, and use valid, reliable, fair, and appropriate assessment tools to screen, diagnose, and measure student literacy achievement; inform instruction and evaluate interventions; participate in professional learning experiences; explain assessment results and advocate for appropriate literacy practices to relevant stakeholders.
4. *Diversity and equity*: Candidates demonstrate knowledge of research, relevant theories, pedagogies, essential concepts of diversity and equity; demonstrate and provide opportunities for understanding all forms of diversity as central to students' identities; create classrooms and schools that are inclusive and affirming; advocate for equity at school, district, and community levels.
5. *Learners and the literacy environment*: Candidates meet the developmental needs of all learners and collaborate with school personnel to use a variety of print and digital materials to engage and motivate all learners; integrate digital technologies in appropriate, safe, and effective ways; foster a positive climate that supports a literacy-rich learning environment.

6. *Professional learning and leadership*: Candidates recognize the importance of, participate in, and facilitate ongoing professional learning as part of career-long leadership roles and responsibilities.
7. *Practicum/clinical experiences (for specialized literacy professionals only)*: Candidates apply theory and best practice in multiple supervised practicum/clinical experiences.

These standards offer a framework for literacy professional preparation program development, refinement, and assessment. They also may serve as a resource to plan or adapt ongoing professional learning opportunities.

Ongoing Professional Learning

Beyond research and evidence-based standards and high-quality preparation for future teachers, leaders, and specialized literacy professionals, there is also a great need for robust and ongoing professional learning. Job-embedded professional learning for all educators, focused on literacy, is essential to maintaining and continually improving literacy teaching and learning across all grade levels (Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005). A recent meta-analysis of the literature on professional learning from the past three decades summarizes much of what is known about the nature and quality of excellent professional learning experiences for educators. According to Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner (2017), effective professional learning reflects the following characteristics:

- Is content-focused
- Incorporates active learning
- Supports collaboration
- Uses models of effective practice
- Provides coaching and expert support
- Offers feedback and reflection
- Is of sustained duration (pp. v–vi)

These findings from the professional learning literature map neatly onto *Standards 2017*, which highlights the ways in which reading/literacy specialists, literacy coaches, and literacy coordinators/supervisors can not only lead ongoing professional

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learning for educators in their schools and districts but also continually build and improve upon their own knowledge and skills over time.

Ultimately, sophisticated literacy instructional practices such as disciplinary literacy (which *Standards 2017* suggests must be a part of preparation and professional learning across all grade levels) will not be able to flourish in schools without specific attention paid to the teacher-centered, collaborative, context-dependent professional learning needed to support advanced practice (Dobbs, Ippolito, & Charner-Laird, 2017).

Robust professional learning models—including mechanisms such as coaching (Bean & Ippolito, 2016), professional learning communities (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2015), communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), and collaborative cycles of inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009)—should be strategically selected, adapted, and implemented as part and parcel of every school’s plan for continually improving literacy teaching and learning.

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Social Justice Education

Literacy is not neutral. Rather, literacy is socially and culturally situated (Gee, 2015) and racialized (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Too often, literacies aligned with the dominant group are valued and assessed in schools while literacies from marginalized groups are often devalued (Delpit, 2006; Delpit & Dowdy, 2008). In this sense, schools, as sociocultural and political institutions, may act as colonial weapons that perpetuate racism and other forms of oppression (Emdin, 2016), but this reality does not have to be the case. Social justice education can and should be used as a force to challenge such inequities (Kumashiro, 2015). In fact, some believe that to assess and understand teacher quality, a lens of social justice education must be applied (Kumashiro, 2002).

Literacy teachers can enact culturally relevant and sustaining literacy instruction that honors the lives and humanity of marginalized students (International Literacy Association & National Council of Teachers of English, 2017; Paris & Alim, 2017; Winn & Johnson, 2011). In order to enact social justice education, teachers themselves must have in-depth knowledge of social justice literacies, which Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) define as the ability to “recognize and analyze how knowledge is socially constructed and infused with ideology” (p. 25).

However, few social justice education professional learning opportunities exist within schools, specifically schools that

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serve the most marginalized students (Skerrett, Warrington, & Williamson, 2018; Skerrett & Williamson, 2015). Teacher education programs have been called to reorient themselves with a social justice disposition (Alsup & Miller, 2014; Chubbuck, 2010; Cochran-Smith, 2004). Further, teachers need to have continual professional learning beyond their teacher education years that focuses on social justice issues and need to learn to use literacy as a vehicle for equity.

Social justice literacies have been seen as a potentially democratizing force across global contexts (White & Cooper, 2015). As Stewart (2017) argues, “A truly democratic education must not be ideologically neutral; rather, it must ardently pursue the preparation of students for engaged citizenship in an ostensibly democratic society.” Students deserve teachers who understand schools do not exist in isolation and the effects of systemic oppression manifest in the daily realities of schools across the globe. Most important, students deserve teachers who know how to work against such oppressive forces to make the aspirations of a socially just democracy through literacy instruction a reality.

Building a Strong Foundation

Our students deserve nothing less than educators who have completed rigorous research-based literacy professional preparation programs, have access to and participate fully in ongoing professional learning, and understand how to best advocate for their students, their colleagues, and overall instruction. This is the foundation upon which knowledgeable and qualified educators stand.

This research brief expands on the first of four tenets that compose the International Literacy Association's *Children's Rights to Excellent Literacy Instruction* position statement: rightstoread.org/statement

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About the International Literacy Association

The International Literacy Association (ILA) is a global advocacy and membership organization dedicated to advancing literacy for all through its network of more than 300,000 literacy educators, researchers, and experts across 146 countries. With over 60 years of experience, ILA has set the standard for how literacy is defined, taught, and evaluated. ILA's *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017* provides an evidence-based benchmark for the development and evaluation of literacy professional preparation programs. ILA collaborates with partners across the world to develop, gather, and disseminate high-quality resources, best practices, and cutting-edge research to empower educators, inspire students, and inform policymakers. ILA publishes *The Reading Teacher*, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, and *Reading Research Quarterly*, which are peer reviewed and edited by leaders in the field. For more information, visit literacyworldwide.org.



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