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Introduction

THE INTERNATIONAL LITERACY ASSOCIATION (ILA) has long published the findings of the What’s Hot in Literacy survey to note trends and foster critical conversations in literacy.

What’s Hot first appeared in the members-only newspaper of the International Reading Association—now ILA—in 1997 under the title What’s Hot, What’s Not. The original survey took the temperature of a list of topics deemed important by a sample of approximately 25 literacy leaders.

By 2001, the questions What should be hot? and What shouldn’t be hot? were added, painting a more comprehensive picture of what the hot topics in reading and writing instruction should be and how the conversations in education needed to shift. The result was an annual, comprehensive ranking of issues.

In 2017, ILA redesigned the survey and launched a broader outreach, reaching a cross-sector of literacy leaders and getting input from more than 1,000 of them. The following year, ILA partnered with YouGov, a global market research firm, to collaborate on and manage the survey and report, which then became a biennial publication.

This year’s survey, again created with YouGov, reflects ILA’s commitment to generating resources that are substantial and relevant to the field of literacy education. Survey questions were reconfigured to allow for more expansive answers, giving respondents the opportunity to offer more insight regarding their own experiences and challenges in providing high-quality literacy instruction.

Although previous iterations of the survey identified which topics were considered important, the goal of this year’s expanded survey was to better identify the needs of classroom teachers, specialized literacy professionals, and school principals/district administrators.

Understanding more about what literacy educators say they need is crucial in advancing the literacy profession and helping to shape the future of literacy instruction.

“We need to come together as a team of literacy professionals to cooperatively address the literacy issues and needs facing today’s students in our modern world.”

—Classroom Teacher, United States
Methodology

ILA’S GOAL WITH THE 2020 SURVEY was to deepen engagement with survey respondents and provide more valuable insight while still maintaining the intimate conversations that have allowed literacy professionals to share their views.

To develop this new direction, the research included two phases, both conducted in partnership with YouGov, an independent research company:

PHASE 1: Four online mini-focus groups were conducted with a cross-section of 17 literacy experts to discuss the state of literacy and determine the topics to be included in the 2020 survey.

PHASE 2: An online survey was conducted between August 29, 2019, and September 18, 2019. This year’s survey was restructured, with Q-methodology implemented to allow respondents to prioritize topics and rate the amount of attention these topics are receiving.

Additionally, the list of topics was adjusted on the basis of the findings from and comments provided in response to the 2018 survey, along with the findings and comments from Phase 1.

The survey also took a deeper dive into several areas that were addressed in the focus groups. As a result, additional questions were included to allow participants to expand on their selections and offer insight.

The survey closed with 1,443 total respondents from 65 countries and territories. The quotes used in this report were sourced from open-ended responses offered in the quantitative survey.

“Literacy ability or capacity is the base rock for understanding any instruction in any discipline.”
—Special Education Teacher, Nigeria
Survey Respondents

1,443 total respondents from 65 countries and territories

TOP RESPONDING COUNTRIES
- United States
- Canada
- Australia
- New Zealand
- Philippines
- Jamaica
- Nigeria
- India
- South Africa
- United Kingdom

EXPERIENCE
Age of Students (among those in education)
- under age 5: 13%
- ages 5–7: 59%
- ages 8–10: 62%
- ages 11–14: 45%
- ages 15–18: 22%

Roles Among Teachers
- Reading/Literacy Specialist: 34%
- Classroom Teacher: 32%
- Literacy/Instructional Coach: 18%
- Literacy Coordinator/Supervisor: 9%

EMPLOYMENT
- 56% TEACHERS
- 37% HIGHER EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS
- 19% LITERACY CONSULTANTS
- 10% PRE-K–12 ADMINISTRATORS

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- 56% TEACHERS
- 37% HIGHER EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS
- 19% LITERACY CONSULTANTS
- 10% PRE-K–12 ADMINISTRATORS
TO DETERMINE THIS YEAR’S RATINGS, respondents were presented with a list of 20 topics and asked to choose as many topics as they would like, in no particular order, that they felt were among the most important in improving literacy outcomes in the next decade.

The following were the most commonly chosen topics:

- Determining effective instructional strategies for struggling readers 66%
- Building early literacy skills through a balanced approach that combines both foundational and language comprehension instruction 65%
- Increasing equity and opportunity for all learners 59%
- Providing access to high-quality, diverse books and content 59%
- Increasing professional learning and development opportunities for practicing educators 58%

To establish a more accurate picture of what’s most important, respondents were then asked to rank the topics they had chosen to indicate their top five. When they used this rank sort approach, the following topics emerged as most critical:

1. Building early literacy skills through a balanced approach that combines both foundational and language comprehension instruction 51%
2. Determining effective instructional strategies for struggling readers 42%
3. Increasing equity and opportunity for all learners 40%
4. Increasing professional learning and development opportunities for practicing educators 39%
5. Providing access to high-quality, diverse books and content 36%
Literacy professionals are almost unanimous in their assessment that all children deserve access to a free, high-quality preschool education that lays a foundation for literacy development (96%).

According to respondents, the greatest barrier to equity is the variability of teacher knowledge and teaching effectiveness. Throughout the report, respondents cite differences in teacher preparation programs and the availability of and support for ongoing professional learning and development.

The majority (60%) of respondents do not agree that today’s teacher preparation programs are equipping educators with the skills they need for effective reading instruction.

Equity and professional development are among the top five most important topics to improve literacy outcomes, and they are both deserving of more focus and attention among education policymakers. In addition, addressing inequity is the No. 1 area respondents report wanting more support in (49%).

When asked to identify professional development (PD) needs, 49% of respondents say they want more PD on using digital resources to support literacy instruction. This response stood out, as the topic of digital literacy is one in which respondents are split when it comes to attention received; 26% feel it deserves less attention, while 25% feel it deserves more.

Addressing disconnects between school curriculum and students’ actual needs in terms of literacy support and instruction is the No. 1 greatest challenge in literacy reported by respondents (58%), followed closely by supporting students with social-emotional or behavioral challenges (52%) and supporting students reading below grade level (48%).

Issues of access to books and time for reading play prominently in survey responses. Inadequate access to books in families’ homes is rated as the second greatest barrier to equity (57%). In addition, 70% of literacy professionals say there is not enough time in the day set aside for independent reading.

Not surprisingly, respondents are divided on phonics instruction, with 31% reporting they feel the topic deserves more attention and 24% saying they feel it deserves less attention.

Respondents not only value literacy research but also want more support with it. When asked about the responsibilities of literacy educators, 89% cite staying abreast of the latest literacy research, which also emerges as an area in which 44% of respondents say they need more support.

The majority of respondents (61%) say they need additional time to collaborate/confer with other teachers facing similar challenges.

Executive Summary (cont.)

THIS YEAR’S SURVEY EXPANDED beyond asking educators to rank the list of topics. To produce a more robust, meaningful report, respondents were asked to offer deeper insight into the challenges they face, the support they require, and the solutions they feel are necessary to advance literacy outcomes.

Among the key findings:

- Literacy professionals are almost unanimous in their assessment that all children deserve access to a free, high-quality preschool education that lays a foundation for literacy development (96%).
- According to respondents, the greatest barrier to equity is the variability of teacher knowledge and teaching effectiveness. Throughout the report, respondents cite differences in teacher preparation programs and the availability of and support for ongoing professional learning and development.
- The majority (60%) of respondents do not agree that today’s teacher preparation programs are equipping educators with the skills they need for effective reading instruction.
- Equity and professional development are among the top five most important topics to improve literacy outcomes, and they are both deserving of more focus and attention among education policymakers. In addition, addressing inequity is the No. 1 area respondents report wanting more support in (49%).
- When asked to identify professional development (PD) needs, 49% of respondents say they want more PD on using digital resources to support literacy instruction. This response stood out, as the topic of digital literacy is one in which respondents are split when it comes to attention received; 26% feel it deserves less attention, while 25% feel it deserves more.
- Not surprisingly, respondents are divided on phonics instruction, with 31% reporting they feel the topic deserves more attention and 24% saying they feel it deserves less attention.
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- The majority of respondents (61%) say they need additional time to collaborate/confer with other teachers facing similar challenges.
A CLOSER LOOK
SECTION I

Improving Literacy Outcomes: Setting the Stage
Determining the Most Critical Topics

“EXCELLENT LITERACY INSTRUCTION builds a strong foundation for learning and, in turn, equips children to develop their potential, growing into adults who participate fully in their communities and society, enjoying the fullness that continuous learning brings to their lives.”

—From Children’s Rights to Excellent Literacy Instruction (International Literacy Association, 2019)

When it comes to early literacy instruction, no one is more keenly aware of its importance and the potential to help or hinder a child’s ability to learn than those entrusted to teach critical skills. And, for the most part, you’d be hard-pressed to find people more passionate about the topic.

The results of the ILA 2020 What’s Hot in Literacy Survey underscore these principles. Read on to learn more.
### Top Critical Topics for Improving Literacy Outcomes in the Next Decade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>CHOSEN AS A TOP 5 TOPIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building early literacy skills through a balanced approach that combines foundational and language comprehension instruction</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determining effective instructional strategies for struggling readers</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing equity and opportunity for all learners</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing professional learning and development opportunities for practicing educators</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing access to high-quality, diverse books and content</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building early literacy skills through explicit and systematic phonics instruction</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching critical literacy skills and how to analyze source material and authorial intent</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasizing culturally responsive curriculum and instruction</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requiring teacher preparation programs to meet rigorous standards</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing explicit instruction in strategies for close reading and comprehension of informational and narrative text</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prioritizing in-school independent reading with student choice of text</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determining effective diagnostic assessments for struggling readers</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fostering social-emotional competencies through literacy instruction</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leveraging formative assessments to modify or guide literacy instruction</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducting research in cognitive science and neuroscience that reveals how reading skills are acquired</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leveraging literacy as a pathway to social justice</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing focus on digital literacy through composing and communicating using digital technologies and evaluating digital information</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementing standards for practicing specialized literacy professionals (reading/literacy specialists, literacy/instructional coaches, etc.)</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building early literacy skills through a whole language approach</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leveraging summative assessments to determine achievement of literacy skills at the end of an instructional period</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Respondents Think More Alike Than Not

INSTRUCTIONAL CONCERNS UNIFY teachers, pre-K–12 administrators, literacy consultants, and higher education professionals. The same top critical literacy topics appear on all four subgroup lists, albeit in slightly different orders. Two notable differences: Teachers, who make up 56% of the 1,443 respondents, also include building early literacy skills through explicit and systematic phonics instruction (and rank it third highest), while those working in higher education (37% of respondents) add teaching critical literacy skills and how to analyze source material and authorial intent.

Building Early Literacy Skills Through a Balanced Approach That Combines Both Foundational and Language Comprehension Instruction
Determining Effective Instructional Strategies for Struggling Readers
Building Early Literacy Skills Through Explicit and Systematic Phonics Instruction
Increasing Equity and Opportunity for All Learners
Increasing Professional Learning and Development Opportunities for Practicing Educators
Providing Access to High-Quality, Diverse Books and Content
Teaching Critical Literacy Skills and How to Analyze Source Material and Authorial Intent
LITERACY EXTENDS BEYOND READING to include the skills students need to understand, question, and participate in the world around them. In doing so, literacy transforms not just the child but also the community.

Given that, it’s not surprising that 54% of literacy professionals believe the topic of equity and opportunity for all learners deserves more attention and focus from education policymakers. By comparison, only 4% of respondents think the topic receives too much attention.

Equity isn’t the only concern. Nearly all of the top 10 most critical topics to improve literacy outcomes in the future are also among the top 10 topics that literacy professionals say deserve more focus and attention.

In some cases, professionals are split more evenly. When it comes to increasing focus on digital literacy through composing and communicating using digital technologies and evaluating digital information, for example, 26% of respondents believe the topic receives too much attention while 25% think it should get more.

Not surprisingly, considering current conversations in the field, respondents are divided over the topic of phonics, with 24% saying building early literacy skills through explicit and systematic phonics instruction currently gets too much attention and 31% saying it deserves more attention.

The issues of equity and social justice as well as social-emotional learning are real and impact children and adults alike. As part of the literacy agenda, there will be an opportunity to heighten awareness of these issues and focus on a variety of intervention plans to address them.

—Teacher Educator, Jamaica
### Receiving Too Much Focus and Attention vs. Should Receive More Focus and Attention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Too Much Focus</th>
<th>Should Receive More Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increasing equity and opportunity for all learners</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing professional learning and development opportunities</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building early literacy skills through a balanced approach</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determining effective instructional strategies for struggling readers</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing access to high-quality, diverse books and content</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching critical literacy skills and how to analyze source material</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasizing culturally responsive curriculum and instruction</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requiring teacher preparation programs to meet rigorous standards</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<td>15%</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<td>26%</td>
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<td>26%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>evaluating digital information</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing explicit instruction in strategies for close reading</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and comprehension of informational and narrative text</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementing standards for practicing specialized literacy professionals</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building early literacy skills through a whole language approach</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leveraging summative assessments to determine achievement</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of literacy skills at the end of an instructional period</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Greatest Challenges Facing Literacy

When asked to identify the greatest challenges in literacy education, some common themes emerge: connecting curriculum and instruction, addressing student challenges, leveling the reading playing field, and differentiating instruction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Addressing disconnects between the school curriculum and students’ actual needs in terms of literacy support and instruction</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting students with social-emotional or behavioral challenges</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting students reading below grade level</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging families in a child’s literacy development</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building and sustaining a love of reading in students</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting students with dyslexia</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designing specific differentiated literacy instruction</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting English learners</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping students engaged</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting students with other academic learning challenges</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing multiple small groups of instruction</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting and challenging students reading at or above grade level</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying materials that promote specific literacy skills needed by readers</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting students with auditory processing challenges</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching students how to read</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
WE KNOW THE SINGLE GREATEST FACTOR IN A STUDENT’S ACHIEVEMENT IS THE TEACHER, but we also know that teachers cannot, and should not, feel alone in helping students reach their potential. That’s what makes access to collaboration, professional development, and evidence-based research strategies so critical for both teachers and students to succeed.

When respondents were asked to choose what support they need to address challenges in literacy, more than anything else, they chose more time for teachers to collaborate with other educators facing similar challenges. **Sixty percent** of teachers and **65%** of literacy consultants believe additional time with colleagues can ensure the greatest challenges in literacy are addressed.

All other needs respondents pointed to fall into the categories of assessments and interventions, access to materials, and professional development.

### Supports to Help Students Succeed

**Assessments and Interventions**

- **#2** Creation and implementation of academic interventions for students who require them (50%)
- **#6** Assessments that help pinpoint student challenges (36%)
- **#9** Diagnostic assessment tools and expertise (31%)

**Access to Materials**

- **#4** Access to additional high-quality instructional materials (42%)
- **#7** Access to more authentic texts (32%)

**Professional Development and/or a Greater Understanding of**

- **#3** ways to differentiate instruction (50%)
- **#5** balanced literacy instruction (39%)
- **#10** the role explicit, systematic phonics instruction should play (30%)
- **#11** comprehension and close reading instruction (27%)
- **#12** the role whole language instruction should play (13%)
Educational Roles and Views on Support

OPINIONS VARY ON WHAT SUPPORTS are most needed to address the challenges mentioned, depending on respondents’ positions in the literacy field. The breakdown below displays some of the differences in responses among teachers, pre-K-12 administrators, literacy consultants, and higher education professionals.

### Assessments and Interventions
- **Diagnostic assessment tools and expertise:**
  - Teachers: 28%, Pre-K–12 Administrators: 41%, Literacy Consultants: 36%, Higher Education Professionals: 31%
- **Assessments that help pinpoint student challenges:**
  - Teachers: 37%, Pre-K–12 Administrators: 43%, Literacy Consultants: 39%, Higher Education Professionals: 32%
- **Creation and implementation of academic interventions for students who require them:**
  - Teachers: 49%, Pre-K–12 Administrators: 51%, Literacy Consultants: 44%, Higher Education Professionals: 50%

### Access to Materials
- **Access to more authentic texts:**
  - Teachers: 29%, Pre-K–12 Administrators: 25%, Literacy Consultants: 35%, Higher Education Professionals: 39%
- **Access to additional high-quality instructional materials:**
  - Teachers: 39%, Pre-K–12 Administrators: 35%, Literacy Consultants: 39%, Higher Education Professionals: 48%

### Professional Development
- **Professional development and/or a greater understanding of the role explicit, systematic phonics instruction should play:**
  - Teachers: 28%, Pre-K–12 Administrators: 40%, Literacy Consultants: 39%, Higher Education Professionals: 28%
- **Professional development and/or a greater understanding of the role whole language instruction should play:**
  - Teachers: 26%, Pre-K–12 Administrators: 12%, Literacy Consultants: 12%, Higher Education Professionals: 13%
- **Professional development and/or a greater understanding of comprehension and close reading instruction:**
  - Teachers: 22%, Pre-K–12 Administrators: 39%, Literacy Consultants: 32%, Higher Education Professionals: 32%
- **Professional development and/or a greater understanding of ways to differentiate instruction:**
  - Teachers: 40%, Pre-K–12 Administrators: 63%, Literacy Consultants: 66%, Higher Education Professionals: 60%
- **Professional development and/or a greater understanding of balanced literacy instruction:**
  - Teachers: 31%, Pre-K–12 Administrators: 55%, Literacy Consultants: 46%, Higher Education Professionals: 47%
LITERACY PROFESSIONALS SERVE AS EDUCATIONAL LIFE PRESERVERS, given the wide swath of situations and issues that affect a child’s literacy learning and development. Their responsibilities, according to respondents, include creating instructional strategies and activities, knowing how to deliver instructional strategies effectively, and ensuring professional excellence.

The top two responsibilities of literacy educators:

- Teaching reading and writing strategies that apply across disciplines (content area literacy) - 91%
- Staying abreast of the latest literacy research - 89%
- Pursuing professional learning opportunities - 84%
- Teaching strategies for using texts in the context of each academic discipline (disciplinary literacy) - 76%
- Creating a culturally responsive environment - 75%
- Cultivating a professional learning network - 65%
- Addressing social and emotional needs - 62%
- Teaching the safe and effective use of digital tools - 61%
- Addressing inequity in education and instruction - 61%
- Ensuring family engagement in student learning - 61%

Because a child’s life outside the classroom can impact performance on the inside, it’s also important, respondents say, that literacy educators are capable of addressing the needs of the whole child. More than 60% believe a literacy educator is responsible for creating a culturally responsive environment, being able to address the social and emotional needs of a student, addressing inequity, and finding ways to ensure families are engaged in student learning.
AFTER NOTING THE TOP RESPONSIBILITIES OF LITERACY EDUCATORS, respondents were asked if there were any responsibilities with which they need more support—and a wide range was cited. Topping the list: addressing inequity in education and instruction, staying abreast of the latest literacy research, and ensuring family engagement in student learning.

Effective teaching cannot afford to be generic. One size cannot fit all. Current research is bringing more and more pertinent information to light. When we know better (and when we know more), we do better for our students.

—Classroom Teacher, Cayman Islands
Addressing Instructional Inequity
Examining Barriers to Equity

**UNsurprisingly, nearly all literacy professionals** agree that literacy is a fundamental right—98% of them, to be exact. And to guarantee that right, 96% of them are in favor of free, high-quality preschool education that lays the foundation for literacy development.

This overwhelming support reflects a commitment to increasing equity and opportunity for all learners—a topic that 40% of respondents identify as a top critical issue.

It’s also an issue for which they’re willing to shoulder responsibility. In fact, 82% feel literacy educators should be accountable for addressing inequity and human rights with their students. Even so, a majority (84%) acknowledge that we still have a long way to go in terms of recognizing and addressing biases in literacy instruction.

Another barrier to equitable literacy instruction: the variability of teacher knowledge and effectiveness. A whopping 71% of respondents selected this as one of the greatest barriers to equity in literacy.

---

“Early childhood education is overlooked by many, especially the education community. High-quality, literature-rich early childhood education helps close the gaps before it is too late. Preschool needs to be universal and kindergarten should be full day.”

—Classroom Teacher, United States
Examining Barriers to Equity (cont.)

A MAJORITY OF THOSE WHO COMPLETED THE SURVEY believe that instructional equity is key to achieving educational equity.

92% EDUCATIONAL EQUITY FOR ALL STUDENTS CANNOT BE ACHIEVED WITHOUT INSTRUCTIONAL EQUITY.

84% WE STILL HAVE A LONG WAY TO GO IN RECOGNIZING AND ADDRESSING BIASES IN LITERACY INSTRUCTION.

Shortcomings in awareness and response to issues related to diversity and/or cultural sensitivities are also cited as barriers to equity, as are inadequate access to high-quality resources and variability in family engagement.

In all, the majority of the barriers cited (displayed in full on the following page), focus on areas of intervention and support; issues of diversity, bias, and cultural responsiveness; and access to resources in school and at home.

All people, regardless of gender, age, race, and ability, should have equal distribution of education... knowledge and resources.
—Teacher Educator, Kenya

A MAJORITY OF THOSE WHO COMPLETED THE SURVEY believe that variability of teacher knowledge and effectiveness is one of the greatest barriers to equity in literacy

71% believe that variability of teacher knowledge and effectiveness is one of the greatest barriers to equity in literacy

Percentages Among Subgroups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subgroup</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-K-12 Administrators</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy Consultants</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Education Professionals</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## The Barriers to Equity in Literacy Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barrier</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variability of teacher knowledge and teaching effectiveness</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate access to books in families' homes</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variability of family engagement in literacy and learning</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of access to affordable, high-quality early literacy education</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate strategies for intervention</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate support/resources for English learners</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate or incorrect diagnosis of reading disabilities</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of awareness of instructors' implicit biases</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of diversity and cultural relevance in literacy resources</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of cultural responsiveness in literacy instruction</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate access to books in school</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of diversity within the teacher population</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of diversity within the literacy researcher population</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate focus on academic language</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Educational Roles and Views on Barriers to Equity

DEPENDING ON THEIR ROLE AND MISSION, literacy professionals have varying opinions on where barriers to equity lie. When answering the question What do you feel are the greatest barriers to equity in education?, we found that teachers place a higher emphasis on barriers related to challenges at home, such as the variability of family engagement in literacy and learning and inadequate access to books in families’ homes.

Higher education professionals, pre-K–12 administrators, and literacy consultants focus more on barriers related to diversity, including lack of awareness of instructors’ implicit biases and lack of diversity and cultural relevance in literacy resources. Another notable difference is administrators placing a lower emphasis on inadequate access to books in schools.

For literacy consultants, additional emphasis is placed on intervention and support, such as inadequate strategies for interventions and inadequate support/resources for English learners.
Ensuring Excellence in Reading Instruction
Excellence Starts at the Beginning

EVERY DAY, TEACHERS ARE TASKED with providing literacy instruction that meets the needs of all learners. To do that, they must be equipped with knowledge of foundational literacy instruction and how to apply evidence-based best practices, as well as the ability to work effectively with other educators in a collaborative environment.

Excellence begins with teacher preparation, but it doesn’t end with preservice programs; excellence must be sustained by research and lifelong learning. From the perspective of respondents, more work needs to be done to remove barriers and prepare teachers for the rigorous challenges they will face in the classroom and to support their ongoing professional growth through access to professional development opportunities and the latest literacy research.

“Quality in education depends on the quality of interactions students receive in all scenarios. Teachers well prepared are needed to improve literacy in all learners.”
—Classroom Teacher, Venezuela
Teacher Preparation Programs Must Be Strengthened

WHEN IT COMES TO TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS, a minority of respondents—only 40%—say that they are equipping today’s educators with the skills they need for effective early reading instruction.

Those who work closest with students and their families feel most strongly about the need for improvements to teacher preparation programs. Only 27% of pre-K–12 administrators agree that teacher preparation programs are adequately preparing teachers, followed by teachers (34%), literacy consultants (36%), and higher education professionals (54%).

This wide range suggests a significant disconnect between the people who are training the next generation of educators and educators themselves.

On Teacher Preparation Programs

- **40%** total agree that teacher preparation programs are equipping today’s educators with the skills they need for effective reading instruction.
- **36%** of literacy consultants agree.
- **34%** of teachers agree.
- **54%** of higher education professionals agree.
- **27%** of pre-K–12 administrators agree.
## Teachers Rate Their Own Preparation

TO GAIN FURTHER INSIGHT, teachers were asked to share what methods of early literacy instruction were included in their preservice programs and to rate how well prepared they were in each of those methods.

Literature-based methods were cited most often, though only 39% of respondents feel they were adequately prepared to employ them. Additionally, while majorities say their program included phonics (63%) and phonemic awareness (59%), only 27% and 26%, respectively, say their program did an “excellent” or “very good” job of preparing them to use these methods.

Similar results were found for other methods as well.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>EXCELLENT</th>
<th>VERY GOOD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literature based</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phonics</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phonemic awareness</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole language</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning emphasis</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code emphasis</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroscience based</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The impact of this limited preparation in instructional methods may be seen in the responses from teachers working with students under the age of 10. Though they are the ones working directly with early readers, they are surprisingly less likely than teachers of older students to feel prepared in phonics, phonemic awareness, and whole language methods.
Comparing Methods and Importance

LITERACY PROFESSIONALS’ THOUGHTS on the most important methods for early reading instruction mirror the differences found among the focuses in their teacher preparation programs.

A majority (51%) say a balanced approach that combines both foundational and language comprehension instruction is among the most critical topics for improving literacy outcomes in the next decade, with 47% saying the topic doesn’t receive enough attention.

When it comes to explicit and systematic phonics instruction, only 32% say it is among the most critical topics. And respondents are split in how much attention the topic is given, with 31% saying we should be paying more attention to phonics instruction and another 24% saying it already gets too much.

Regarding professional development, 39% of respondents would like more PD and/or a greater understanding of a balanced approach, while 30% would like more PD and/or a greater understanding of explicit and systematic phonics instruction.

There is little variation in how subgroups feel regarding the importance of building early literacy skills through a balanced approach. No significant differences are found in the importance they place on a whole language approach either, but notable differences among subgroups exist in the importance placed on explicit and systematic phonics instruction.

Percentage Ranking Phonics Instruction as a Top 5 Critical Topic

Building early literacy skills through a balanced approach that combines both foundational and language comprehension instruction

- RECEIVING TOO MUCH FOCUS AND ATTENTION: 5%
- SHOULD RECEIVE MORE FOCUS AND ATTENTION: 47%

Building early literacy skills through explicit and systematic phonics instruction

- RECEIVING TOO MUCH FOCUS AND ATTENTION: 24%
- SHOULD RECEIVE MORE FOCUS AND ATTENTION: 31%

Building early literacy skills through a whole language approach

- RECEIVING TOO MUCH FOCUS AND ATTENTION: 23%
- SHOULD RECEIVE MORE FOCUS AND ATTENTION: 9%
Issues in the Classroom

BEYOND TEACHER PREPARATION, other areas of importance in ensuring excellence in reading instruction center on issues related to instructional excellence. More specifically, respondents point to areas such as determining effective instructional strategies for struggling readers (42%), teaching critical literacy skills and how to analyze source material and authorial intent (26%), emphasizing culturally responsive curriculum and instruction (24%), providing explicit instruction in strategies for close reading and comprehension of informational and narrative text (23%), and fostering social-emotional competencies through literacy instruction (19%).

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Percentage Ranking Each in the Top 5 Most Critical Topics for Improving Literacy Outcomes

- Determining effective instructional strategies for struggling readers: Teachers 45%, Pre-K-12 Administrators 39%, Literacy Consultants 39%, Higher Education Professionals 37%
- Teaching critical literacy skills and how to analyze source material and authorial intent: Teachers 23%, Pre-K-12 Administrators 23%, Literacy Consultants 25%, Higher Education Professionals 21%
- Emphasizing culturally responsive curriculum and instruction: Teachers 21%, Pre-K-12 Administrators 27%, Literacy Consultants 24%, Higher Education Professionals 30%
- Providing explicit instruction in strategies for close reading and comprehension of informational and narrative text: Teachers 24%, Pre-K-12 Administrators 25%, Literacy Consultants 19%, Higher Education Professionals 21%
- Fostering social-emotional competencies through literacy instruction: Teachers 20%, Pre-K-12 Administrators 21%, Literacy Consultants 16%, Higher Education Professionals 18%

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Extremes are usually not helpful for progress. Taking a balanced approach to literacy that includes word strategies, read-alouds, shared and guided reading, independent reading, and a similar program in writing is the best approach to capturing all learners.

—Literacy Consultant, Canada
Addressing Challenges in Reading Instruction

ISSUES RELATED TO READING INSTRUCTION are among the greatest challenges in literacy, with the biggest hurdles including supporting students reading below grade level (48%), supporting English learners (37%), and teaching students how to read (20%).

To help level that playing field, 50% of literacy professionals say the support they need is academic interventions for students who require them, while 31% say they need diagnostic assessment tools and expertise in using them.

The topic of differentiating instruction is also among the top challenges, with 40% citing the greatest challenge as designing specific differentiated literacy instruction and 29% pointing to managing multiple small groups of instruction.

Professional development and/or a greater understanding of ways to differentiate instruction is identified by 50% of respondents as a support that is needed to address literacy challenges.

“Teachers need more autonomy to plan authentic literacy instruction based on real literature and talk. Teachers must move beyond the scripted curriculum. There is no quick fix in literacy education.”

—Teacher Educator, United States
Where More Support Is Needed

Given the challenges of teaching students—27%—say they need support in both creating a professional learning network and pursuing professional learning opportunities.

In both situations, literacy professionals who selected these items as among the top three responsibilities of literacy educators believe that help should come from their school or district administration, professional associations, and staff with expertise in the area.

### Who should provide direction, leadership, and support pursuing professional learning opportunities?

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School or district administration</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional associations</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff with expertise in the area</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic experts/consultants</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleagues</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policymakers</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community organizations</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Who should provide direction, leadership, and support cultivating a professional learning network?

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School or district administration</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleagues</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional associations</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff with expertise in the area</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic experts/consultants</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community organizations</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policymakers</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Where More Support Is Needed (cont.)

In addition, 30% of teachers say they need more support with content area literacy, while 24% say they need support with disciplinary literacy. Literacy professionals who selected these items as among the top three responsibilities of literacy educators believe support should come from staff with expertise in the area, academic experts/consultants, and colleagues.

Who should provide direction, leadership, and support in content area literacy?

- Staff with expertise in the area: 84%
- Academic experts/consultants: 73%
- Colleagues: 72%
- School or district administration: 60%
- Professional associations: 55%
- Policymakers: 14%
- Community organizations: 7%

Who should provide direction, leadership, and support in disciplinary literacy?

- Staff with expertise in the area: 86%
- Academic experts/consultants: 78%
- Colleagues: 69%
- Professional associations: 57%
- School or district administration: 54%
- Policymakers: 15%
- Community organizations: 11%
The Role of Research

RESPONDENTS HIGHLY VALUE the role of research in ensuring excellence in reading instruction, with an overall 93% agreeing that research is the backbone of effective literacy instruction. It may not be surprising that literacy consultants and higher education professionals agree the most (96%), but pre-K–12 administrators (94%) and teachers (90%) follow closely behind.

There is also an awareness that literacy research isn’t something static but rather constantly evolving. Half or more of teachers, literacy consultants, and higher education professionals say that staying up to date on research is among the top three most important responsibilities of literacy educators.

It’s also cited as an area in which literacy professionals want more support. Nearly half of all respondents—44%—say that staying abreast of the latest literacy research is an area in which they need more support. When it comes to who should provide that assistance, several avenues are cited.

A strong majority (85%) agree that academic experts and professional associations should provide the direction, leadership, and support to help educators keep up with research. There is also support among respondents for help being provided internally, though disconnects can be found there. For example, 81% of administrators and 75% of teachers feel support with research should come from school or district administration, but only 67% of literacy consultants and 65% of higher education professionals agree.

Where Respondents Think Support With Research Should Come From
Promoting Access and Opportunity
The Right to a Literacy-Rich Environment

ILA’S CHILDREN’S RIGHTS TO EXCELLENT LITERACY INSTRUCTION position statement asserts that all children have the right to supportive learning environments and high-quality resources. That includes not only access to books at school and at home but also robust literacy-rich experiences that honor social and cultural identities and are culturally responsive, student centered, and free of bias.

What’s Hot respondents support this right, with more than one third saying providing access to high-quality, diverse books and content is among the top five most critical topics for improving literacy outcomes in the next decade, and 59% saying it is among the most important topics.

Despite the critical importance, however, students don’t always have the chance to read when and where they want or the opportunity to experience books that provide—in the words of scholar Rudine Sims Bishop—windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors.

“The narratives in children’s literature matter. They have huge influence. We are showing children what society values, devalues, and who is invisible. We must share many diverse stories and help prevent stereotypes and future generations [from inheriting] bias.”

—Researcher/Scholar, United States
ACCESS TO BOOKS IN GENERAL is viewed by respondents as a top barrier to equity in literacy instruction. Fifty-seven percent of respondents say a barrier is families not having enough books at home, while 40% say a barrier is not having enough at school.

Given this, it’s not surprising that 42% of literacy professionals say more support is needed in getting access to high-quality instructional materials and 32% say more support is needed in gaining access to more authentic texts.
Where Access Should Be Improved

STRENGTHENING CLASSROOM LIBRARIES is a top way to ensure students have access to high-quality books, say 36% of respondents, while 18% say school libraries should be bolstered. Only 15% think strengthening home libraries is key and a mere 7% point to community libraries.

Literacy consultants are more likely to say that classroom libraries should be strengthened, while teachers put more emphasis on strengthening home libraries. This is a trend seen throughout the report: Teachers tend to look more for external support when looking at challenges and solutions.

Types of Libraries That Should Be Strengthened

- Classroom libraries: 35%, 35%, 36%
- School libraries: 19%, 17%, 20%
- Nontraditional libraries: 19%, 16%, 17%
- Home libraries: 15%, 11%, 12%
- Community libraries: 5%, 9%, 9%
- Mobile libraries: 6%, 5%, 5%
- Nonpractitioners: 4%

It’s critical to note the importance of high-quality and authentic texts as well. Respondents recognize that the issue of access and opportunity is about more than just access to books themselves. 42% of literacy professionals cite a lack of diversity and cultural relevance in literacy resources as a barrier to equity in literacy instruction, and an equal percentage point to a lack of cultural responsiveness.

In addition, 75% say creating a culturally responsive environment is a responsibility of literacy educators.

THE VALUE OF LIBRARIANS

Respondents could choose only one answer to the question of which type of libraries should be strengthened, and survey results tell us that classroom libraries are seen as a main access point to reach the most learners. But this in no way implies that educators don’t use or value school and community libraries and librarians as sources of support for literacy learning. If anything, it demonstrates the need for more resources that can connect educators and families with these knowledgeable literacy partners. For some ideas, see ILA’s Advocating for Children’s Rights to Read manual: rightstoread.org/takeaction.
IN ADDITION TO IMPROVING ACCESS TO RICH READING MATERIALS, 40% of respondents say that making time for student-selected independent reading during the school day is the best way to help all students grow into strong readers. Another 33% say guided reading and/or small-group instruction is the best way. Literacy consultants are more likely than teachers to prefer guided reading and/or small-group instruction over time for student-selected independent reading.

Independent reading is an area where teachers are especially passionate: 25% place prioritizing student-selected independent reading as a top five critical topic, six percentage points more than pre-K–12 administrators and nearly 10 percentage points more than literacy consultants.

And while 91% of teachers say time should be set aside daily for independent reading in school, a significantly smaller amount—60%—are actually able to block off the time.

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Valuing time to be spent on independent reading in the classroom makes all the difference, I think, in literacy instruction. If you can inspire children to read and they don’t want to put the book down, it solves a lot of these problems! Being patient and finding that key with each student is paramount.

—Classroom Teacher, Turkey
Barriers to Independent Reading

SO WHAT ECLIPSES INDEPENDENT READING TIME during the school day? When asked to choose, 70% of respondents say there isn’t enough time in the day, given other curriculum goals.

Other reasons cited include independent reading not being valued by pre-K–12 administrators (40%), students not staying focused on their reading (32%), teachers not valuing it (30%), the literacy curriculum does not include independent reading (30%), and there are not enough books available in school (27%).

In some cases, there are stark differences in answers among the literacy professionals. Literacy consultants and higher education professionals are much more likely to say administrators and teachers do not value independent reading. Conversely, teachers and administrators are more likely to say student attention is a factor affecting independent reading. They also are less likely to cite a lack of books in school as an issue.
When we delved into the demographics of survey respondents, we looked at the variations among certain subcategories of professionals and found some interesting differences in responses when comparing by region, profession, or student learner level.

- Teachers working with students ages 15–18 are more likely than those working with younger students to say barriers to equity include inadequate support/resources for English learners (57%), lack of diversity and cultural relevance in literacy resources (51%), and inadequate access to books in school (40%).

- Teachers who work with students ages 10 and under are more likely than those working with older students to select increasing professional learning and development opportunities for practicing educators in their top five critical topics.

- Those in the Western region of the United States are least likely to agree that teacher preparation programs are equipping educators with needed skills for reading instruction: West (31%), Northeast (40%), Midwest (40%), and South (44%).

- Teachers working with students ages 10 and under are less likely to feel prepared in regard to phonics, phonemic awareness, and whole language methods compared with teachers working with ages 11–14.

- Teachers working with students ages 11+ are more likely than those working with younger students to say it is important to provide access to high-quality, diverse books and content: 11–14 (37%), 15–18 (38%), 8–10 (33%), and 7 and under (34%).

- Teachers are more likely to say prioritizing independent reading is a top five critical topic (25%) than pre-K–12 administrators (19%), higher education professionals (18%), and literacy consultants (16%).

- Pre-K–12 administrators (85%) are more likely to say that 20+ minutes a day should be dedicated to independent reading as compared with higher education professionals (80%) and literacy consultants (78%).

- A desire to strengthen school libraries is more often cited by literacy professionals in urban settings (21%) compared with those from rural settings (16%) and suburban settings (16%).
Appendix A: Acknowledgments

THE WHAT’S HOT IN LITERACY SURVEY RESULTS have been a trusted resource for classroom teachers, teacher educators, researchers, and literacy leaders across the spectrum for 20-plus years. ILA thanks the following literacy professionals who played a part in the qualitative phase of this year’s project by participating in one of four online focus groups. Their feedback was used to select the topics included in the 2020 survey.

- Patrick Burke, Lecturer, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland
- Esmeralda Carini, Literacy District Educational Specialist, Hawaii Department of Education
- Tiffany A. Flowers, Assistant Professor, Georgia State University
- Paul Emerich France, Teacher, The Latin School of Chicago, Illinois
- Sean Gaillard, Principal, Moore Magnet Elementary School, North Carolina
- Maureen Hall, Literacy Coach, Rutgers Center for Literacy Development, New Jersey
- Jacy Ippolito, Associate Professor and Department Chair, Salem State University, Massachusetts
- Aeriale Johnson, Teacher, Washington Elementary School, California
- Margaret G. McKeown, Clinical Professor Emerita, Senior Scientist, Learning Research and Development Center, University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- Donalyn Miller, Author and Teacher, Texas
- Todd Nesloney, Director of Culture and Strategic Leadership, Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association
- Molly Ness, Associate Professor, Fordham University, New York
- Stephen Peters, ILA Vice President of the Board and Superintendent, Laurens County School District 55, South Carolina
- Eugene Pringle Jr., Assistant Professor, Bethune-Cookman University, Florida
- Melissa Sonnek, Elementary Program Administrator, Roseville Area Schools, Minnesota
- Jacob Olaoluwa Sule, Executive Director, iRead To Live Initiative, Nigeria
- Jon M. Wargo, Assistant Professor, Boston College, Massachusetts
Appendix B: Locations Represented

THE ILA 2020 WHAT’S HOT IN LITERACY SURVEY received 1,443 responses from the following 65 countries and territories:

Afghanistan
Australia
Brazil
Bulgaria
Cambodia
Cameroon
Canada
Cayman Islands
China
Colombia
Croatia
Czech Republic
Denmark
Egypt, Arab Rep.
eSwatini (formerly Swaziland)
Finland
Germany
Ghana
Grenada
Guam
Honduras
India
Indonesia
Ireland
Israel
Jamaica
Japan
Kenya
Luxembourg
Malaysia
Mauritius
Mexico
Mozambique
Nepal
Netherlands
New Zealand
Nigeria
Pakistan
Peru
Philippines
Portugal
Puerto Rico
Romania
Rwanda
Saint Kitts and Nevis
Saint Lucia
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
Serbia
Sierra Leone
Singapore
South Africa
South Korea, Republic of
South Sudan
Sweden
Taiwan
Thailand
Trinidad and Tobago
Turkey
Uganda
United Kingdom
UK - Armed Forces Europe (APO AE)
United States
Venezuela
Virgin Islands, British
Yemen
Appendix C: Subgroup Definitions

FOR THE PURPOSE OF EXAMINING VARIATIONS among survey answers, we asked respondents to select the role with which they most closely identified. We then organized the selections into the categories of Teachers, Pre-K–12 Administrators, Literacy Consultants, and Higher Education Professionals.

**Teachers**
- Classroom Teacher
- Librarian/Media Specialist
- Literacy Coordinator/Supervisor
- Literacy/Instructional Coach
- Reading/Literacy Specialist
- Special Education Teacher

**Pre-K–12 Administrators**
- School Administrator
- District Administrator

**Literacy Consultants**
- Literacy/Education Consultant for Pre-K–12 Schools
- Literacy/Education Consultant Outside of Pre-K–12 Schools

**Higher Education Professionals**
- Full-Time Student
- Researcher/Scholar
- Teacher Educator
- University/College Administrator
Literacy is the key to making our world a better place, which is something we should all strive for—to leave it better than we found it.

—School Administrator, Canada