LITERACY LEADERSHIP BRIEF

# Transforming Literacy Teacher Preparation

## Practice Makes Possible

**N**ot all literacy teacher preparation programs are directed toward the same goals. Some programs assume that literacy teacher educators should prepare new teachers to fit into the norms and expectations for literacy teaching in schools as they exist today. Other programs assume that the responsibility of teacher educators is to prepare teachers to introduce and transform teaching practices that are more powerful for learners and more responsive to the changing forms of literacy in our society.

Although framing the goals of literacy teacher education in simple binaries can be problematic, transformative literacy teacher preparation is now at a point where it is both a necessity and a responsibility.

Literacy teachers must embrace a moral stance in the face of an educational system that is falling short on the promise of providing educational opportunities for all.

## Literacy Teacher Preparation: The Shifting Landscape

The shifting landscape for literacy teacher preparation reform is very much aligned with the shifting landscape for literacy practices. As literacy professionals have grown in our understanding of how people learn and how they are using literacy in the world, we also have grown in our understanding of the demands facing literacy teachers and teacher educators. The trend line can be traced through three distinct perspectives.

### Skills

The skills perspective dominated the teaching of literacy in the United States from colonial schools through most of the 20th century and continues to dominate in many contexts for teaching. Reading and writing, viewed as behaviors, could be deconstructed into componential skills that could be arranged from simple to complex and taught in a manner that promised mastery of the "basics." Learners were both blank slates and passive recipients of all that is important in becoming literate—an approach once described as "banking education." In teacher preparation, the skills perspective, framed in the competency-based teacher education movement of the 1960s, promised an efficient and effective model for teacher preparation. Preservice teachers worked in courses organized around

training modules that focused on specific skill domains. Transfer of these skills to classrooms was ensured through practice teaching in schools under close supervision.

## Strategies

As constructivist theories of learning displaced behaviorist principles, the literacy learner was repositioned as active in making meaning through language and experience. The learner was strategic in drawing on resources and gaining control over the complexities of language processes. The teacher supported the reader and writer in using these strategies in more powerful ways. In teacher preparation, preservice teachers were viewed as coming into the profession deeply shaped by their experiences, both positive and negative, as students in schools. Teaching strategies were constructed and reconstructed through experiences working with children. Teacher educators engaged with preservice teachers in the complex decision-making processes required in the context of teaching. Thoughtfully adaptive teaching that grew out of experience and reflection was the goal.

## Practice

As socioconstructivist theories have grown in popularity, researchers have come to focus not only on what is inside the child's head as he or she engages with literacy, but also consider what the child is "inside of" in terms of sociocultural contexts for literacy practices. Through this perspective, literacy professionals have become more aware of the growing divide between the literacy practices engaged with in school and out of school—in particular, with the use of new literacies. We have also become more aware of the ways in which access to particular forms of literacy and tools of literacy tend to privilege some and exclude others. Teachers are responsible for opening new spaces for learners who are making choices about literacy that are meaningful and powerful.

In teacher education, the practice perspective embraces the social nature of teaching and learning. Practices refer to the behavioral, cognitive, social, emotional, cultural, moral, and embodied ways that teaching is enacted and cannot be deconstructed into subareas without corrupting the practice. Practice in teaching is not getting ready to perform but rather

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real teaching, as in the ways medical doctors practice medicine or attorneys practice law. Practices are shaped by sociocultural norms of what is expected and valued within a community of practice. These communities can constrain (i.e., prohibit change or variation) or support change (i.e., the growing of more powerful perspectives). Communities can be open and scaffold new members into their practices or can set up barriers for entry.

### Resistance to Change

The evolution from skills to strategies to practice views reflects the work of the literacy teachers and scholars using research and theory inside and outside of schools to grow our understandings. These are not small shifts but major reconstructions of how we view teaching and learning. In the real world, however, resistance to change abounds. Although the goal of closing the so-called achievement gap remains high on the public agenda for schools, the tools being used to guide reform efforts (e.g., testing, sorting, labeling, and a reductionist curriculum) are actually the same tools used in the efficiency era based on a factory production model. It is no surprise that these dehumanizing efforts yield the same results over and over. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Society is served well and inequities are preserved. Literacy continues to be viewed as a set of technical skills and not as a set of practices that are imbued and embodied in the rich cultural lives of all children, families, and communities.

## The Path Forward for Literacy Teacher Educators

Transformation of literacy teaching through the transformation of literacy teacher preparation has been a long journey. (For a succinct historical perspective on past efforts at transformative change, see https://bit.ly/2siGcwJ.) We simply cannot expect changes in the practices of teachers in classrooms without changing our own practices as teacher educators. It is a journey that will depend on individual literacy teacher educators committing to change in their practices despite the (sometimes) oppressive conditions that surround their work. Literacy teacher educators, like classroom teachers, face similar kinds of institutional norms and structures that are resistant to change. Transforming practices requires radical imagination

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and effort. The following suggestions can help accomplish that transformation and are drawn from the growing body of research on initial teacher preparation.

## Think Big

Sometimes we think of change as tinkering. We change a reading or two. We revise an assignment. We work more online, creating synchronous and asynchronous contexts for promoting dialogue. Although these changes are important, they are not transformative. Life is too short for just rearranging the furniture. We should begin to think of change in terms of a program and not just the world of isolated courses that are institutional constraints for higher education that was never designed to prepare teachers. How can courses articulate or blend across a program? How can courses taken at the same time work together? How can we continue to work with the same group of students through their program? Every time you respond to your own imaginative thinking about your program and come to say "I can't," ask yourself, "How could I?"

## Grow Practices

Just as we know that there is no perfect method for teaching literacy and that it is the thoughtfully adaptive teacher that matters, we must resist the search for "best practices" in teacher preparation and start growing practices into more powerful forms. We can begin by disrupting the divisions between theory and practice (courses and practicum) and ensure that practice-based work is part of every course experience.

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## Work on Words

The discourse of behaviorism still dominates our teacher preparation program: *objectives*, *lessons*, *accountability*, *feedback*, *transfer*, *skills*, *management*, *mastery*, *behaviors*, *learning outcomes*, *competencies*, *standards*, and so forth. How can we reframe our work into a practice perspective by introducing new terms that describe what we do as teachers? Substituting is a starting place (e.g., *responsibility* for *accountability*, *teaching* for *lessons*, *growth* for *learning*, *growing learning communities* for *management*). You will be amazed how the conversations become more powerful around teaching when we align our words with our theories.

### Expand Perspectives

We have made progress recently in focusing on literacy rather than just reading and writing, but we still see too many courses as reading methods and writing methods. We have barely scratched the surface of multimodal thinking about literacy and the expanding forms of literacy that the world is engaged with, yet our courses are not. When can we begin to think about disciplinary literacies as something that should be topics of conversation in all classrooms and not just secondary curriculum? When will literacy become a tool and not a subject?

### Connect to Schools

Your most important allies in the transformation of teacher preparation are classroom teachers. There are outstanding classroom teachers everywhere waiting to connect with university thinking and the work of teacher education. Grow relationships with these teachers on the basis of your shared goals of transforming teaching.

### Coteach

Forget about "demonstration" teaching and "model" teaching. Jump into classrooms regularly and coteach with your school colleagues and your preservice teachers. If you are demonstrating anything, you are demonstrating vulnerability, imagination, risk taking, and how to reflect and grow with others.

### Create Hybrid Spaces for Teaching

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Sometimes, in working to transform teaching, we need to create spaces where the teaching is real (in terms of working to support students' literacy growth) but the context is something other than a traditional classroom. Try preservice teachers working with parents in adult ESL/literacy work. Try preservice teachers working in a community, environmental center with students, and inquiry. Try one-on-one tutorials around student interests. The understandings and values developed in these settings will find their way into classrooms over time.

### Coach Into Practice and Coach for Transformation

We are stuck in models of coaching rooted in supervision. We (the experts) give feedback to our students on their performance (e.g., "two glows and a grow"). What if we positioned ourselves as

coaches, not in judgment, but in support of our students making sense of their experiences and growing their practices?

### Engage in Practice-Based Research

We must reframe research as a tool of liberation. We are unfinished. This means that not only teacher educators but also preservice teachers need to engage in research as fundamental to their practice. New forms of research (e.g., design-development research, participatory action research, practice-based research) offer opportunities for all of us to take on this responsibility as central to our professional practice. It is important to note that the majority of studies in the CITE-ITEL database are studies conducted by researchers focused on their own practices.

### Build Communities

Practices are shaped, constrained, and grown in communities. There are at least five communities (and probably more) to consider. Community #1 is you and your preservice teachers. Community #2 is composed of the teachers you work with in the schools. Community #3 consists of the parents and leaders in the schools you work in. The funds of knowledge you develop in these communities can be used as resources to build on toward the future. Community #4 is composed of the teacher educators you work with who share in your goal of transformation. Community #5 is the professional community of literacy teacher educators around the world that you engage with in your struggle. Now, how many ways can you link these communities (and others) together?

## Practice Toward the Possible

Why should we expect the next generation of literacy educators to engage in transformative practices when our history of success in the past has been limited and the obstacles today are greater than they have ever been? We are optimistic because we envision a changing approach and not just a call for working harder or continuing the struggle. We see the future of literacy teacher preparation as less about finding a model for a perfect program and trying to clone that model into other spaces, and more about literacy teacher educators using their radical imaginations and their research to build programs in specific contexts that we can all learn from together.

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We see the future in terms of building preparation programs where we as teacher educators are not only engaged in research into our practices but also are preparing teachers to do research in their classrooms to grow their future practices. We see this commitment to research in practice across both contexts as tools of resistance to pressures to conform and as tools to create new pathways into excellence. The transformative power of literacy teacher preparation comes through a nurturing of a disposition to question, to grow practices using the tools of scientific inquiry, and to create powerful communities of practice that are dialogic and expansive.

## MOVING FORWARD

- Consider changes at the program level and not just the course level.
- Look beyond searching for "best practices" to ensure practice-based work in all courses.
- Use language that reflects a practice perspective for more powerful conversations.
- Expand perspectives of literacy to think of literacy as a tool and not just a subject.
- Foster relationships with teachers to help transform teacher preparation.
- Make time to coteach with colleagues and preservice teachers.
- Establish creative teaching spaces outside the traditional classroom.
- Reposition your coaching role away from supervision to coaching into practice and for transformation.
- Engage with research to continue to inform your practice.
- Build and link communities including teachers, parents, and teacher educators to help shape and grow practices.

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