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## Phonics Preparation in Teacher Education Programs

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Phonics Preparation in Teacher Education Programs

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Liberty University

### Phonics Preparation in Teacher Education Programs

Teaching reading is one of the most basic tasks of an American elementary teacher. The basics of reading, phonics, phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, and morphemic awareness constitute the foundation of reading instruction. Without knowledge of these topics, teachers can have little hope of accurately and effectively instructing children in the art of reading. Reading instruction in the earliest levels of schooling can positively or negatively impact the entirety of a student's education. In order for children to learn to read, their teachers must be adequately prepared to teach. Teachers learn to teach reading in teacher education programs at colleges and universities throughout the United States. What actually matters, however, more than the existence of many teacher education programs, is the quality of these programs. Do the colleges and universities actually prepare classroom teachers who can effectively instruct children in reading?

Researchers have conducted various studies in recent years to answer this question: how much do teachers know about the subject of reading, and how well do teacher education programs equip their students to teach reading skills to students? In a worldwide survey of preservice teachers in English-speaking countries, researchers found that these teachers, all of whom attended teacher education programs at universities, only scored an average of 56% correct on the survey assessing the preservice teachers' knowledge of phonics and phonemic, phonological, and morphological awareness (Washburn, Binks-Cantrell, Joshi, Martin-Chang, Arrow, 2016). Preservice teachers in the United States scored even lower, at only 50% correct (Washburn, et al., 2016). In a typical university setting, scores under 70% would be failing grades; therefore, from a grading perspective, the preservice teachers participating in this survey failed in their knowledge of basic reading skills (Washburn, et al., 2016).

In 2010, the U. S. Department of Education released the findings of a survey of over two thousand preservice teachers from ninety-nine different U.S. institutions (Salinger et al., 2010, p. 13). This survey contained more comprehensive questions than the international survey and provided more detailed information about the state of teacher education and preparation in the United States. This survey assessed the topics of alphabets, fluency, and meaning. Alphabets involves phonics and phonemic awareness, fluency relates to oral reading fluency, and the meaning category provides information on comprehension and vocabulary knowledge (Salinger et al., 2010, p. xi). Preservice teachers scored an average of 57% correct on the basic knowledge assessment section of the U.S. Department of Education survey (Salinger et al., 2010, p. 31). In both the international survey comparing the teachers in several English speaking nations and the U.S. survey collecting data from domestic teachers, the U.S. preservice teachers scored in similarly low percentage brackets, demonstrating the need for further investigation into this issue.

While the scores from the international study and the domestic U. S. study are similar, the U. S. study went beyond simply assessing the preservice teachers' knowledge. The Department of Education also asked the teachers to indicate whether their program of study emphasized the topics in the knowledge assessment either in the classroom instruction or in any field experiences the teacher candidates might have experienced. The teacher candidates responded, rating their teacher education programs at an average of 1.7 for focus on basics of reading in the coursework with 1 being little focus, 2 showing moderate focus, and 3 indicating considerable focus on these topics (Salinger et al., 2010, p. 24). The teacher candidates' rating for their field experiences was slightly better, at 1.9 on the same scale (Salinger et al., 2010, p. 24). These ratings, given by preservice teachers for their own program of study, indicate that one of the determining factors in

teachers' knowledge of basic reading instruction is the focus of the education program in which the teacher candidates receive their training.

The program of study which a preservice teacher is in should focus on equipping every candidate to properly educate future students. For this reason, the study by the Department of Education examined the focus of the programs. The Department of Education also probed the relationship between the teacher candidates' scores on the knowledge assessment and the academic scores that the preservice candidates had reported in the assessment (Salinger et al., 2010, p. C-5). These academic scores included the preservice teachers' GPAs and SAT scores. The analysis found that those who had reported high scores on the SAT and a high GPA were more likely to score well on the study's assessment of basic reading knowledge and skills (Salinger et al., 2010, p. C-6). This relationship indicates that while the teacher education programs may be presenting some information in areas such as alphabeticity, phonological awareness, and fluency, the preservice teachers also use their background knowledge to answer correctly on the assessment. Teacher education programs do not seem to provide enough reading instruction to enable each candidate, regardless of background knowledge or education, to fully comprehend the reading knowledge and teaching strategies necessary for teaching future students how to read. Teacher candidates ought to be able to score equally well on the assessment of reading after proper instruction in phonological awareness, fluency, and alphabeticity.

Not only must the focus of the teacher education programs include extensive instruction on teaching basic reading skills, but the instructors of these courses must also be knowledgeable in the area of teaching reading. If the professors have not been educated in the basics of reading, the preservice teachers will not receive proper instruction and will, therefore, not be able to

adequately teach the students in their future classrooms. In two separate studies of teacher educators, the instructors displayed a low understanding of graphemes, exhibited very little working knowledge of phonological awareness, and appeared unacquainted with various phonics instructional methods, such as synthetic phonics (Joshi et al., 2009). Each of these areas are basic reading skills that classroom teachers ought to know and implement with their reading students. However, if the teacher educators remain unfamiliar with these concepts, preservice teachers have limited means of learning and implementing such ideas themselves. Increasing student knowledge of basic reading skills ought to begin at the collegiate or university level, as professors expand their knowledge of phonics and instructional methods and pass this knowledge on to preservice teachers.

While all of these studies have focused on nationwide trends, this paper will narrow its focus to the phonics education in the teacher education program at Liberty University. At Liberty University, preservice teachers must take a literacy block of classes equal to four credit hours as part of their program's training to become competent literacy teachers. Included in this literacy block is a phonics curriculum that teaches and reviews the basic phonics structures that the preservice teachers will have to teach students in their future classrooms. The phonics topics range from phoneme definitions and relationships to syllabication, diphthongs and digraphs. At the beginning of the semester, each student takes a pre-test designed to provide a picture of the student's previous knowledge of phonics. Each week, the students read and study new phonics material, review the information in a weekly class, and take a quiz. At the end of the semester, the students each take a post-test to record what the students have learned over the course of the phonics instruction. Students must score an eighty percent or above on the weekly quizzes or on a final phonics exam in order to pass the class and complete the phonics preparation in Liberty

University's teacher education program. The bulk of the formal phonics instruction for Liberty University's preservice teachers occurs in this literacy block; the instruction is monitored and assessed by the preservice teachers' performance on the weekly quizzes or final exam.

The pre-test and post-test that demonstrate the preservice teachers' growth in phonics knowledge over the course of the semester do not influence the ability of the preservice teachers to pass the class. However, these tests do provide insight into the effectiveness of the program and the growth of the preservice teachers in their knowledge of phonics. The remainder of this paper examines the results of the pre- and post-test in a sample class of 20 students.

The class began with 21 students (preservice teachers), but because of the incomplete data provided by one student, that student was disqualified and the sample size became 20 students. At the beginning of the semester, the class took the pre-test, which consisted of 75 questions over the course of three weeks in 25 question segments. The average score for the 20 students on the pre-test was 46 out of 75 possible points, or a 61.33%. The lowest score was 28 points, while the highest score was 71 points. The students took the post-test in a similar manner, broken into three segments over the last three weeks of the course. The average post-test score was 53.75 out of 75 possible points, or 71.667% correct. The lowest score was a 38, and the highest score was 67 points out of the 75 possible. Therefore, the average improvement from the pre-test to the post-test out of the 20 students was 7.75 points, or 7.75 more questions answered correctly. The students improved their scores by 10.33% over the course of the semester.

The study showed several limitations in the area of scoring, specifically on the pre-test. The professor of the class told the students that they would be taking the pre-test, and that the pre-test would gauge their knowledge of phonics. Furthermore, the professor told the students that their grades on the pre-test would be recorded as part of their class grade. When the students

took the test, the grades were only recorded as a completion grade: every student received a perfect score for the assignment with regard to the students' total grade for the class, and the actual scores on the pre-test were only kept for research purposes. However, since the students did not know that the pre-test scores did not count towards their final grade, the students faced the temptation to study for the pre-test instead of allowing the pre-test to accurately assess their knowledge of phonics prior to any instruction or study. This miscommunication may have resulted in abnormally high pre-test scores. By the time of the post-test, the students knew that their test scores were only kept for research purposes, and that the scores would not influence their final grade. Therefore, the students were much less likely to study for post-test, instead relying on their newly learned knowledge of phonics gained throughout the semester which provided a relatively accurate post-test score. Furthermore, the post-test average of 71.67% is lower than the average phonics quiz score for the class, which was 88.6%. The phonics quizzes were entirely secure and provide an accurate assessment of the students' knowledge. Therefore, the fact that the post-test scores were lower than the quiz scores lends credibility to the post-test scores. However, because of the possibility of inflated pre-test scores, the average improvement from the pre-test to the post-test may not accurately reflect the learning that took place over the course of the semester in the phonics class. In the future, in order to accurately assess the students' previous knowledge of phonics, the professors of this class will take measures to communicate with the students the importance of the accuracy of the test and the grading procedures that occur.

The post-test scores closely reflect the knowledge of phonics with which the preservice teachers in the sample ended their class. While the tests are not the same, the post-test in Liberty University's phonics instruction program covers many of the same topics that the U.S.



Department of Education covered in its assessment of preservice teachers' knowledge of phonics. As stated previously, the preservice teachers in the U.S. Department of Education's sample scored an average of 57% correct on the survey (Salinger et al., 2010, p. 31). In comparison, Liberty University's preservice teachers scored an average of 71.67% on the post-test of phonics knowledge. While Liberty University still must improve its scoring methods and increase its sample size, so far the Liberty preservice teachers have scored well in comparison with students in other teacher education programs throughout the nation. All teachers must have an excellent working knowledge of phonics with which to educate the students of America, and while many preservice teachers across the nation possess little knowledge in regards to phonics, Liberty University's teacher education program works to equip preservice teachers with a greater knowledge of phonics than is currently provided in other teacher education programs.

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