

How well prepared are pre-service teachers to teach early reading?

The importance of the teaching of early literacy skills in the first few years of schooling cannot be underestimated, as this lays the foundation for all future literacy learning. We know that if this is not done well, it can result in later instructional casualties, putting stress and strain on the education system, families, and most importantly, on children.

For many years, there has been widespread concern regarding the quality of pre-service teacher education. A recent systematic review of the literature on the knowledge and preparedness of pre-service teachers (PSTs) to teach early literacy has confirmed concerns about the content of teacher education courses (see Meeks, Stephenson, Kemp, & Madelaine, 2017 for the complete review). In their review, the authors sought to answer a number of questions.

First, how do pre-service teachers rate their preparedness to teach early literacy skills? The results from six published surveys indicated that pre-service teachers rated their preparedness to teach early literacy skills as anything from not prepared/not confident to somewhat or moderately prepared.

Second, do PSTs feel confident in their ability to teach early literacy skills to students who struggle with learning to read? According to four studies addressing this question, pre-service teachers were clearly not confident about teaching struggling readers or students with specific learning difficulties or disabilities.

Third, what knowledge do pre-service primary and early childhood teachers have about specific components of early literacy instruction such as phonemic awareness and phonics? Questionnaire studies found that low numbers of pre-service teachers had adequate knowledge about phonics (terminology and instruction) and the structure of the English language.

Fourth, what is the relationship between PSTs' knowledge of components of early literacy instruction and their rating of their preparedness to teach early literacy skills? There were eight studies which addressed both knowledge and perceptions of preparedness, and the studies generally included two types of questions – those that looked at knowledge (e.g. the ability to define terms) and skills (e.g. the ability to count the number of phonemes in a word). In the majority of studies, both knowledge and perceptions of preparedness were low. The exceptions were a few intervention studies in which intensive training or tutoring resulted in higher scores for knowledge and preparedness.

Finally, do PSTs demonstrate a preference for either a code-based approach or a meaning-based approach to the teaching of early literacy? From the seven studies reviewed, most PSTs had a positive attitude to a code-based approach (i.e. including explicit phonics instruction in a K-2 program) and were less positive regarding meaning-based approaches. Of particular concern was the findings of one Australian study, in which the majority of PSTs favoured a whole language approach for teaching struggling readers (even though they favoured a phonics-based approach for teaching beginning readers).

So, we might ask, is there anything that can be done about this? There is evidence in the literature that the knowledge and preparedness of pre-service teachers can be increased or improved. Three intervention studies looking at how teachers rate their preparedness to teach early reading skills found that levels of preparedness were high post intervention.

A relatively small number (13) of Australian and American studies were included in this review, so more research is needed. If the results of these studies are representative of teacher education more generally, however, it seems that concerns regarding the quality of pre-service teacher education, particularly that for teachers of early reading skills, are warranted.

Reference

Meeks, L., Stephenson, J., Kemp, C., & Madelaine, A. (2017). How well prepared are pre-service teachers to teach early reading? A systematic review of the literature. *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*, 22(1), 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19404158.2017.1287103>



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