



## **Literacy Leadership: Supporting Pre-Service Teachers in Teaching in K-12 Schools in the US**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Literacy is at the center of any teacher's preparation program in the United States. Students in K-12 schools need systematic and effective literacy instruction to acquire foundational knowledge crucial to their success in college and beyond. This paper discusses how teacher's preparation programs can support the preparation of pre-service teachers in literacy curriculum and instruction via self-reflective practice. In the first part of the paper the author discusses the importance of literacy and language in teacher's preparation programs as the blueprint of foundational knowledge in teachers working with students who are culturally and linguistically diverse in K-12 schools in the United States. In the second part, the author proposes a tool to help pre-service teachers to become aware and understand literacy as a complex social, cultural, historical and personal trajectory in their live via self-reflective practices to support their students and become literacy leaders in schools and communities.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Literacy plays such a pivotal role in our lives as educators and in our students' because literacy is paramount in the acquisition and use of foundational knowledge across content areas and disciplines (Hiebert, 2014). Literacy instruction is shifting from a narrow view of literacy centered on meaning found primarily in texts to a more complex and multilayered view of literacy where the interaction between text, reader and sociocultural and socioeconomic variables creates and nurture literacy growth in the learner (Dumber, 2012). In turn, literacy left the narrow boundaries of the self-contained text to navigate the uncharted waters of a complex literate society where meaning is found in the text and in the reader with his/her unique literacy experiences.

This view of literacy and diversity poses new challenges in instructors in teachers' education programs to rethink how to prepare pre-service teachers to design, assess and implement literacy instruction across the curriculum to prepare students for a diverse and competitive world where literacy is at the core of any learning experience (García, O., Johnson, S., & Seltzer, K., 2017). The challenge is twofold. Learners are required to process large amounts of information that do not belong to just one cultural realm but comes from many different trajectories in a global society (Gutiérrez, K. D., 2008). In addition, as interaction among individuals from very different cultures increases, individuals are required to construct meanings from different perspectives and understand how one's meanings may differ from those of other (European

Centre for Modern Languages, 2006). In other words, literacy in a complex society requires what researchers define as higher literacies (Morell, 2008). Without higher literacies, learners will not have the opportunity to participate in the educational, economic and political lives of their local and global communities.

If this is the new challenge for literacy instructors in teachers' preparation programs in the US, the question here is to become aware and understand if pre-service teachers are ready to support students' literacies in a diverse and global society. The issue at stake is to support pre-service teachers to understand who they are as literate individuals and professionals to become literacy leaders in their schools and communities (Morell, 2017). The importance of becoming a literacy leader is primarily a question to understand who we are as literate individuals and literacy instructors.

Understanding the relationship between our background (cultural, linguistic, social, political, familial, educational, communal and economic) and his/her literacy development is key to providing appropriate instruction. We must reel back to rediscover and rethink our literacy development and growth from past to present as an account of significant experiences and influences that formed us a literate individuals and played a crucial role in who we are as literacy instructors (Dumber, 2012; Morell, 2017). A leader is able to see other through his/her own strengths and biases to lead them to become leaders in their community and globally.

This paper discusses how teacher's preparation programs can support the preparation of pre-service teachers in literacy curriculum and instruction via self-reflective practice. In the first part of the paper, the author discusses the importance of literacy and language in teacher's preparation programs as the blueprint of foundational knowledge in teachers working with students who are culturally and linguistically diverse in K-12 schools in the United States. In the second part, the author proposes a tool to help pre-service teachers to become aware and understand literacy as a complex social, cultural, historical and personal trajectory in their live via self-reflective practices to support their students and become literacy leaders in schools and communities.

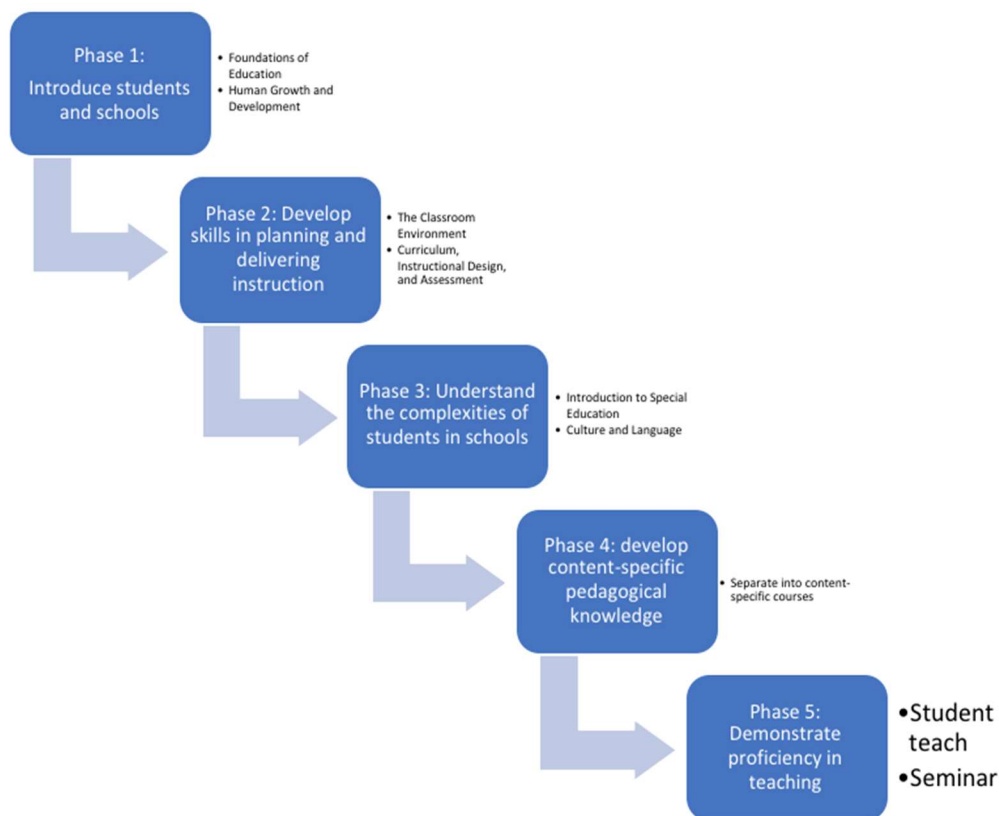
### **PRESERVICE TEACHERS AND LITERACY**

Pre-service teachers' experience in literacy teaching and learning grows and develop out of the opportunity to engage in rigorous academic work in their teacher's preparation programs and the systematic collaboration and support school districts provide during their internship and student teaching (Masuda & Erbesol, 2013). Three important questions are posed here: (a) Are teachers' education programs in US universities teaching the literacy foundational knowledge to pre-service teachers? (b) How well our literacy courses prepare pre-service teachers in supporting students in K-12 schools who are culturally and linguistically diverse? (c) What intellectual and practical tools do we give pre-service teachers to become aware and understand their culturally and linguistically diverse students?

Literacy in a complex society requires instructors in literacy courses to provide pre-service teachers with a foundational knowledge that takes into account the literacy theories and methodologies to support students who are culturally diverse in K-12 schools. Also and more importantly to give students the opportunity to see literacy as multiple forms of knowledge and understandings about literacy and social contexts that enable appropriate and successful performance in all aspects of life (Anstey & Bull, 2006).

The literacy curriculum and instruction for pre-service teachers in a teacher's preparatory course should systematically support the literacy continuum of literacy practices and diversity needed to teach an increasing diverse body of student population (Larson, J., & Marsh, J., 2005). Figure 1 proposes a sequence of instruction in a typical four-year preparation program that gives pre-service teachers the opportunity to acquire the foundational knowledge to teach students who are culturally and linguistically diverse in K-12 schools. The sequence of courses is designed to allow pre-service teachers to see literacy from a broader yet systematic perspective where learning literacy is part of a more complex and comprehensive process (Barton, D., & Hamilton, M., 2000).

Figure 1.



The core aspect of a balanced literacy program for pre-service teachers lies in the acquisition and use of foundational knowledge that leads pre-service teachers to become aware and understand who they are in terms of literacy professionals and leaders in their schools. Research in literacy and leadership points out that teachers and professional educators who provide literacy leadership in schools must not only have a strong foundational knowledge in literacy but also how literacy instruction must and can be differentiated to accommodate these diverse learning

populations. Literacy leaders must be familiar with theory and research that explains such complexities of literacy development as connections between oral and written language and literacy achievement, options for literacy assessment, contributions technology can make to developing students' literacy and their learning of new literacies (Bean, 2009; Donaldson, 2007).

One important aspect of literacy courses in teachers' preparation programs we need to take into account is the leadership of what it means to become a literacy leaders and professional in school. Oftentimes, this core component of literacy curriculum and instruction is marginal to the preparation of pre-service teachers in literacy courses (Bean and Dagen, 2012). It does not suffice to teach theories and methods of literacy development if the leadership component of the curriculum is perceived as peripheral to teachers' identity development as professional educators and literacy experts in their schools (Bean and Dagen, 2012).

Teachers' preparation programs must support leadership development in pre-service teachers by explicitly addressing what it means to be a leader and what qualities make a strong and effective literacy leader. Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) discuss four categories of leadership activities or functions: (1) setting goals or directions for the school; (2) developing people, that is, providing professional development that helps individuals grow as professionals; (3) redesigning the organization, that is, changing the school structure so that it facilitates the work of teachers and promotes student learning; (4) managing the instructional program, that is, using data to monitor student and school progress, establishing routines and procedures that facilitates effort to achieve school goals, and selecting approaches that meet the specific needs of students. If Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) are correct, literacy teachers must develop the above four components to not only be part of a system of school leadership but also and more importantly to lead students in K-12 schools to become literate individuals and informed citizens in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Literacy leadership is foundational in a society where students are required to have multiple forms of knowledge and understandings about literacy and social contexts that enable appropriate and successful performance in all aspects of life (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Even though teachers' education programs are bound by national accreditation standards to ensure quality in pre-service teacher preparation in pedagogical content knowledge and skill preparation, along with critical dispositions, one crucial component to take into account is the leadership aspect, the maturation of pre-service teachers to become agents of change in schools. In order to do so, literacy instructors must ensure a systematic approach to leadership development in their courses (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). A model of self-reflective literacy leader will be presented and critically assessed here. First, a self-reflective framework is laid out to contextualize literacy leaders as reflective practitioners. Second, Literacy History Roadmap will be presented as a reflective tool to effectively translate self-reflective practices in pre-service teachers' literacy courses.

### **THE SELF-REFLECTIVE PROCESS**

The self-reflective process is a path that supports the systematic and in depth development of teachers and professional educators (Schon, 1987). What Shon (1987) claims is that any education endeavor and growth begins and evolves from a systematic self-reflective process. Johns (2000) maintains that self-reflective practices is the breeding ground of the self-practitioner. This is due to a commitment on behalf of the self-practitioner to reflect on things that matter to his/her own practice and ask questions on why things are as they are and envision and propose solutions to change and consistently improve the practitioner professional field of

study or discipline. In the field of education, self-reflective practice becomes paramount for educators in higher education who hold the responsibility to prepare teachers to support students in K-12 schools at a crucial moment where policy makers are asking to address the literacy demands of a complex society.

Teachers and educators need a deeper more connected, more inclusive, and more aware way of knowing (Kind, Irwin, Grauter, and de Cosson, 2005). Kadar (1997) points out the importance of laying out and implementing a self-reflective agenda for the self-reflective practitioner. This agenda should support the self-reflective practitioner to fine-tune one's knowledge and to begin a journey of professional transformation in the field of education.

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LaBoskey (2000) in her research on reflective teaching for educators, leads us to think how we can develop and continuously refine a self-reflective agenda with checkpoints to see where we start, where we are going as professionals in the field, and begin to pave the way for future endeavors in our professional fields or disciplines. Loughran (1994) invites us to consider the important implications that reflection has on our professional identity and development. Loughran (1994) contends that reflection "is something that when understood and valued (by teacher educator and student teachers) can be developed through teacher education programs where teacher educators practice what they preach." (p. 291) Loughran (1994) brings our attention to self-reflective practice as a coherent process of maturation and growth and reliability in our profession. Self-reflective practice is being aware of our core values as educators through a systematic self-reflective practice.

I contend here that self-reflective practice is an important approach to understand principally what one wants to understand as a professional educator, to question one's own cultural orientation and overcome one's own limits in teaching and learning. In addition, I claim that self-reflection is a sociocultural and sociohistorical process that allows that self-reflective practitioner to become aware and understand the historical moment in which reflection and growth take place to refine one's knowledge in the field of education (Loughran, 1994).

Self-reflective practice is the ability to confront one's own biases and limitations that condition our own understanding of education and being able to use this process to become better educators. As Parker (1998) contends, self-reflective practice helps the self-reflective practitioner to abandon his/her own certainties and explore intellectual uncharted professional territories to map out and explore new ways of thinking new opportunities of professional development and growth.

The principles of self-reflective practice discussed here form the theoretical framework for the self-reflective practitioner's journey of growth and professional maturation. However, this

theoretical framework must be translated into an actual tool for the professional literacy educator aiming to understand his/her own literacy positionality to transmit the passion of literacy to his/her students by a profound self-literacy knowledge. In turn, the exploration, the unraveling and awareness of who we are as literacy individuals and professional in the field of education (Richert, 2001).

## **LITERACY HISTORY ROADMAPS**

Literacy histories allow pre-service teachers to bring to the surface the complexities of their own literacy development both in official and unofficial settings (Boggs & Golden, 2009). As Boggs & Golden point out “Literacy histories provide an interpolated framework for understanding the past experiences of one’s life and how these literacy events shape preservice teachers as they take initial steps toward becoming teachers” (p. 211). What Boggs and Golden claim is that literacy histories shape our lives as educators, help us become aware our biases and strengths and give us the tools to envision the next steps in how we want to teach and support literacy instruction in K-12 schools.

The Literacy History Roadmap is a literacy self-reflective process that allows pre-service teachers to explore the complex growth of their own literacy acquisition and development to see how literacy shapes the lives of their students in K-12 schools (Trotman & Kerr, 2000). The philosophical and methodological matrix stems from the principle that understanding the relationship between an individual’s background (cultural, linguistic, social, political, familial, educational, communal and economic) and his/her literacy development is key to providing appropriate instruction. Pre-service teachers create a personal literacy history roadmap that reflects their literacy development from past to present as an autobiographical account of significant experiences and influences (Piazza, Rao & Protacio, 2015).

The methodological components of a literacy history roadmap are the following: Think back to your earliest experience of being literate. Ask yourself such questions as: What were my earliest experiences with literacy? Who helped me, inspired me, who supported me and how? What literacy tools did I use? Was I encouraged or discouraged? Which ones significantly affected my development and opinions about reading and writing? What occurred inside/outside the school setting? (2) Continue to reflect on later experiences in your life. Ask yourself such questions as: When did I begin to feel like a reader and a writer? What kinds of writing, reading speaking, listening, or viewing did I tend to enjoy? What kinds of literacy frustrated me? Who were my role models? (3) Think about how you feel about yourself as a literate person today. How do you feel about literacy and why? In what ways do you continue to use literacy in your personal life? Who or what influences you and why? (4) Consider all the influences in your background (cultural, linguistic, social, political, familial, education, communal, economic, etc.). (5) Do not limit yourself to the above questions as these are only guides for your thinking; (6) Create a ‘roadmap’ of your personal literacy history using symbols (roadblocks, caution signs, stop signs, red lights, etc.). You may also use photographs, clip art, short pieces of descriptive texts, etc. Get creative, but keep in mind it is the content that is important. This is not an exercise in art, but a way to visually represent your development and thinking about literacy. (7) As a final piece, step back from your map and ponder the emerging theme of your autobiography. Consider these questions: What message might your autobiography send about literacy development? What

examples from your map best represent and support this message? What influenced you the most and why? How might this road map play a role in your decision to become a teacher? How might it influence your literacy instruction in the classroom? How might an activity such as this be beneficial for adolescents?

The literacy roadmap laid out here has the advantage to allow pre-service teachers to explore literacy from different trajectories that intersect with political, historical, social and personal aspects of literacy as an integrated system of meaning that shapes the lives of literate individuals (Freire, 1970). Literacy history roadmaps are at the crossroads of literacy and culturally relevant pedagogy because pre-service teachers must explore the word within the dialogical and sociohistorical context of their own literacy dimension (Morris, 1995). The dialogical nature of literacy history roadmaps stimulate and challenge pre-service teachers to begin an inner dialogue with their own literacy self; a voyage at the center of their literate being to become aware and understand who they are professional educators. This inner dialogue is the starting point to become a leader on oneself to lead others to become literate individuals in a complex society (Morris, 1995).

### **CONCLUSION**

This article presented and discussed the importance of literacy leadership to prepare pre-service teachers to support the literacy needs of students in K-12 schools. Literacy leadership is a constructive-dialogic process pre-service teachers engage in order to become aware and understand their own literacy trajectories and how these literacy trajectories influenced their literacy development and the students they will serve in schools (Lankshear, & Knobel, 2006). Leadership, as pointed out in this paper, is a self-reflective dialogic process that challenges pre-service teachers to delve into their own literacy histories to discover strength, limitations, and open new paths to literacy teaching and learning.

The literacy history roadmap as a tool to help pre-service teachers rationalize their literacy experiences emerges from the idea that literacy is pervasive as an intellectual and pedagogic process (Nichols, & Snowden, 2017). This pervasive process is key for learning since language permeates the curriculum and instruction in K-12 schools and is at the center of the intellectual development of learners (Nichols, & Snowden, 2017). This paper is an invitation to open and continue a conversation on the importance of literacy as leadership in pre-service teachers' preparation to support future educators to understand that literacy and leadership are the pillars of curriculum and instruction in K-12 schools. In addition, this paper presents a tool among many other possible, the literacy history roadmaps, to lead pre-service teachers to find their own literacy identity and begin the path of literacy leadership in schools. The literacy history roadmap is a framework to capture the rich literacy experiences of pre-service teachers reflecting and growing as literacy professionals and literacy leaders (Moje, and Luke, 2009).

The paper invites other literacy scholars to analyze the literacy history roadmap and to enrich the tool or to challenge it by opening new paths for literacy leadership research. It is the hope of this paper that a rich and constructive conversation will lead literacy instructors to continuously analyze and refine ways of teaching literacy to pre-service teachers to prepare them to serve in a complex global society (Gee, 2010). The hope of this paper is to see such a conversation growing and become a forum where ideas are challenged and new ways of preparing pre-service

teachers as leaders in school will become a strong and substantial voice in literacy curriculum and instruction.

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