

PRTE POSITION PAPER MAY 2015

Graduate Reading Education and Certification: The Significant Roles of Professors and Universities in Preparing Reading Specialists

Given their expertise in the literacy field, reading professors have a significant responsibility to articulate, implement, and evaluate the process and preparation of reading professionals. As literacy leaders, the professors who comprise Pennsylvania Reading Teacher Educators (PRTE) recognize that reading faculty should be the primary developers and chief decision-makers regarding reading education. Responsible curriculum decisions should be made by those who have expertise in reading/writing processes, assessment and diagnostic skills, strategic pedagogy, and accurate supervisory skills. Assuring an appropriate learning continuum is as important in graduate reading education as it is in Pre-K- 12 education, undergraduate programs, and any other graduate program. This position paper addresses graduate reading programs, course structures, significant roles of those involved in graduate reading education, and certification considerations. The purposes of the position paper are: (1) to endorse specific rigorous graduate work toward reading certification for practicing educational professionals; (2) to reinforce the significant roles of university reading faculty in the comprehensive preparation of reading specialists; and (3) to promote high standards of preparation for reading professionals and dissuade add-on testing as the only criteria for granting certification to a teacher to become a recognized reading specialist. The paper concludes with recommendations to the educational communities of Pennsylvania.

Considering that reading specialists have multiple and complex responsibilities (Bean et al., 2015), including diagnosis and remediation of reading difficulties, the rigor in their preparation should be analogous to other university-prepared and credentialed professionals who assess, diagnose and treat those in need. For example, among medical professionals, doctors are the most thoroughly prepared to diagnose and recommend therapies and/or other treatments to help their patients. General practitioners are highly prepared medical professionals, but not to the same degree as surgeons; surgeons have rigorous and comprehensive training specific to their skill requirements. A good general practitioner would not qualify as a surgeon for a child's broken bone or appendectomy. Only a skilled surgeon would be the desired expert to provide care, even if the doctor might have passed a written test alone without a surgical residency. Similarly, add-on testing will not adequately prepare a classroom teacher to be a reading specialist. Although the role of the reading specialist has evolved and vacillated over the last 62 years (Kern, 2011), present day responsibilities include:

- Administering a wide variety of diagnostic assessments
- Analyzing and interpreting assessment data and information
- Designing individualized and differentiated instruction to target students' identified strengths and needs
- Delivering high quality instruction directly to students who struggle with literacy
- Coaching classroom teachers to provide appropriate instructional strategies
- Providing professional development sessions to teachers on a variety of topics related to literacy
- Assisting in school change efforts, including the development of comprehensive

literacy plans and curriculum development

- Communicating effectively with families and communities

Graduate Reading Programs

Universities must ensure that graduate reading curriculum and programs are developmental so that foundational knowledge of the acquisition, development, and challenges related to literacy is enhanced as students advance through their graduate education (Vogt & Shearer, 2007). Quality instruction, especially instruction that requires direct oversight of strategic processes and assessment, needs to occur with careful personal observation and feedback. Another aspect of graduate programs that prepare reading specialists is the charge to develop leadership skills in candidates. The International Reading Association's *Standards for Reading Professionals* (2010) include expectations that programs imbed content and processes of literacy leadership. Potential reading professionals, both reading specialist and literacy coaching candidates, must be adequately prepared to assume the responsibility of teaching struggling K-12 students, as well as be able to support the work of classroom teachers in order to improve instruction (Bean et al, 2015). Figure 1 distinguishes the general responsibilities of the certified reading specialist from the reading teacher.

One of the final aspects of graduate reading education is the rigorous reading clinic/practicum in which students apply the knowledge and skills acquired throughout the program to accurately assess students who are struggling readers and writers, implement appropriate curriculum for those students, and make significant recommendations for their continued literacy growth to families and teachers. As the role of the reading specialist has expanded, so have the leadership responsibilities. Therefore,

reading specialists need to be highly capable leaders who can adapt to complexities and challenges of this multi-faceted role (Lewis-Spector & Jay, 2011).

Reading professionals are certified by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) after the university stipulates that students have demonstrated proficient abilities throughout their course work and have passed the Praxis 5301. The importance of the rigorous preparation needed to gain this professional status through course work, followed by testing, needs to be fully recognized, valued, and respected by PDE. It is the position of PRTE that PDE's recent decision to allow add-on testing as the only requirement to fulfill certification as a reading specialist was rashly enacted and inappropriate. Rather than the temporary stop-gap of the moratorium placed on add-on testing only, PRTE encourages PDE to eliminate add-on only testing and fully recognize the need for intense graduate work as appropriate and necessary for K-12 certification as a reading specialist.

Course Structures

Today, undergraduate and graduate courses are conducted in either seated, hybrid, or on-line formats. Each format is described briefly in the following section; advantages and disadvantages of each format for graduate reading courses are also noted.

Seated. Seated classes (often called face-to-face) are scheduled sessions in which the professor and students meet for class. Technology (computers, Internet, etc.) can be imbedded in the seated class format. This format is particularly advantageous when graduate students are engaged in clinical work with students. Observations of processes and procedures as well as of dispositions and interactions between the reading candidates and the children can be immediate. The course instructor's feedback to the graduate

reading students can be immediate, if appropriate, or provided during the next scheduled session or in follow-up sessions through the use of video-taping.

Hybrid. In today's universities, the use of hybrid courses is encouraged in order to offer the most flexible learning environment for graduate students while still allowing professors the best opportunity for assessing mastery of skills (Amerin-Beardsley, Foulger, & Toth, 2007; Kiiti, Makinen, & Coiro, 2013). A program consisting of hybrid courses offers some of the flexibility of on-line learning while also offering the professor and student immediate, real-time, actual, personal interaction, and feedback, and should be developed as an alternative to fully on-line courses when an institution is considering a change from the traditional learning format.

On-line. Although fully on-line programs may be completely appropriate for content-based degrees, that format is inadequate for a graduate reading degree. A graduate degree in history is very different from a graduate degree in reading education where mastery of processes and skills is the ultimate goal. The reading specialist's competence may have direct and long-term impact on the emotional and academic life of K-12 students. Graduate reading programs that offer no opportunities for professors to observe students until clinic/practicum delay performance assessment of processes and skills. Such programs also put the K-12 population of students at risk.

Concluding Comments

Highly qualified reading specialists must have rigorous graduate course work in literacy that includes a supervised clinical practicum experience that consists of face-to-face work with K-12 struggling readers and writers and culminates in a graduate degree in reading/literacy that includes certification. Therefore, we strongly oppose any less

rigorous approach, including add-on reading specialist certification by testing only or fully on-line programs that risk inadequacy of preparation.

Cognizant of research-based findings and the shared views of Pennsylvania Reading Teacher Educators (PRTE), Keystone State Reading Association (KSRA), the International Literacy Association (ILA), and the Association of Literacy Educators and Researchers (ALER) about the rigorous preparation of reading specialists, the following recommendations are made to Pennsylvania's educational community:

1. Professors of reading/literacy who have knowledge and expertise of reading processes, difficulties, assessment, and instructional practices should design graduate reading programs.
2. Graduate reading students' competencies must be based on current ILA and PDE standards.
3. Universities responsible for educating reading professionals (i.e., reading specialists and literacy coaches) must require graduate students to demonstrate competencies at pre-specified milestones throughout the graduate program.
4. Course work should include the requirement of conducting research and at least one course in developing competencies as a literacy leader.
5. All graduate reading programs should include a face-to-face supervised clinical experience with no less than 75 supervised hours. Such clinical experiences should include opportunities to work with struggling elementary and secondary level readers and writers.
6. Universities offering on-line courses must consider ILA, Council of Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), and PDE positions regarding on-line programs.

PRTE supports graduate reading programs that offer a combination of face-to-face, hybrid, and on-line courses.

References

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Reading Teacher	Certified Reading Specialist
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructs children in the general education classroom in developmentally appropriate texts and strategies • Plans and conducts lessons for whole-class instruction of reading/language arts • Plans and conducts lessons for small guided reading groups • Has an undergraduate degree in education; may have a general graduate degree in education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has earned certification as a K – 12 Reading Specialist • Has successfully completed advanced graduate work in reading diagnosis and reading leadership • Instructs children in general education classrooms • Instructs struggling readers in small groups in both in-class and pull-out settings • Assists general education teachers with strategies to improve instruction in content area subjects, reading, and language arts • Facilitates school and/or district-wide professional development sessions related to literacy instruction • Facilitates curriculum

	<p>writing and/or revisions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provides workshops for parents regarding at home literacy activities to help students• Conducts demonstration lessons for general and special education teachers related to literacy instruction• Diagnoses and assesses students' reading disabilities and recommends instructional plans• Leads school change efforts regarding curriculum, grouping structures, etc.• May coach classroom teachers one-on-one to develop improved instructional practices• Analyzes and interprets school wide testing scores
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	<p>for teachers and administrators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Performs major/key role on Child Study Team;• Conducts testing of individual students (strugglers, gifted students, students new to the school setting)
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Figure 1: General Responsibilities of Reading Teachers and Certified Reading Specialists