

Laying the Foundation: Practicing Before Teaching in Structured Literacy

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Introduction

Pre-service teachers enter college classrooms with a variety of experiences as it pertains to learning how to read, and how reading, phonics, phonemic awareness, and comprehension were taught to them when they were learning to read. Many pre-service teachers do not have prior knowledge or memories of being taught how to read; therefore, they are unsure, nervous, or lack confidence teaching reading (Kerbs & Pule, 2023). This is why it is imperative for these experiences to be formed as adults so they will be able to teach beginning reading and phonics to elementary students. Being able to read is important and being able to teach students how to read is even more important (Porter et al., 2023) which is why pre-service teachers must receive explicit instruction and learn how to implement multimodal lessons, multiple senses within instruction, in beginning reading during their undergraduate studies in order to learn hands-on explicit instruction in regards to teaching reading, while incorporating evidence-based practices and resources to enhance their literacy lessons (Moats, 2023). For our pre-service teachers to be effective literacy teachers, they must develop the skills and knowledge “to explain to children the important functions of literacy to help them grasp concepts” (Leland, 2013, pp. 67- 68).

Early reading habits have a direct correlation with future success, which is why it is imperative for pre-service teachers to learn how to cultivate a positive community of learners so students will view reading as important and necessary based on the experiences they were provided by their teachers (Kerbs & Pule, 2023). If pre-service teachers believe in the ability to transform non-readers into readers, they will cultivate readers. This transformation can be accomplished by ensuring pre-service teachers can develop their skills in reading and literacy, especially in phonemic awareness, throughout various activities, microteaching, and field experiences during their undergraduate teacher preparation classes (Mazzye et al., 2023). To demonstrate this twenty pre-service teachers participated in a qualitative study, by answering the question, how does implementing Structured Literacy activities enhance pre-service teachers’ ability to teach phonics and beginning reading?

At the beginning of the semester pre-service teachers were asked to reflect on their memories of learning phonics and learning how to read to determine the amount of knowledge and experiences they had prior to beginning the semester. At the beginning of the semester, the middle of the semester, and at the end of the semester pre-service teachers were asked to respond to a question about their feelings about teaching phonics and beginning reading. The questions were asked to gain an understanding of the pre-service teachers’ lived experiences and feelings about teaching beginning reading through a Structured Literacy lens prior to introducing lessons embedded with components of Structured Literacy. The pre-service teachers were asked,

1. Do you remember learning phonics?

2. How do you feel about teaching beginning phonics and beginning reading?

By providing authentic opportunities for pre-service teachers to interact, learn, develop, and teach literacy activities, both in the classroom to their peers and in an elementary classroom during their practicum, they were able to enhance their understanding of reading and teaching beginning reading along with gaining a deeper understanding of phonics and phonemic awareness. If pre-service teachers are confident in their ability to teach phonics and reading, it will be transferred into the classroom, which in turn will grow proficient, confident readers (Asare & Amo, 2023).

Background

Structured Literacy is an instructional model incorporating evidence-based principles and components into literacy instruction developed by the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) that will help prepare teachers to meet the literacy needs of their students to ensure they become proficient readers (Fallon & Katz, 2020; Spear-Swerling, 2018). Structured Literacy focuses on building and developing the foundational literacy skills of phonemic awareness, letter-sound correspondences, syllables, morphology, syntax, and semantics using explicit, systematic instructional principles (Cowen, 2016; IDA, 2018). These skills must be teacher-led that are clearly taught, explicitly, and systematically, so students can learn and develop literacy skills properly.

Since Structured Literacy lessons are successful for all learners, not just struggling readers or students with dyslexia, it is imperative for pre-service teachers to learn and practice teaching phonics and reading through a Structured Literacy lens to ensure their lessons are systematic and explicit, which will lead to literacy success for all students.

Literature Review

The literature review revealed three main themes; pre-service teachers need opportunities to demonstrate mastery of new literacy content knowledge, hands-on experiences are necessary to enhance learning and understanding, and microteaching opportunities are essential to developing the skills needed to ensure the needs of all learners are met in the elementary classroom.

Opportunities to Demonstrate Mastery of Content

Throughout the literature review it was evident pre-service teachers must have opportunities to gain knowledge about the content, especially since many pre-service teachers do not have prior knowledge as it pertains to phonics, beginning reading, and literacy (Ehri & Flugman, 2018). There is a complexity in teaching students to read. Simply addressing the Science of Reading for pre-service teachers is not enough (Kent et al., 2013). Pre-service teachers must be provided with specific experiences to support elementary students in the classroom. Intentional practice incorporating evidence-based resources, coaching, and immediate feedback will provide the necessary opportunities pre-service teachers need to implement techniques to intentionally and explicitly teach literacy and master the content. The more practice, guidance, and exposure pre-service teachers receive in teaching reading and literacy, the greater chance they will have at mastering effective reading instruction (Hindman et al., 2020).

It is important for pre-service teachers to be able to explain what will be taught and how to teach it for students to truly grasp a concept and learn how to read (Leland, 2012). By learning the

content, pre-service teachers will gain the specific knowledge needed to become an expert in the field which will allow them to teach their future students with confidence and fidelity. The opportunity to master teaching reading prior to completing their teacher preparation program will ensure they have the skills, knowledge, and experience to effectively teach their students when they begin their first-year teaching. They must have the opportunity to teach and receive feedback in the college classroom to ensure they have the knowledge and experience to take to the elementary classroom, beginning with their first field experience. It is crucial for pre-service teachers to receive these skills prior to entering their first classroom (Mazzye et al., 2023).

If pre-service teachers are unsure of the most effective practices when it comes to teaching reading, they will have difficulty when they must teach reading (Dilgard et al., 2022). The more practice pre-service teachers receive in the college classroom prior to their field experiences, student teaching, and their first classroom, the more prepared they will be when they must teach reading and literacy, and the more effective their lessons will be for their students. For their lessons to be effective, pre-service teachers must have the opportunity to practice what they learn (Kent et al., 2013).

Hands-On Experiences

It is imperative for pre-service teachers to gain hands-on experiences because they learn through application. Manning & Payne (1993, as cited in Leland, 2013) explain the importance of pre-service teachers being able to cultivate knowledge while in the field. When it comes to providing experiences to teach reading pre-service teachers must have the opportunity to use resources, manipulatives, and curriculum that will be utilized in the classroom. These positive experiences in their teacher preparation classes, especially reading classes, will enhance positive outcomes and ensure they have the knowledge and confidence to teach students (Kent et al., 2013). The pre-service teachers' depth of knowledge will directly affect the outcome, which is a confident, knowledgeable teacher along with students who will be able to read and comprehend. Learning by doing will have a greater impact on the pre-service teachers; ability to teach to the needs of the students and to ensure the lessons and content are relevant and meaningful.

Since reading is critical and is the most complex and challenging subject to teach. It is important to identify what is needed for pre-service teachers to effectively teach students how to read (Kent et al., 2013). Since teacher qualifications make a difference, it is essential for pre-service teachers to be well prepared in the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively teach reading and literacy (Kent et al., 2013). Independent practice in the theory of teaching reading and the implementation of best practices that are developed through a high-quality teacher preparation program will provide the opportunity for pre-service teachers' competence when it comes to teaching, especially teaching reading.

The necessary experience can be obtained through field experiences. Field experiences are imperative for pre-service teachers to not only practice and observe content, but also to gain knowledge and understanding of the needs of the students in today's classrooms (Lane et al, 2023). If pre-service teachers only have prior knowledge from their own classroom experiences as a student, they will not be able to understand the needs of the students they will teach.

Microteaching

Teaching reading requires not only knowledge, but the ability to deliver instruction explicitly through modeling and demonstration, which is why preservice teachers must be presented with opportunities to demonstrate their understanding of the literacy skills and content they will be teaching (Lane et al., 2023). Pre-service teachers can develop these skills needed through detailed and explicit coursework that allows them to engage with the content they will teach (Lane et al., 2023). Microteaching and feedback from peers and professors with specific material, resources, and curriculum will help pre-service teachers develop awareness and the implementation of evidence-based practices in their lessons (Hindman et al., 2020). Pre-service teachers can model their instruction after the lessons they observe from their peers and professors and grow based on the feedback they receive. Opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding are paramount if pre-service teachers are expected to effectively teach students how to read (Leland, 2013).

Microteaching prepares the pre-service teachers to learn strategies while practicing with peers in their university classroom (Asare & Amo, 2023). Microteaching will provide opportunities for the students to practice differentiating the curriculum while gaining practical experiences that can be implemented into lessons during field placements and practicum teaching. Microteaching is an important aspect to the teacher education program because it provides the “how” of teaching (Asare & Amo, 2023). During microteaching the pre-service teachers will learn by receiving constructive feedback while honing their craft. This constructive feedback will allow the students to analyze their lessons and become reflective practitioners (Kerbs & Pule, 2023).

Methodology

In this qualitative study, grounded in Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory, which states that individuals learn through observation and interaction with others, (Bandura, 2001) twenty pre-service teachers, enrolled in their first undergraduate literacy class, were asked questions three times during the fall about their feelings about teaching beginning reading and phonics. Data were collected from survey questions and through classroom observations of the pre-service teachers teaching minilessons through microteaching. The responses to the surveys questions were coded by hand and common themes were recorded. The microteaching lessons were observed by the professor, and notes were taken based on the pre-service teachers’ ability to teach phonemic awareness and beginning reading lessons to their peers during class time. During the classroom lessons and lectures the professor introduced the pre-service teachers to different Structured Literacy lessons and activities, which the pre-service teachers could use as a guide or reference when planning their future lessons. The pre-service teachers were able to create and teach lessons and activities that focused on phonics and beginning reading to their peers after the lessons were explained and modeled.

Common Themes

After the pre-service teachers were asked the question, do you remember learning phonics? their responses were recorded. This was the initial question asked at the beginning of the semester to establish a baseline, as far as to what the pre-service teachers remember about learning phonics. This was relevant to determine if the pre-service teachers would be able to draw upon lived experiences and prior knowledge to create and teach phonics and beginning literacy lessons.

Beginning of the semester survey

Themes	Number Occurred
I do not remember learning any phonics.	13
I remember learning some phonics.	5
I remember learning phonics in school.	2

At the beginning of the semester the question, how do you feel about teaching beginning phonics and beginning reading? was asked to gain an understanding of the pre-service teachers' feelings about teaching phonics and beginning reading prior to receiving any instruction in Structured Literacy. Knowing the pre-service teachers' feelings toward a subject, such as phonics and literacy, will help understand their efficacy, which is important because "a positive teacher efficacy has been linked to many encouraging student outcomes" (Kent et al., 2013, p 4). The information gathered identified the pre-service teachers feelings about teaching phonics prior to receiving any instruction. The responses were coded to determine common themes.

Beginning of the semester survey

Themes	Number Occurred
I am nervous, scared, or intimidated.	10
I am very unsure / lack confidence.	5
I think it will be fun / exciting.	5

The same question, how do you feel about teaching beginning phonics and beginning reading? was asked in the middle of the semester to gain an understanding of the pre-service teachers' feelings about teaching phonics and beginning reading after receiving some instruction and obtaining some experience creating and teaching phonics and beginning reading lessons to their peers and elementary students in their practicum classrooms. The responses were coded and recorded to determine the common themes that aligned with the beginning of the semester.

Middle of the semester survey

Themes	Number Occurred
I am nervous, scared, or intimidated.	4
I am somewhat confident.	11
I am excited.	5

The same question, how do you feel about teaching beginning phonics and beginning reading? was asked at the end of the semester to determine if the pre-service teachers' feelings about teaching phonics and beginning reading changed after receiving instruction for an entire semester and having had multiple opportunities to teach to their peers during class time as well as to teach to elementary students during their practicum. The responses were coded and recorded to determine the common themes that aligned with the beginning and the middle of the semester.

End of the semester survey

Themes	Number Occurred
I am nervous, scared, or intimidated.	2
I am more confident.	7

I am ready.	11
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During the semester the pre-service teachers were observed teaching phonics and beginning reading lessons to their peers three times. The professor observed the lessons and recorded notes. The observations focused on the amount of engagement the students, the pre-service teacher's peers, had in the lesson based on the pre-service teacher's delivery of the lesson and their ability to incorporate hands-on or multimodal activities to enhance involvement and motivation. The common themes that were evident in the notes based on the lesson observations were recorded.

Classroom Observations – Lesson Engagement

Beginning of the Semester	Limited knowledge of multimodal phonics lessons
Middle of the Semester	Incorporated some multimodal phonics activities
End of the Semester	All phonics lessons included hands-on, multimodal components

Results

The themes that evolved from the pre-service teachers' responses in the beginning of the semester are consistent to not remembering learning phonics or learning to read, therefore they were unsure, nervous, and intimidated when it came to teaching beginning readers. Most pre-service teachers did not remember learning to read or being taught phonics. Many pre-service teachers expressed a desire to teach in the intermediate grades due to their limited knowledge of phonics. The responses from several students to the question, how do you feel about teaching phonics? are included. Their responses are Student A said, "I will not lie; I am feeling a bit nervous. I struggled a lot with spelling in elementary school." Student B said, "I feel nervous about teaching phonics and beginning reading since I do not remember being taught phonics." Student C said, "Phonics has always been a scary thing for me when it comes to teaching." Student D said, "I won't lie, it definitely seems scary and a little daunting now." Student E said, "I feel a little anxious about teaching phonics and reading since I am still learning all the information that goes along with it." Student E said, "Scared – that is why I don't want to teach elementary grades.

In the middle of the semester, the pre-service teachers were asked the same question, how do you feel about teaching beginning phonics and beginning reading? and the themes that evolved included more comfort with teaching beginning reading since they were provided opportunities to teach and learn phonics and reading activities. Although the pre-service teachers were still nervous, their confidence increased. The pre-service teachers' feelings and attitudes about teaching phonics began to change due to the instruction in class and the opportunity to create lessons and teach in small groups and to the whole class. Student A said, "I feel more confident and knowledgeable." Student B said, "I feel a lot more comfortable." Student C said, "It seems like a lot of pressure, but I am ready for the challenge." Student D said, "I feel this class helped me learn phonics." Student E said, "I'm still a little nervous about teaching beginning phonics and reading, but I'm also feeling more excited about it." Student E said, "I feel far more confident about teaching phonics than I did at the beginning of the semester." The new knowledge, confidence, and understanding of phonics instruction and beginning reading had a

positive impact on the students. Their lived opportunities provided the experiences needed for the pre-service teachers to gain the knowledge and past experiences that were missing.

At the end of the semester the pre-service teachers were asked the same question, how do you feel about teaching beginning phonics and beginning reading? By the end of the semester the pre-service teachers taught lessons to their peers, created whole lesson plans, and taught lessons to elementary students during their practicum. Based on the themes that emerged from their final responses, the pre-service teachers gained confidence and knowledge in teaching early literacy skills and felt they would be able to teach beginning readers. Student A said, "I feel more confident in teaching phonics and reading." Student B said, "I am more eager than ever to get into the classroom." Student C said, "I feel much more confident in my ability to teach beginning phonics and beginning reading now that I have been taught how those skills are broken down into smaller steps that can be used like building blocks." Student D said, "I am excited to begin teaching phonics and beginning reading." Student E said, "I feel so much more prepared after this class."

The themes that evolved throughout the pre-service teachers' answers to the questions and the themes that emerged from the literature support the need to teach pre-service teachers' explicit, multimodal lessons during their teacher preparation program to learn how to cultivate a positive community of learners so students will view reading as important due to the experiences they were provided by their teachers (Kerbs & Pule, 2023). The pre-service teachers must be given the opportunity to learn what they did not learn as a child or what they forgot so they can create experiences that will transfer into prior knowledge. This new knowledge the pre-service teachers gain will be what is recalled when they are teaching students phonics and beginning reading.

If pre-service teachers believe in the ability to transform non-readers into readers, they will cultivate readers (Kent et al., 2013). This transformation can occur by ensuring pre-service teachers develop their skills in reading and literacy, especially in phonemic awareness, throughout various activities, microteaching, and field experiences. By providing authentic opportunities for pre-service teachers to build background knowledge and confidence in teaching early literacy through a Structured Literacy lens.

Discussion

After a thorough review of the literature and the responses from the pre-service teachers surveys and observations it is evident that the pre-service teachers gained confidence and knowledge throughout the semester by learning the content, when provided the opportunity for mastering phonics and literacy skills, and being able to apply what they learned through mini teaching lessons and microteaching in the classroom with their peers. These in-class experiences were taken to the elementary classroom during their field experience or practicum, and a positive result was obtained. The more practice the pre-service teachers received, when it came to teaching to their peers, the more confidence and comfort they gained. It is evident the answers to the initial question, how does implementing Structured Literacy activities enhance pre-service teachers' ability to teach phonics and beginning reading? support hands-on instruction in undergraduate teacher preparation programs. This is proven through the twenty pre-service teachers' responses and observations that began with nervousness, and lack of prior knowledge to confidence and readiness to teach beginning readers.

Conclusion

Since elementary students learn best if their teachers have knowledge of the content and are better prepared to teach the required content, it is imperative to ensure pre-service teachers are receiving “deliberate instruction in reading, spelling, and writing to better prepare their future students” (Moats, 2020, p. 9). Through hands-on, multimodal opportunities to create the missing experiences in phonics and beginning reading pre-service teachers must have the opportunity to develop and create those memories and experiences in their undergraduate teacher preparation classes. The lived experiences the pre-service teachers are acquiring will be beneficial to them and their future students when they are tasked with teaching elementary students to read.

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