

**Preparing Early Childhood Educators to Teach Reading:
Challenges and Difficulties**

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While reading professors would agree that there is nothing more important than preparing preservice early childhood educators (PECE) to teach reading, research indicates that the processes by which this occurs are often ineffective and incomplete. Helping teacher candidates develop the content knowledge and pedagogical strategies necessary to work with young children on their literacy skills is critical, but it requires time and engagement with the content that is not easily afforded through one three-credit hour phonics course. This case study chronicles one teacher educator's attempt to improve the quality of instruction provided to preservice early childhood educators (PECE) in her phonics course for the purpose of equipping them with the skills required to teach young children how to read.

Keywords: course design, teacher education, literacy learning, reading

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Throughout their teacher education programs, preservice early childhood educators (PECE) are encouraged to master the domain specific knowledge of their field. In the case of early childhood educators, that includes information related to teaching all content areas, including the skills associated with teaching reading. In the area of language development, PECE are expected to understand how children develop listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills over time; what constitutes developmentally appropriate practice with regard to phonemic awareness and phonics instruction; and what pedagogical strategies and classroom environments underscore comprehension when applied across the content areas. Additionally, PECE are expected to have a deep understanding of English language orthography, including, but not limited to, knowledge of phonemes, phonics generalizations, morphemic units, word derivations, and word etymology.

For many teacher education programs, this is a tall order. Most teaching academies, while they include traditional liberal arts requirements in math, science, history, and English, require only 12 hours of literacy instruction or less for PECE. This instruction is usually comprised of four 3-credit hour courses that touch upon various aspects of teaching reading: a phonics course, a pedagogy course that combines method and materials, a children's literature course, and a reading and writing foundations course that may or may not include assessment and diagnosis strategies or literacy theory. Most teacher preparation programs do not demand courses in linguistics and often require only survey courses that touch upon English concepts such as

writing, public speaking, and literature for the adult learners. As a result, PECE often emerge from teachers colleges with a superficial knowledge of the basic tenets of how learning to read occurs in young children, without a deep understanding of how the individual pieces of their coursework fit together in a comprehensive and balanced literacy program for the young children (Pressley, Roehrig, Bogner, et al., 2002). Thus, many entry-year educators arrive in their first classrooms woefully underprepared to work with young children in the development of their initial reading and writing skills.

Darling-Hammond (2000) noted that teacher preparation is a stronger correlate of student achievement than class size, overall educational spending, or teacher salaries. Teacher preparation accounts for as much as 60% of the total achievement variance after considering student demographics. Yet, in a study completed by Cunningham, Perry, Stanovich, and Stanovich (2004), teachers reported that they had not received instruction concerning the complexities of written English language in their teacher education programs, nor did the instructional materials provided by their schools or districts emphasize that information. Research over time has consistently indicated that many licensed educators do not have enough background or skills in English orthography to provide reading instruction that is based on empirically validated instructional content and methodology (Bos, Mather, Dickson, Podhajski, & Chard, 2001; Clark, Helfrich, & Hatch, 2017; Moats & Foorman, 2003; Washburn & Mulcahy, 2014).

The importance of teacher training with regard to literacy instruction cannot be overemphasized. With a significant number of elementary students struggling to learn to read and write, improving literacy skills in US classrooms starts with properly training literacy educators in preservice contexts, such as in teachers college. In 2004, Spear-Swerling and

Brucker suggested that novice teachers with an extra 6 hours of classroom instruction training had a positive impact on children's skills in basic decoding and spelling abilities, thus emphasizing the difference that professional development and skills training in this area might make for student performance. More recently, attention has been placed on the significant role knowledgeable and skilled educators can play in the literacy development of young children. Findings by Clark, Helfrich, and Hatch (2017) indicated that a minimum of five reading courses (or an additional reading methods course) allows PECE to present robust levels of knowledge in the areas of phonological awareness, phonics, and vocabulary instruction; they further noted that there were statistically significant differences in knowledge based on the type of program attended and the number of courses in literacy completed.

The following sections outline one teacher educator's experiences teaching a phonics course at a large, urban, public university. This university has eleven colleges, and the teacher education program is one of three hundred undergraduate programs. Of the eleven colleges, two are open access regional campuses. The course investigated here is taken by students at both the main campus and the two regional campuses, and it is designed to introduce PECE to the complexities of English orthography and the pedagogical skills associated with its instruction. This case study looks at ways in which teacher educators can adjust their instruction in reading coursework so that PECE learn content via pedagogical strategies they themselves will employ while also modeling the practice to theory connections most easily established in the classroom. For post-secondary instructors who do not work with teacher candidates, this case study illustrates the way in which small adjustments in course design can lead to both practical applications of course content and authentic assessments. These adjustments improve the quality

of instruction over a 16-week semester and promote a meaningful learning context that helps students make connections to the demands and requirements of their future careers.

Phonics in Early Childhood Education Course: Background

The Phonics Theories and Practice in Early Childhood Education course examined here is taken at the end of the second year of a four-year baccalaureate program. By this time in their program, it is assumed that PECE have taken their introductory liberal arts core and foundational education courses, are exhibiting a serious career orientation, and have a strong commitment toward the teaching profession. By this point, most have also successfully passed some English liberal arts content classes like composition, literature, and public speaking. They have not, however, been accepted to the early childhood education cohort on the main campus, which is a competitive process requiring a 3.1 GPA, a 21 on the ACT (or passing scores on the Reading, Writing, and Mathematics Praxis I tests), and a clean FBI/BCII background check.

For most PECE, the Phonics Theories and Practice in Early Childhood Education course represents the first “methods and materials course” in their program. The course has eleven course outcomes that overlap in significant ways and can be placed in one of three categories. One, students are required to describe the nature of English orthography and master terms and concepts related to it. Two, they are expected to understand the theoretical background and historical sequence related to phonics instruction in US schools. Three, they are to demonstrate developmentally appropriate pedagogy for children in the early stages of reading development.

In essence, PECE are required to learn phonics skills, master the generalizations, contextualize phonics pedagogy theoretically and historically, and then understand how to apply that knowledge in order to teach decoding skills to young children. For many PECE, this is a

daunting task, especially since some students were never formally introduced to phonics generalizations in a traditional sense or systematic manner, or, if they were, they do not remember the guidelines or rules, except for a few trite mnemonic phrases, such as “when two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking.” The course can be especially difficult for teacher candidates who did not learn English as their primary language or who have reading or writing difficulties or disabilities of their own.

For a professor of reading, this presents a huge challenge. To begin with, each of these three purposes (learning the content, understanding the theory behind the instructional approach, and putting theoretical knowledge into practice) could easily constitute an entire course on its own. A reading instructor could easily spend 45 contact hours teaching PECE the phonics generalizations, including the rules and terms associated with the orthography of the English language and its instruction in schools. Additionally, volumes of work have been published on “The Reading Wars” (e.g., Castles, Rastle, and Nation, 2018; Kim, 2008; Nicholson, 1992) and phonics debate, the value of a decoding emphasis on overall reading ability, and the place phonics instruction has (or should have) in a comprehensive, balanced, and effective reading program (e.g., Bowers, 2020; Ecalle, Dujardin, Gomes, et al., 2020; Goodman, 2014; Weaver, 2002). In our era of accountability, one cannot forget the significance of assessment-driven instruction for the purpose of both data collection and response-to-intervention instruction. It is easy to see that a typical 3-credit hour course, spread over a 15- or 16-week term is simply not enough to adequately prepare PECE for the complexities of both mastering the content *and* preparing to teach it.

Phonics in Early Childhood Education Course: Course Organization

As a result of the demands of the course description and learning outcomes, the course is broken down into three sections of instruction that overlap throughout the course of the 16-week semester. In weeks 1 through 4, PECE read and dissect articles that provide an historical context for phonics instruction, while concurrently analyzing information about the varying views regarding its significance. This part of the course requires readings not included in the course textbook, but are provided via pdf on Canvas, the university's chosen learning management system. Examples of these articles include Currier and Duguid (1916), Smith (1927), and the seminal study by Clymer (1963/1996). The students are also required to view at least one video that provides an historic overview of "The Reading Wars," the debate concerning how much, if any, phonics is appropriate in a balanced literacy classroom. This debate pits phonics oriented instruction against a more holistic approach exemplified by Goodman's Whole Language Theory (Goodman, 1986) which emphasizes comprehension over decoding. This segment of the course ends with an assignment requiring each PECE to develop a history of phonics timeline that highlights seminal studies, publications, and reading instruction advancements. This assignment assesses the degree to which PECE meet the second learning outcome of understanding the theoretical background and historical sequence related to phonics instruction in US schools.

In weeks 5 through 10, students are introduced to the many phonics generalizations related to consonant and vowel sounds, blends and digraphs, complex vowels, affixes and Greek or Latin bases, root words, compound words, and a myriad of inflectional endings. These rules or generalizations are introduced in conjunction with the stages of orthographic development as indicated by the course textbook, *Words Their Way* (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston,

2016). Students examine the developmental process involved in orthography while concurrently looking at the phonics generalization “scope and sequence” associated with each stage. This section of the course ends with an examination on the phonics generalizations taught in class and the concepts and theory introduced in the classroom textbook. As part of the application of pedagogical skills, students are expected to conduct a spelling inventory in the field with a student under the age of 10 and submit the results of that assessment, along with a brief narrative about the testing situation.

The balance of the term (weeks 11 through 16) is used to review all of the parts of speech and the orthographic rules for adding inflectional endings such as –ed and –ing for verbs, and –es and –s for nouns. Students learn to diagram sentences during this portion of the course to ensure that they understand the ways in which the parts of speech are contextualized by their use and function in a sentence. This section of the course ends with an examination of sentence diagramming, and PECE are required to develop a teaching lesson that they present to the class that uses some type of hands-on activity to illustrate a specific phonics or word analysis skill.

The final culminating project is one in which the PECE use the spelling inventory assessment conducted in the second segment of the course (weeks 5-10) as the basis for a larger project requiring them to apply the knowledge ascertained from the final part of the course to a hypothetical pedagogical situation involving the student previously assessed.

While students tend to do well when reading and writing about the history of literacy in the first section of the course, mastering and utilizing the generalizations in the second part of the course (weeks 5-10) is often at challenge at first. The use of the spelling assessment is important because it strengthens PECE’s understanding of the purpose of learning the phonics rules; the administration, scoring, and evaluation of the assessment allows them to see the relative

strengths and weaknesses of their student considering the child's age, grade level, and overall development in both the cognitive and language domains. The final part of the term connects what has been learned to the actual practice of teaching; for most students, this is the most interesting part of the course and, because it reinforces the scope and sequence of phonics generalizations introduction and requires them to develop lesson plans and activities for young children, PECE are almost always highly motivated.

Phonics in Early Childhood Education: The Need to Go Beyond the Learning Outcomes

For the purposes of this case study, the focus will be on the second section of the course (weeks 5-10) where PECE students are introduced to the many phonics generalizations and rules, as well as the developmental nature of orthographic knowledge in children. The use of the course textbook, *Words Their Way* (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2016) was a purposeful choice because of its emphasis on an integrated model of reading, writing, and spelling pedagogy. Furthermore, it provides a useful discussion of the difference in instruction when utilizing analytic phonics (as opposed to synthetic phonics) as a primary basis for instruction in the classroom. In short, in analytic phonics instruction, the whole word is seen and attention is drawn to certain letters and patterns; it breaks words down from whole to part. In synthetic phonics, letter sounds are taught individually, and the emphasis is on how words are built; it builds words up from part to whole.

Based on decades of research into the ways in which orthographic knowledge develops over time and keeping in mind the significance of schema, background knowledge, and experience with language (Smith, 1988), this textbook provides the framework for PECE to understand the developmental nature of orthographic knowledge and structures the phonics

generalizations in a comprehensive scope and sequence. It provides an assessment tool that allows educators to determine individual students' developmental stages, and it comes with a plethora of stage-specific resources appropriate for each level, including reproducible word sorts, detailed directions for use, and phonemic awareness activities or phonics instruction guidelines.

Because the course text provides an assessment tool for determining the orthographic stage of individual children, PECE students have an opportunity to administer the assessment, apply their understanding of phonics generalizations to the results of this assessment, and apply their burgeoning knowledge of methods and materials to a specific learning outcome. For many PECE who had limited instruction in phonics generalizations during their own formative education, the initial introduction (or relearning) of the letter and letter sound combinations is made more meaningful as they apply it with a student who is learning these skills at the same time.

Promoting a Comprehension-Based Mentality

As stated previously, the use of the course textbook, *Words Their Way* (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2016) was a purposeful choice. In addition to its analytic phonics orientation and the integration of some of the language arts (reading, writing, and spelling specifically), the textbook promotes hands-on activities that reflect the basic cognitive learning processes used from birth: comparing and contrasting by categorizing features, and then discovering similarities and differences within and between those categories (Smith, 1988). As the authors indicate, "During word study, words and pictures are sorted in routines that require children to examine, discriminate, and make critical judgments about speech sounds, spelling patterns, and meanings" (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2016, p.4).

As the PECE soon realize, word sorting is efficient because learners have concentrated practice; it is naturally differentiated because students practice at the level of their understanding and ability and are not required to begin instruction at the same place or continue instruction at the same pace. Learners work with words and pictures they already know and are able to pronounce and are then encouraged to return to texts to extend the list of words. Unlike traditional phonics workbooks and worksheets where a skill or sound may be introduced on one or two pages, students can do word sorts repeatedly in a variety of ways. Much of the repeated practice in traditional phonics, spelling, and vocabulary programs consists of drill and memorization that are devoid of context and meaningful usage. As a result, students may not have opportunities to discover spelling or sound patterns, to manipulate their notions of words, or to apply critical thinking skills that are necessary in moving toward reading comprehension and writing and spelling fluency. This is significant in that it provides a context for PECE to adopt a specific methodology that they can use in their own classroom and allow them to make meaningful theory to practical connections.

More importantly, the word sorting emphasizes the fact that English is a language of multiple dialects, and that dialect differences are noticeable in the pronunciation of words, especially the vowels. For example, in some regions, the final -r in r-controlled vowels is dropped, as in Boston where you “pahk the cah” (*park the car*). Another example is that in some areas, the word *roof* may sound like “ruff” or the word *crayons* may be pronounced as two syllables “cray-ons” or “cranes.” While some PECE or practicing teachers may worry about how speakers of such dialects will learn to spell if they cannot pronounce the words according to the rules of Standard American English, word sorting allows students to associate certain letter

patterns with their own pronunciation while concurrently learning the sound patterns of Standard American English (Cantrell, 2001).

Additionally, English vowels may pose challenges for English Language Learners (both PECE and future students) as they compare the sounds of vowels in their primary language with English. While some English vowel sounds may not be made in their languages, others may not be spelled in the same way; word sorting lessons are an explicit way to draw English learners' attention to the similarities and differences between languages in terms of both sound and spelling, while also building vocabulary. In this way, the pedagogy embraced and modeled by the course content and design affirms the National Council of Teachers of English's (2014) statement on Students' Right to Their Own Language.

During weeks 5 through 10 of the term, PECE are introduced to beginning and ending consonant sounds, consonant blends and digraphs, short vowel sounds, long vowel patterns, inflectional endings and the rules associated with adding them, syllable junctures, unaccented final syllables, advanced suffixes, and bases and root words. All of these are introduced through partnered or small group word sorting activities in the classroom that allow students to develop an understanding of the interaction of the three levels of orthography: alphabetic principles, patterns, and meaning. The hands-on orientation of the lessons provides significant practice in mastering the content and the instructional strategy. The authors of the course textbook argue that "orthographic knowledge—understanding the ways in which letters and letter patterns in words represent sound and meaning—plays a central role in a comprehensive language arts program that links reading and writing" (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2016, p. 9). In this way, PECE are encouraged to focus on the end goal: comprehension. As a teacher educator, it is important to help PECE to develop an understanding of what it means to plan for and

implement a comprehensive literacy program where alphabetic principles, phonetic patterns, and word meaning are not separate, but interacting principles that must be integrated to move toward understanding (Smith, 1988).

At every course meeting, during this period of time, PECE are challenged to discover the rules, apply them, move through the developmental stages they may not have attained, while concurrently experiencing the critical thinking and deductive reasoning skills required to complete the given sorts. Students learn the difference between *closed sorts*, where the categories are pre-determined and fixed, and *open sorts*, where the categories are fluid and require the highest level of independent thought and effort to analyze word features and/or sounds. They are also given opportunities to learn about extension activities and follow up routines that optimize the memory of words and strengthen the understanding of generalizations and their applicability. After each course meeting, PECE are required to “return to meaningful texts” (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2016, p. 87) to extend the word lists, look at examples of children’s literature that practice the skills, and consider future instruction with their own target student. While knowing the phonics rule or generalization is important, it is only a vehicle for learning to read; it is not an end in itself (Goodman, 1986). By engaging in these meaningful tasks, PECE learn that it is in the application, not the memorization, that students will become literate. While some phonics courses may approach teaching and learning the phonics rules as a rote task, the discovery method employed in this course allows the PECE to begin thinking about their future students and classrooms.

During this period of time, students are also required to conduct a spelling inventory assessment with a reader under the age of 10. While the focus of the class is on early readers, this assignment reinforces to PECE that it is the orthographic knowledge and ability of the child (not

the chronological age or grade level of the child) that determines where instruction should begin. PECE administer and score the assessment, and then are expected to utilize the results of the assessment to plan for future instruction. While this is an authentic assessment of the PECE that captures learning a traditional selected response test would not, the opportunity to plan for future instruction also creates a concrete opportunity for PECE to visualize instructional opportunities, explore available methods and materials, be creative, and connect theory to meaningful classroom practice.

At the end of the course, in lieu of a final exam on the material, PECE are required to submit a hard copy assessment portfolio on the child that they tested. Students are encouraged to administer the spelling inventory to children in their lives or families. Most students assess younger siblings, cousins, nieces, or nephews, or even their own children or neighbors. They are required to obtain a simple permission slip from the parents that indicates the guardian's willingness to allow child participation for educational practice purposes, and only the child's first name is indicated on all materials submitted. The portfolio includes:

- a cover page that includes a summary of the tested student's background information
- a summary of how, when, and where the assessment was administered
- the testing materials themselves, including the inventory in the student's handwriting and the scoring guide completed by the PECE
- an evaluation and recommendation that is both a narrative summary of the testing results and two word-sorting activities that would be stage appropriate for the tested child

- a short, annotated bibliography of at least 3-5 children's texts that are both age- and ability-appropriate for practicing the skills in context
- a final project option, where the PECE can choose to either write a proposed parent letter or teacher letter to the tested student's guardian or teacher

In this way, PECE are encouraged to use assessment-driven data to plan for future instruction and strengthen their own understanding of how theory to practice works. The creation of instructional materials and reading list reminds PECE that it is in the application of skills to meaningful activities and relevant texts, not the memorization of rules and generalizations, that their students will become literate. Developing activities that allow for the use of analytic phonics and the integration of some of the language arts (reading, writing, and spelling) promotes the type of hands-on, discovery learning that replicates the cognitive learning processes humans employ for the development of authentic learning.

Discussion

For teacher educators working with PECE, there is nothing more important than ensuring that teacher candidates have the knowledge and skills necessary for teaching young children to read. While helping teacher candidates develop the phonetic generalization content knowledge in concert with pedagogical strategies is critical, a three-prong approach can only work if it is efficient and streamlined.

Even though most teacher colleges only require 12 credit hours of reading instruction and most of these take place in a 16-week course frame, some gaps can be bridged by focusing on the ways in which teacher educators can encourage PECE to learn content via the methodology they themselves will use while concurrently modeling the practical ways theory can be applied in the

classroom. In doing so, teacher educators can provide both the motivation and the purpose for PECE to learn all three: the content, the theory, and the pedagogical strategies. This is not to propose such instruction as a complete fix for the issues discussed above. As indicated previously, novice teachers would benefit from even one or two more classes that focus on classroom instruction, pedagogical methods and materials, and advanced training in phonetics and linguistics. Nevertheless, the efficient utilization of instructional time earmarked for PECE literacy instruction has the potential to positively impact children's skills in basic decoding and spelling abilities.

For post-secondary instructors working in other fields and with students who are not PECE or teacher candidates, this case study illustrates that small adjustments in course design can lead to both practical applications of course content and authentic assessments. From resolute and purposeful course text or resource choices to hands-on activities that reinforce both concepts and disciplinary methods, the enhanced quality of instruction over a 16-week semester can lead to improved theory-to-practice course design. Such meaningful connections may help post-secondary students not only understand the content better but begin to absorb and process the disciplinary requirements of their chosen profession.

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