



2014-15 Study of Mississippi Teacher Preparation for Early-Literacy Instruction

A Project of The Barksdale Reading Institute (BRI) and The Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A. Current Conditions

Mississippi continues to rank last or near bottom on national measures of reading achievement. The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE), the public schools, the State Legislature, and the Institutions of Higher Learning (IHLs) can change this unacceptable reality. Research marks an unambiguous path to effective reading instruction. We must choose this path.

The State Legislature has taken significant steps toward improving children's reading achievement. In 2012 they enacted programming to improve reading instruction for students with specific learning disabilities, including dyslexia. In 2013, they passed the Literacy-based Promotion Act (LBPA) to ensure students were reading on grade level by the end of third grade.

In the LBPA's first year, the MDE placed reading coaches in the lowest performing schools across the state to help schools improve the teaching of reading. An increasing number of coaches has extended support to more schools each year. The LBPA also instituted intensive research-based professional development for in-service teachers and made this available to university professors of literacy.

These measures have introduced scientifically-based structured literacy into our public schools. The IHLs are charged with bringing this science to the next generation of reading teachers.

B. Goal and Scope of the Study

This report by the Barksdale Reading Institute (BRI) focuses on the critical role Mississippi's teacher preparation programs must play to realize the goal of reading proficiency in the early grades. That critical role is to improve the initial preparation of new teachers. This study replicates one completed by BRI in 2003, which prompted licensure changes for elementary education majors.

The goal of this study was to determine whether Mississippi's IHLs are adequately preparing pre-service teacher candidates to effectively teach reading when they enter their elementary classrooms.

Since 2003, MDE licensure has required two early-literacy courses (Early Literacy 1/EL1 and Early Literacy 2/EL2) in undergraduate elementary education programs. The purpose of the mandated courses was to ensure that pre-service candidates learned evidence-based practices documented by the National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000) for literacy instruction in five essential areas of reading and writing: phonological/phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Over the course of eighteen months, the BRI study team reviewed the required reading course sequence at each of the 15 public and private colleges and universities in Mississippi during the

2014-15 academic year with a particular focus on EL1 and EL2. This table summarizes the scope of the study. It is noted that IHL participation in the study was voluntary.

Scope and Size of the BRI/IHL Study						
Deans and Faculty Interviewed on 23 Campuses	Syllabi Reviewed	Textbooks Reviewed	Pre-service Candidates Surveyed in 20 Focus Groups	Pre-service Classes Observed	Recent Graduates and Student Interns Observed Teaching in K-5 Settings	Principals in Partner Schools in 15 Districts Interviewed
119	83	45	149	71	58	24

C. Instructional Minutes Spent Teaching Components of Reading

Since the 2003 BRI pre-service study of early literacy in the eight public teacher preparation programs, the five essential components of reading instruction have become an integral part of elementary education preparation throughout the state. This trend is significant and positive.

The table below highlights the statewide averages for the number of minutes devoted specifically to learning how to teach and assess these essential components. To put this in context, a typical semester course has approximately 2,450 minutes for EL1 and 2,750 minutes for EL2. Each of the averages in the table shows the number of instructional minutes within a typical semester course that are focused on learning how to teach a particular component. These minutes only tell part of the story, obviously, but they serve as a solid baseline upon which to build a better pre-service program.

Note: The review found that, on average, EL2 courses had more instructional time allocated than for EL1. This did not appear to be intentional, nor was any rationale provided. It may have been a function of variable length in fall and spring semesters and number of holidays.

Average Number of Minutes within Semester Courses of EL1 and EL2 Spent Learning to Teach These Components of Reading					
EL 1 MINUTES			EL2 MINUTES		
Alphabetic Knowledge	Phonological and Phonemic Awareness	Explicit Phonics	Fluency	Vocabulary	Comprehension
54 mins.	150 mins.	282 mins.	114 mins.	154 mins.	329 mins.
Out of approximately 2,450 total instructional minutes in a semester of EL1 <i>20% of course time</i>			Out of approximately 2,750 total instructional minutes in a semester of EL2 <i>22% of course time</i>		

D. 9 Key Findings

The nine key findings from the study are:

Finding #1 – The five essential components of reading instruction are the primary focus of all teacher preparation literacy programs through the state-mandated courses.

Finding #2 – The structure and content of early-literacy courses are inconsistent across the state.

- Finding #3** – Established research-based principles of early-literacy instruction remain largely unapplied in preparation and practice.
- Finding #4** – “Balanced Literacy”—as interpreted by Mississippi teacher preparation programs and in many K-3 classrooms—has resulted in widespread use of practices that are not supported by research.
- Finding #5** – High standards for learning have become the norm in early literacy and in teacher preparation.
- Finding #6** – Opportunities to observe instruction being modeled, followed by opportunities to practice are insufficient for developing entry-level skills for teaching.
- Finding #7** – Time in the field associated with early-literacy instruction has increased significantly.
- Finding #8** – Most programs now offer a distinct assessment course, usually specific to assessing reading difficulties.
- Finding #9** – Writing as a component of literacy is inadequately addressed.

E. 3 Big Ideas

Mississippi is a small state with only 15 traditional-route teacher preparation programs. MDE is fully engaged in K-3 literacy efforts and the Legislature appears keen to ensure that the literacy challenges that keep us at the bottom of all reading measures are conquered. The interrelated tasks among the various players are complex, but the road map for IHLs is clearly marked. All of us entrusted with preparing Mississippi’s teachers of literacy are urged to consider Three Big Ideas.

Big Idea #1 ADOPT RESEARCH-BASED PRACTICES AT EVERY LEVEL OF READING EDUCATION

- a) Establish research-based principles and practices in core reading courses at all 15 IHLs.
- b) Focus pre-service course core content on explicit, systematic instruction for all five essential components plus writing rather than on the balanced literacy approach which is more implicit and less systematic.
- c) Expand and apply knowledge of research-based practices so that teacher preparation instructors, literacy coaches, and K-3 classroom teachers all incorporate research-based approaches to instruction.
- d) Develop and apply stringent standards for state accreditation of teacher preparation programs to require application of research-based methods in the 15-hour reading sequence.

Big Idea #2 BRING CONSISTENCY TO EARLY-LITERACY COURSE CONTENT AND DELIVERY IN ALL TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMS

- a) At the pre-service level use established research-based methods to teach all essential components of literacy, including writing, and teach skills in assessment and intervention.
- b) Develop core content for EL1 and EL2 course schedules, including a common set of required readings.
- c) Develop textbook guidelines and adoption policies that insure research-based content.
- d) Incorporate regular and frequent modeling of effective practices in undergraduate courses, including using a core of approved video demonstrations of research-based instruction.
- e) Develop a statewide network of “laboratory classrooms” in the K-3 system with skilled, paid mentor teachers for fieldwork and practice teaching.
- f) Ensure pre-service candidates practice teaching and assessing all early-literacy skills by developing a core set of assignments for fieldwork.

- g) Require demonstration of proficiencies in literacy instruction as a requirement for graduation from an elementary education program.

Big Idea #3 DIRECTLY INVOLVE EDUCATORS IN SHAPING POLICY AND PRACTICE

- a) Amend LBPA to increase intentional planning and collaboration among literacy education policymakers and practitioners by expanding the State Reading Panel to include representation from IHL Deans, early-literacy instructors, literacy coaches, mentor teachers, partner district principals, and other literacy experts. Expanded functions to include:
 - o Designing a credentialing process for instructors of EL1 and EL2, with all instructors gaining early literacy credential by 2020.
 - o Developing a set of Evidenced-based Literacy Instruction Principles to guide all pre-service teacher training, in-service professional development, and K-3 coaching and instruction in Mississippi.
 - o Organizing and monitoring the execution of Big Idea #2.
 - o Proactively advising the legislature and the MDE on all policy and other issues related to early literacy.
- b) Revise the State’s program accreditation process to ensure consistent application of high standards to pre-service elementary education programs that will support full implementation of evidence-based practices in early-literacy instruction.

For more information about the Study or to receive a copy of the Statewide Report, visit our website at www.msreads.org.

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