

## Preparing Effective Literacy Educators Through Professional Development

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### **Abstract**

*Since changes to the reading/language arts Oklahoma Subject Area Test (OSAT) in late 2010, elementary education teacher candidates at a teacher training college in the Southern United States have experienced declining scores resulting in test failure and delaying student teaching and graduation. The purpose of this case study was to identify factors that students and faculty perceived as most beneficial in preparing students to pass the OSAT. Constructivism served as the conceptual framework for this study addressing the effects of collaboration, hands-on learning, and application of knowledge. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit 6 elementary education students who had taken the OSAT and 4 full-time reading and language arts faculty members who participated in semistructured interviews. Analysis of coded data indicated themes of preference for experiential learning, intensive strategy instruction, and a review of tested content. Based on study findings, a 3-day professional development training was created to provide students a review of tested subject matter through embedded strategy instruction and opportunities for hands-on application of learning.*

**Keywords:** *Teacher preparation, professional development, teacher training, elementary education, Oklahoma Subject Area Test, United States.*

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## **1. Introduction**

Graduating competent, qualified teachers is a goal worldwide (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005). Northeastern State University (NSU), situated in the northeastern corner of Oklahoma, is no different. Rich in local history and tradition, NSU strives to produce top performing teachers and is known for graduating more teacher candidates than any other institution in the state (Agnew, 2009). However, since 2011, NSU's college of education has experienced a declining pass rate on one of the three required exams necessary for teacher candidates to graduate and be certified to teach in the state. Declining pass rates on the reading/language arts Oklahoma Subject Area Test (OSAT) for elementary education majors posed a problem at NSU. In November of 2010, 69% of NSU students passed compared to 68% of students statewide. The 2011-2012 academic year data revealed a cumulative pass rate of 34% locally, compared with a 37% pass rate statewide (certification officer, NSU College of Education, personal communication, September 27, 2012).

The goal of NSU's elementary education program is to increase student scores and, ultimately, the rate of passing to save its teacher candidates both time and money, while maintaining a program that prepares teachers of the highest quality. The OSAT must be passed before NSU students can continue to their final internship and to graduation. Delays in passing this required exam delay graduation for NSU's teacher candidates that further delays them from entering the workforce and impacting the lives of the students they will teach. This delay in graduating highly qualified teachers ultimately affects preschool through 12th grade (P-12) schools across the state as fewer new teachers are entering the profession.

The Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education recently announced a critical teacher shortage in 10 areas including elementary education (OSRHE, 2013). Discouraged students left in a holding pattern, waiting to intern until they pass this single test, left NSU's teacher education program out of necessity to find a source of income, which results in further teacher shortages. Other programs across the state allow their candidates to complete their full internship and graduate, but leave their graduates unemployable because they have not achieved the certification requirement from the state.

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that may have contributed to the decline in the rate of passing as well as those factors that contributed to success from the perspectives of NSU's elementary education teacher candidates and reading and language arts faculty members. If these factors went unidentified, and NSU's elementary education teacher candidates continued to perform unsatisfactorily on the OSAT for reading and language arts, NSU was at risk of losing its accreditation from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and, eventually, its elementary education

program. However, the effect it would have on NSU's teacher candidates and their future students was the greatest threat. In an effort to identify contributing factors, data were collected from reading and language arts faculty members as well as teacher candidates who had already achieved this benchmark. Surveying teacher candidates who had taken the OSAT to identify factors that helped better prepare them, and interviewing faculty members about how they prepared students for the test in their courses, revealed practices that proved beneficial in better preparing future students for successful completion of the test.

## **2. The Literature**

Professional development (PD) has a longstanding presence in education and the ongoing learning among teaching professionals. Research indicated that effective PD attended by preservice teachers lead to higher quality teaching and a greater commitment to the profession (Han, Hu, & Li, 2013). In recent years, traditional modes of PD, including workshops and conferences, have been reported as being ineffective and lacking the qualities needed to not only increase teacher knowledge but to sustain that learning toward professional growth (Bayar, 2014). Years of research have shown a direct link between student achievement and teacher quality while other research has revealed many teacher preparation programs fail to adequately prepare teacher candidates for their future classrooms (Bayar, 2014). Resulting from federal initiatives including No Child Left Behind (NCLB), professional educators have felt the push from standards-based reform emphasizing "improved teaching as the best path to increased learning and improved student performance" and have subsequently been required to participate in additional professional development activities (Wallace, 2014, p. 11).

Although vast differences exist in teaching across subjects and grades, whether urban or rural, some similarities remain when identifying components of effective professional development. Effective PD in the arts, vocational education, and elementary and high schools includes components of collaboration and active learning (Abilock, Harada, & Fontichiaro, 2013; Shoulders & Myers, 2014; Stanley, Snell, & Edgar, 2014; Wallace, 2014). Mishkind (2014) found duration as the key factor in evidence-based professional learning, while Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) identified content, context, and design as the characteristics of effective professional development. The use of peer reviews and observations to inform PD decisions has also proved to be beneficial in improving teaching practices (Drew & Klopper, 2014). Furthermore, researchers at the Florida Center for Reading Research found that one component of effective PD included the use of student outcome data to "establish priorities for adult learning, to monitor progress or growth in teacher skills, and to sustain continuous improvement" (Torgesen, Meadows, & Howard, 2006, para. 1).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2009) reported having a class with an effective teacher increased student achievement drastically and was more beneficial than limiting class size. Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain (2005) suggested the single greatest impact on student achievement is not class size, funding, or the grade a school receives on local or state report cards, but the effectiveness of the teacher in the classroom. However, according to the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ, 2011), 72% of states in the union fall well below the norm in the amount of content knowledge required to achieve state certification, with Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Iowa ranked at the second percentile. Furthermore, NCTQ (2011) reported that only nine states adequately test their teacher candidates' knowledge of reading content and methods and the essential elements of reading instruction. This evidence fails to support expert opinions that greater content knowledge and advanced subject matter degrees positively impact student learning (Beare, Marshall, Torgerson, Tracz, & Chiero, 2012).

The need for effective teachers has never been greater than it is today. Nationally, reading and math scores among fourth and eighth graders have stagnated over the past decade and have shown only slight gains in scores in less than one fourth of the United States since 2009 (NCES, 2011). Data indicated that the lowest performing subgroups continue to be minority groups including Native American Indians, Hispanics, and African Americans as well as those from lower earning families who qualify for free or reduced price school lunches (NCES, 2011). There continues to be an achievement gap, especially in reading and mathematics, between White and non-White students as well as those considered limited English proficient and the need for highly qualified teachers is a priority (Rojas-LeBouef & Slate, 2012).

Statistics show a direct correlation between teaching quality and student achievement. Researchers suggest that higher qualified teachers, those with National Board Certification and value added or advanced degrees, were less likely to teach in schools with a high minority population or an increased number of economically disadvantaged students (Berry, Daughtrey, & Wieder, 2010). Conversely, the greatest portion of alternatively certified teachers or those teaching on an emergency license were found in urban and poor rural districts with high percentages of minority and disadvantaged students (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin, & Heilig, 2005). In California, one in seven teachers was considered under qualified or undercertified, and those classrooms were staffed by teachers who held emergency credentials or were in the process of receiving some type of teacher training, whether traditional or alternative training (Howard, 2003). Although many states suffer from teacher shortages, it is predominantly districts in urban areas or schools whose students are considered to be at-risk or underserved that are most difficult to staff. These schools suffer more from teacher attrition and retention problems than schools with a higher socioeconomic status enrollment (Howard, 2003).

### **3. Methodology**

In an effort to identify the information proposed, a case study approach was taken. Traditionally, case study research is employed in an attempt to define “what is known based on careful analysis of multiple sources of information” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006, p. 10). An in-depth study, including interviews from multiple participants, aimed to reveal the perceptions of both students and reading and language arts faculty regarding practices and procedures in and out of the classroom that best prepare students to successfully complete the OSAT.

Addressing the problem using a case study design resulted in the fleshing out of specific aspects that are present in NSU’s teacher preparation program that best prepared students to pass the OSAT. Participants also identified aspects they felt might be missing that are keeping candidates from passing on their first attempt. This information could only be extracted from qualitative data gathered through individual interviews with both faculty and students. The use of open-ended questions ensured the participants could elaborate on any of the questions and were not led in any particular direction that may have skewed the results of the study. Interview questions were directly aligned with the guiding research questions to help focus specifically on the problem and identify potential solutions.

### **4. Summary of the Findings**

As anticipated, a match existed between teacher preparation methods, subject area knowledge, and pedagogical knowledge and a candidate’s later effectiveness in the classroom. Research findings also revealed that reading and language arts instructors who provided opportunities for enhanced or additional field experiences and application based projects in the classroom yielded students who performed higher on the OSAT. Student findings, from those who successfully completed the reading/language arts OSAT, indicated that students who conducted a thorough review of the subject matter prior to taking the test, along with those application based projects in the classroom, felt more prepared for success on the OSAT. Reading and language arts course work could span a candidate’s professional education over a period of two to four semesters, at minimum, resulting in some regression of foundational subject matter. Additional findings indicated that the most successful students were those who conducted some manner of subject area review upon completion of all course work and prior to taking the OSAT.

The findings revealed several specific activities and assignments teacher candidates believed were most beneficial in preparing them for successful completion of the OSAT subtest 1 (reading/language arts). One common recommendation among student participants was to take the OSAT subtest 1 as soon after completion of all required reading

and language arts courses as possible so the content and strategies would still be fresh. This recommendation was the initial driving force behind the decision to design a PD plan that offers a review of the tested content in a way that involves the participants with hands-on activities and includes opportunities to apply the information while thinking critically about subject matter, proposed problems, and logical solutions (Dixon, Yssel, McConnell, & Hardin, 2014).

A 3-day PD project was designed to focus on content knowledge and involve active learning. This design not only provides participants with the subject matter review they need but also equips them with tools and strategies that will better prepare them for their future classrooms. Many designs for PD exist, but recently the focus has moved away from the passive, workshop approach to one with more opportunities for active engagement, critical thinking, and practical application (Yamauchi, Im, & Mark, 2013).

## **5. Conclusion**

This case study set out to identify the perceived aspects inherent in NSU's elementary education teacher preparation program that best equips candidates with the skills and dispositions necessary to pass the OSAT subtest 1. Interviews with faculty and students confirmed beliefs that a constructivist approach to teaching and learning was preferred and that offering students multiple opportunities to apply their learning through hands-on engagement, both in the classroom and in the field, helped in constructing meaningful connections between theory and practice. The development of a PD plan that incorporates many of the elements that participants identified as beneficial will serve as a rigorous review of reading and language arts content. Furthermore, embedding many effective instructional strategies into the review provides opportunities for participants to experience how beneficial the strategies can be in better understanding content. These known strategies can become part of the future teachers' repertoires and, subsequently, can be applied in their classrooms with their students when they enter the teaching profession. Preparing highly qualified teachers who possess in-depth subject matter knowledge, understand effective pedagogy, and utilize best practices in teaching reading and language arts has the potential to positively impact students' academic achievement across the state for generations to come.

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