

# Higher Education Collaboratives: Aligning Research and Practice in Teacher Education

by Elaine A. Cheesman, Martha Hougen, and Susan M. Smartt

Anyone who drives a car has probably felt the vehicle “pull” to one side, signaling to the driver that a wheel alignment is due; however, the problem is actually a much more complex situation involving the interrelated suspension and steering systems. Proper alignment is essential to the car’s steering system. The current state of reading instruction is very much like a car out-of-alignment—the steering system (standards, accountability, and instruction) often do not align with the suspension (research basis).

Decades of research evidence confirms the lasting value of reading instruction that includes five essential elements—phonemic awareness, systematic phonics, text fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Moreover, a teacher’s level of expertise in assessing and teaching these essential skills predicts reading improvement in children (Moats, 2004). Although ongoing research is important to refine our understanding of reading acquisition and instruction, there is already enough valid, research evidence to improve reading instruction. However, this knowledge about evidence-based reading instruction is not universally recognized, accepted, or practiced.

## The Alignment of Research, Policy, Accountability, and Practice

Aligning the steering (standards, accountability, and instruction) with the suspension (research basis) of the “reading machine” involves several components:

- policy (e.g., State and professional organization standards for teachers),
- accountability (e.g., standards for State accreditation of teacher preparation programs, licensure tests for teachers), and
- teacher knowledge.

Each element involves a tangled web of repair shops. The drivers of the reading car, the customers, are the beginning readers who expect the car, that is, their instruction, to work for them. Finally, the title to the reading car is shared by many partners—researchers, professional associations, federal and State policy makers, and teacher educators—who have varying views on what teacher candidates need to know and be able to do when teaching reading. Sometimes it seems that the reading car is a politically correct compromise of all views, rather than a unified machine with all parts working together to better serve the teacher candidate and ultimately, their students.

### Policy

Professional associations publish standards for teacher education in reading instruction with varying degrees of depth and alignment with scientifically based reading research. Some standards, such as the new IDA *Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading* (International Dyslexia Association,

2010), elaborate and specify critical areas of content knowledge and practices. IDA’s standards include 42 separate elements to guide instruction in the five essential elements of reading, plus another eight devoted to spelling, handwriting, and composition, all supported by extensive research citations. In contrast, other standards, such as the recently revised International Reading Association’s (IRA) *Standards for Reading Professionals* (2010), leave educators on their own to translate research into meaningful practice. Standard 2 states, “Candidates use the instructional approaches, materials, and an integrated, comprehensive, balanced curriculum to support student learning in reading and writing.” Evidence that demonstrates competence for Reading Specialist/Literacy Coach Candidates for this standard states, “Use instructional approaches supported by literature and research for the following areas: concepts of print, phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, critical thinking, motivation, and writing” (Standard 2, Element 2.2). The 2003 IRA standards, which covered the five essential reading elements in one sentence (International Reading Association, 2004, Standard 1.4), were adopted by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as the primary accrediting body for colleges of education.

### Accountability

There are two ways to hold accountable the content of teacher preparation in reading: university accreditation and teacher licensure examinations. As part of the accreditation process, State departments of education review the content of teacher preparation programs pursuant to standards described in State statute. Each State determines the content and the process, with varying degrees of rigor and specificity. For example, the Colorado Department of Education expanded the existing professional standards for teachers to more precisely align with current research evidence (e.g., *Colorado Teacher Preparation Program Approval Rubric and Review Checklist for Literacy Courses*, Colorado Department of Education, 2008). The Department uses this document to review coursework as part of the accreditation process. Other State departments of education and teacher preparation programs may wish to conduct similar reviews using the generic *Scientifically Based Reading Instruction Innovation Configuration* (Smartt & Reschly, 2007). This document is a user-friendly tool that examines syllabi on two dimensions: essential components of reading and degree of implementation. You may download this document from <http://www.tqsource.org/publications/June2007Brief.pdf>

Performance on State teacher licensure tests measures the outcome of teacher education. For results to be meaningful, State standards, course content, and licensure tests must be uniformly aligned with evidence-based reading research (SBRR); most are not (Stotsky, 2009). Although some states

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have standards and accreditation reviews of coursework that include the science of reading instruction, not all licensure tests include this critical knowledge (Greenberg & Jacobs, 2009). In the words of Lyon and Weisner, "It is hard to imagine widespread improvement in the preparation of reading teachers when examinations designed to measure essential content and pedagogical competencies assess content and competencies that are not in line with current research" (Lyon & Weiser, 2009, p. 478).

Some states (e.g., California, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Virginia) now require that prospective elementary teachers pass a specific test dedicated to evidence-based reading instruction; the standards assessed are aligned with reading research (Stotsky, 2009). See "How Research-Based Licensure Exams Can Improve Teacher Preparation in Reading: Lessons from Connecticut" by Louise Spear-Swerling and Michael D. Coyne, in this issue, for a comprehensive discussion of teacher licensure tests.

### Teacher Knowledge

**K–12 Teachers.** A growing body of evidence suggests that many graduates of teacher licensure programs feel unprepared to teach reading (See "Examining Promising Practices to Improve Linguistic Knowledge and Inform Practice in Teacher Education" by Shannon Gormley Budin, Nancy Mather, and Elaine Cheesman, in this issue). For example, over half the teachers surveyed in the 2008 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher felt unprepared for their first year of teaching. Schools that wish to align with research evidence frequently secure professional development designed to improve teacher practices and through them student learning and achievement. Districts must provide this professional development because far too many teacher candidates are NOT receiving instruction about the science of teaching reading in their preparation program. This begs two questions. First, why must school districts use tax dollars to re-educate recent university graduates in the science of teaching reading? Second, where and from whom do teacher educators obtain an understanding of the recent research in reading?

**Teacher Education.** A national review of teacher education course syllabi revealed that few teacher licensing programs align well with scientific evidence regarding reading instruction (Greenberg & Jacobs, 2009; Greenberg & Walsh, 2010). In addition, a study of the most widely-adopted books for elementary-level reading instruction revealed that most college textbooks de-emphasize the essential components of instruction and may also include misinformation (Greenberg & Jacobs, 2009; Joshi, Binks, Graham, et al., 2009). The National Council on Teacher Quality has issued reports specific to teacher preparation in several individual states. These reports are available online at [www.nctq.org](http://www.nctq.org)

To test the hypothesis that teacher educators themselves may be unfamiliar with English language structure, Joshi, Binks, Hougen and their colleagues (2009) administered a survey of language concepts to 78 university reading instructors and interviewed an additional 40 instructors about best practices

in reading instruction. Results showed that few teacher educators had a secure understanding of the essential elements of reading instruction; for example, 80% of the university instructors confused phonemic awareness (the ability to notice and manipulate sounds in spoken language) with phonics (using letter-sound correspondences). Similarly, in a study of 223 first-year teachers, Cheesman and her colleagues (2009) found that 60% also defined phonemic awareness as letter-sound correspondences. These two studies suggest a link between the knowledge of university faculty and their students. If professional development for K–12 teachers increases student achievement, then is it not a logical step to provide the same, high-quality professional development and ongoing support to teacher educators?

### Higher Education Collaborative: Professional Development for Teacher Educators

University teacher educators rarely have the opportunity to participate in ongoing professional development and to collaborate with peers to learn about current research and the most effective practices to teach all students to read. If the role of the teacher educator teaching reading is to make "abstruse knowledge potentially usable," (Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005, p. 12) for teacher candidates, what supports the teacher educator in ensuring that he or she has a solid grasp of the most relevant, often "abstruse" and controversial, reading research?

To address this challenge and to provide support to teacher educators, the Texas Education Agency provided funding in 2000 for the Higher Education Collaborative (HEC) to support teacher educators training teachers to teach reading in grades K–3. The HEC began with 15 members from 5 teacher preparation institutions. Currently the HEC has more than 300 members representing more than 100 institutions. The HEC provides ongoing professional development and collaborative opportunities for teacher educators and educational administration faculty responsible for university undergraduate teacher preparation programs, post-baccalaureate programs, programs in community colleges, and alternative certification programs. The HEC provides financial support for members to attend seminars and opportunities to collaborate with colleagues.

The HEC seminars feature renowned educational researchers. In addition to the opportunity to talk to those conducting seminal research, members receive materials, books, and presentations to use in their classes. HEC developed a beginning reading course, *Foundations of Reading*, for use by all members. The course includes a sample syllabus, videos of teachers and students demonstrating the concepts presented, quizzes, PowerPoint slides with speaker notes, and references citing the scientific research supporting the concepts presented.

The HEC is responsive to the needs of its members. Recent seminar topics, identified by the faculty as of interest to them, include response to intervention, differentiating instruction, teaching English language learners, curriculum-based assessment, and active engagement of the college student.

HEC members identified six activities that are most useful to them:

- 1) Dissemination of evidence-based materials for use in the college classroom;
- 2) Online support and collaborative opportunities;
- 3) Opportunities to attend seminars and dialogue with experts and colleagues in the field;
- 4) Opportunities to present and disseminate their own research and effective teaching strategies;
- 5) Sharing syllabi that integrate research and instruction; and
- 6) Provide opportunities to visit colleagues on other campuses; learn about other programs and ways to integrate evidence-based practices in reading instruction.

The following statements by HEC members serve to underscore the fact that belonging to this organization has helped them to grow professionally, learn about current research, and be aware of national and state initiatives:

- *The materials you distribute work really well with the reading/language arts course I teach. I use the presenter slides and handouts on the five components of an effective reading program.*
- *The knowledge and collaboration gained from meeting with colleagues across Texas has been priceless. My students have gained from the information provided by HEC, and I have become a more effective and efficient teacher.*

The HEC has achieved its primary objective: improved preparation of teachers of reading. Many school districts now request teachers trained by HEC institutions. The districts state that HEC teacher candidates do not require retraining through costly in-service professional development, as the teachers already understand the essential components of teaching reading. A recent study of linguistic knowledge found that preservice teachers instructed by teacher educators instructed by HEC instructors performed significantly better than preservice teachers instructed by teacher educators not affiliated with HEC (Binks, 2008).

Although the financial support HEC has received since 2003 from the Texas Reading First initiative will end with Reading First, the relationships formed and the knowledge gained will continue to grow stronger. The strong support of its members may help resurrect HEC and, perhaps, help replicate it in other states.

### Seven Steps in Establishing a Higher Education Collaborative in Your State

The success of the Texas Higher Education Collaborative has come to the attention of other states. Currently, several are in the process of establishing a HEC to serve the needs of their teacher educators. The design of each state collaborative is unique but completing the following steps will help ensure the success of each new HEC.

- 1) **Initiate comprehensive preliminary preparation planning.** Abundant planning must go into the early stages of developing a HEC, even before the first

meeting. First, to have a successful HEC and provide ongoing and timely support to faculty members, there must be sufficient staff, including a project coordinator who is a teacher educator and is responsible for managing the entire project, and an administrative person to coordinate the logistics of planning the professional development and collaborative events.

Next, develop a tentative budget based on projected needs for one year. Budgetary needs will vary across states depending on the scope of the mission, objectives, and goals. Primarily, the budget would account for seminars, materials and resources, staff salaries, copying, presenter fees, travel expenses, and meeting expenses.

Conduct a needs assessment with as many constituents as possible, either with paper and pen, or with a web-based survey provider. One way to ensure commitment to the collaborative is to obtain input from faculty members about what would be most beneficial to them and how the HEC could facilitate improved preparation for teacher candidates. Survey perceived needs for professional development. Create a similar document for deans and administrators to determine perceived need and the initial focus of professional development seminars and workshops.

Finally, attempt to engage other agencies and centers who may be interested in working with your state as a partner. For example, currently in one western state, the regional comprehensive center has agreed to “partner” with the state to provide technical support and collaboration in the way of facilitation of communication, meetings, and documentation. In addition, one of the five U.S. Department of Education National Comprehensive Centers has agreed to fund the speakers for the seminars during the first year. These entities have formed a strong partnership with this state to move forward toward preparing teachers to teach struggling readers to read more effectively and efficiently.

- 2) **Form an advisory committee.** This committee is typically comprised of selected faculty members who help guide the development of the collaborative. The advisory committee and subsequent members must understand that the collaborative exists to support faculty members, not to evaluate them, judge their programs, or report to the State. A collaborative must be an organization of equals, all striving to improve their practice.
- 3) **Establish purpose, objectives, and methods of evaluation.** One of the initial and most important tasks of the advisory committee is to establish the purpose, objectives, and methods of evaluation of the collaborative. An example of a purpose for an evidence-based reading HEC might be to “integrate evidence-based literacy research and instruction in preservice teacher-education courses.” Once the purpose of the collaborative is decided, establish specific objectives for the first year and design activities to support the objectives.

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For example, an objective might be to disseminate research about the essential components of reading instruction, including oral language development, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension instructional strategies. Finally, the Advisory Committee must design an evaluation to determine if the collaborative is successful. What are the criteria? How will HEC measure these criteria? Remember, ongoing participation is an important positive indicator!

- 4) **Obtain commitment from university leaders and faculty.** Even in the early talking and planning stages, it is helpful to include the deans of schools of education and related fields to determine their interest in the concepts of a collaborative. Keep the deans informed as the collaborative ideas develop; ask for their recommendations and ask them to identify specific needs within their departments.
- 5) **Publicize your collaborative from the beginning.** The more people who know about the collaborative, the greater its chances are of growing and succeeding. Deans of schools of education, university presidents, and department chairs should be informed of the value of faculty members working together collaboratively to improve teacher education. In addition, send the information directly to your targeted audience—teacher educators. Do not rely on general mailings to the Dean’s office.
- 6) **Provide seminars and other professional development events routinely.** Faculty will soon begin to expect professional development opportunities and look forward to attending them. During the first year or two, offer several seminars a year. In addition to large seminars, offer smaller workshops addressing specific needs. Examples could include using assessment data to guide instruction, progress monitoring, teaching English language learners, and implementing response to intervention.
- 7) **Plan for sustainability by thinking about year two, three, and four.** The collaborative will continue and flourish if the members feel it benefits them and improves their instruction. However, given the uncertainty of the funding, it is wise to look ahead and plan for sustainability.

Most agree that the “reading machine” is long overdue for a comprehensive alignment, but if we work together to address the professional development needs of teacher educators, we can better align research, policy, and teacher education to enable teachers to meet more effectively the needs of all students. It is for them—after all—that we built this car in the first place.

For more information about how to start or plan a Higher Education Collaborative in your state, contact either Marty Hougen ([mhougen@mail.utexas.edu](mailto:mhougen@mail.utexas.edu)) or Susan Smartt ([susan.m.smartt@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:susan.m.smartt@vanderbilt.edu)).

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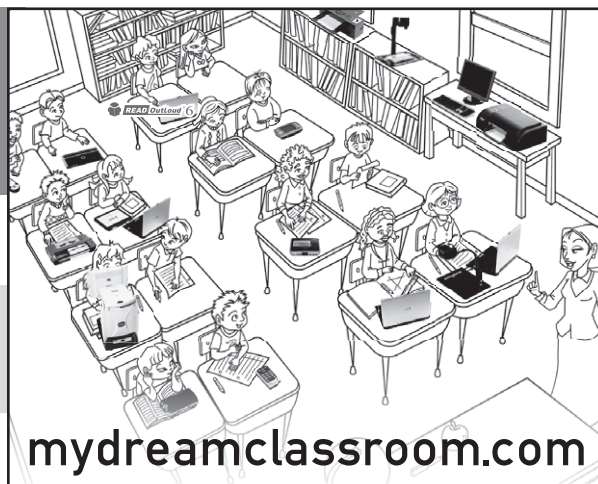
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