



August 21, 2013

To the members of the International Reading Association's Literacy Research Panel:

In your [response](#) to NCTQ's *Teacher Prep Review* last month, you delivered a clear message: NCTQ needs to *do more* when it comes to evaluating the programs training teachers how to teach reading.

On this, we agree. Although we evaluated 1,200 programs at 1,130 institutions across the country, we will expand the scope of the *Review* by at least one third for the next edition. And we are currently developing a crop of new standards, a number of which pertain to reading instruction, which we will apply in future editions.

But while the *Review*, like all research efforts, can stand improvement, it's nonetheless vitally important to acknowledge what we did find: the vast majority of programs are not equipping their graduates to succeed, particularly in the crucial area of reading instruction. Unless the field comes to grips with this disturbing reality, no effort to strengthen teacher preparation will even get off the ground. We welcome constructive dialogue and collaboration with any group that recognizes this reality and is willing to do something about it.

For the first edition of the *Review*, we decided to start our evaluation of training in reading instruction in the area where the research consensus was overwhelming, about which we had published a report in 2006 and for which virtually every elementary teacher training program in the country has required coursework: reading in the early elementary grades.

The Literacy Research Panel agrees that preparing elementary teachers in the "five pillars" of early reading instruction identified by the landmark National Reading Panel Report -- phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension -- is "necessary." If so, then surely its members would also agree that it is appalling that *less than 20 percent* of the hundreds of programs we reviewed addressed all five pillars. And we hardly set a high bar: a course that had as few as two lectures on each topic and assigned an adequate textbook would be scored as meeting the standard.

We are now developing standards on struggling adolescent readers and Common Core reading and writing that we will apply to secondary programs. We're also working on standards on emergent literacy for early childhood teachers that will pay particular attention to oral language development. New standards take at least two years of research and field testing to develop, and will be applied in future editions of the *Review*.

At that time, we may well find that some of the institutions housing the top elementary programs in reading still have work to do in other areas of reading instruction. In the meantime, they are at least noteworthy for being ahead of the rest of the field. As for the programs that don't cover any of the five pillars -- *almost a third of our sample* -- the fact that we did not look at every aspect of reading instruction cannot excuse their complete failure to prepare their elementary teachers for the most important part of their jobs.

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Curiously, you suggest we ignored research and information about teacher preparation gathered by those most concerned with its quality, namely, teacher educators themselves and state agencies. In fact, we went through these sources exhaustively. That the *Review* could only partially rely upon them speaks more to their limitations than our neglect.

As we note in our [research inventory introduction](#), we examined thousands of peer-reviewed articles published in the past decade on teacher preparation. Most of these articles were written by teacher educators. Unfortunately, very few met basic standards of research design or looked at the impact of preparation on actual teacher effectiveness (only two articles in the area of [early reading instruction](#) met these criteria.). Our inventories echo the findings of literature reviews undertaken by the American Educational Research Association in 2007 and the National Research Council in 2010: the research base underlying teacher preparation remains altogether too thin. This, too, is an area in vital need of attention by the field.

As for taking advantage of the information collected by state agencies about teacher preparation programs, we only wish that we could have done so, as it would have made our job a *lot* easier. But when we requested materials from state agencies, we found that they were either out of date or irrelevant, largely because they did not describe what students in actual classes were being taught. Given the substantial investment states and programs put into accountability, the fact that we came up empty is cause for concern.

It's not enough to take state mandates for teacher preparation at face value. One has to dig deeper to see if these mandates will make a difference. Take California's regulations on secondary teachers. You suggest that because the state either requires high school candidates to have majored in the subject they will teach or take a rigorous exam, all of California's programs should get four stars on our high school content standard. But that's not actually the case for subjects that fall under the umbrella of "social studies." A new teacher could be assigned to teach history having majored in political science. And California's social studies licensing test is too broad to actually determine if the teacher knows enough history to teach the class well.

Perhaps we are just talking past each other, using the same words -- "training" and "profession," in particular -- to mean different things. In our minds, to be a member of a profession requires that one master a core set of knowledge and skills that have been determined to be effective. That's certainly what's required of physicians and lawyers.

So, for example, to be an elementary teacher, one must at a minimum be trained in how to productively apply the five pillars of reading instruction. Of course, no one is arguing that an elementary teacher mindlessly enact these principles without any regard to what his or her students can already do. Indeed, that's the very reason why our early reading standard looks to see whether candidates are trained in assessment. Instructing candidates in how to use relevant data as they do their job should be embedded in any form of training that would, as you put it, "help candidates move towards a professional teaching role."

But the approach to teacher training that you appear to favor, one that emphasizes "difference and variation," all too often leads to a free-for-all, in which teacher candidates are asked to develop their own philosophies of reading. Well-trained doctors are indeed flexible, but no one thinks that they should develop their own "philosophies" of mending broken limbs or conducting heart surgery.

Our goal is to make sure that new teachers are classroom ready from day one so that they and their students can succeed. By putting information in the hands of the consumers of teacher preparation -- teacher candidates and school districts -- about which programs are doing a good job of training their candidates, we aim to invigorate a market that until now has countenanced mediocrity or worse. The profession of teaching, the field of teacher education and, most importantly, our students will reap tremendous gains when we succeed. We hope you will join us.