How Do Literacy Teacher Educators Engage as Literacy Leaders?

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Introduction

The preparation of PreK-12 classroom teachers is a topic of worldwide importance (International Literacy Association [ILA], 2018c). PreK-12 classroom teachers must be competent teaching practitioners who are equipped with well-defined knowledge about literacy development and know how to apply this expertise with impactful pedagogical practices among diverse learners (ILA & National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2017). In the present accountability-focused era, PreK-12 classroom teachers must also be learner-centered practitioners who prioritize research-based and responsive approaches to literacy instruction over test-centric teaching practices (Au & Valencia, 2010; Davis & Willson, 2015). Ultimately, PreK-12 classroom teachers must be trained as literacy leaders who engage in lifelong learning, reflect upon their practices, collaborate with other practitioners, and advocate for powerful literacy teaching and learning (ILA, 2018a).

Literacy teacher educators play a vital role in the development of quality PreK-12 classroom teachers. Literacy teacher educators must value literacy education themselves (Courtland & Leslie, 2010) and develop preservice teachers' ability to implement transformative literacy instruction among all learners (Kosnik, Rowsell, Williamson, Simon, & Beck, 2013). Teacher education is a knotty enterprise in that literacy teacher educators train preservice teachers for "the schools we have," as well as "the schools we want" (Williamson, 2013, p. 2). However, there seems to be little research on literacy teacher educators themselves, their transition in

becoming teacher educators, factors that influence their pedagogical methods, or how they view their professional roles (Kosnik, Menna, Daharamshi, Miyata, & Beck, 2013).

Moreover, another important topic that is missing from conversations about literacy teacher educators is their engagement with literacy leadership practices. Literacy leadership has been deemed an essential topic for literacy teacher education, and preservice teachers must engage in various types of teacher training experiences that prepare them as lifelong learners, reflective practitioners, professional collaborators, and committed advocates (ILA, 2018a). Additionally, literacy teacher educators themselves must possess a strong knowledge base for leadership and model desired leadership characteristics and practices among preservice teachers (Wold, Young, & Risko, 2011). Although literacy leadership has become a growing area of interest in literacy teacher education (Sharp, Piper, & Raymond, 2018), there is an obvious research gap that examines the literacy leadership practices of those who train preservice teachers.

In this paper, we report on a study we conducted that explored the literacy leadership practices of literacy teacher educators who were affiliated with university-based teacher education programs throughout the United States. Literacy teacher educators are an important factor in the success of preservice teachers, thereby demonstrating a compelling need for this study. Our work was also driven by the larger objective to make research-based recommendations that strengthen and enhance the quality of literacy teacher education. Our work was exploratory in nature and provides a necessary starting point for opening discussion regarding the ways in which literacy teacher educators practice literacy leadership.

The Work of Literacy Teacher Educators

Literacy is an expansive and dynamic field that has become increasingly complex. Literacy teacher educators play a prominent role as teachers who prepare PreK-12 classroom teachers for contemporary literacy instruction in a diverse and globally connected world (Kosnik, Menna et al., 2013). Literacy teacher educators also make important contributions within the literacy community as academics through professional service and scholarship. To manage essential functions and address specific challenges associated with the dual roles of teacher and academic effectively, literacy teacher educators must be literacy leaders. Recently, ILA (2018a) identified four core elements of literacy leaders. In the section below, we briefly explain these in the context of existing literature to provide a foundation of knowledge and literature-based definition for literacy leadership.

Lifelong Learners

To advance education, literacy teacher educators must be knowledgeable literacy professionals (Wold et al., 2011). PreK-12 student populations have become increasingly diverse, and literacy teacher educators enter the field of teacher education with varied backgrounds, perspectives, and teaching experiences (Dharamshi, 2019). Thus, literacy teacher educators must be lifelong learners who seek wider understandings of literacy teaching and learning from others (Kosnik, Menna, Dharamshi, & Beck, 2018). Lifelong learning experiences should be continuous and occur within collaborative communities that allow literacy teacher educators to learn with and

from preservice teachers, PreK-12 teachers, school leaders, parents, colleagues in their respective teacher education programs, and literacy teacher educators (ILA, 2018b).

Reflective Practitioners

Reflection has been a longstanding component of teacher education, whereby teacher educators develop reflective capacities among preservice teachers to facilitate continuous self-improvement with teaching practices (Calderhead, 1989). Similarly, literacy teacher educators must continually improve and refine their pedagogical practices by engaging in recurring cycles of reflection and action (Dharamshi, 2019). Literacy teacher educators are generally responsible for developing, planning, teaching, and assessing literacy-focused coursework in their teacher education programs (Saudelli & Rowsell, 2013). Therefore, they must critically examine their assigned courses in an ongoing manner to ensure that the content and learning activities sufficiently prepare preservice teachers to address current literacy needs.

Professional Collaborators

Collaboration is an area of great importance among PreK-12 classroom teachers (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013). PreK-12 classroom teachers must know how to collaborate with teachers and other education professionals, students, parents and caregivers, and community members to support student learning and wellbeing. Since many literacy teacher educators have previous experiences as PreK-12 classroom teachers, they tend to have a great deal of familiarity with collaboration (Jay, 2015).

Committed Advocates

PreK-12 classroom teachers who are committed advocates work individually or collectively to promote and protect the interests of the education profession (Royea & Appl, 2009). Thus, it is essential that literacy teacher educators assume the role of advocate during their work in teacher education. Literacy teacher educators are positioned to advocate for best practices in literacy during coursework, field experiences, and other teacher education program activities (Kosnik, Menna et al., 2013). Literacy teacher educators also serve as committed advocates through involvement in high-quality research and professional service work.

Theoretical Framework

Since the work of PreK-12 practitioners is vastly different from the work of teacher educators, we drew from teacher educator research to frame our work. Teacher educators are a unique professional group who are typically accountable for professional achievement in teaching, scholarship, and service (Boyer, 1990). Novice teacher educators must learn how to navigate working in higher education and broaden their knowledge base for PreK-12 education, develop a pedagogy for teaching teachers, create a strong identity as a researcher, and identify effective ways to collaborate with different PreK-12 education stakeholders (Murray & Male, 2005). It is not unusual for teacher educators to enter the field with little to no deliberate preparation for their professional roles (Goodwin et al., 2014). Consequently, many teacher educators maintain their PreK-12 classroom teacher identity during their induction into higher education (Dinkelman,

Margolis, & Sikkenga, 2006; Murray & Male, 2005). Teacher educators construct, negotiate, and refine their teacher educator identity in a socio-constructive way based upon the contexts and structures within which they work (Murray & Male, 2005) and according to specific subject area demands (Boyd & Harris, 2010). Teacher educator identity development is a complex and dynamic process (Dinkelman et al., 2006), and over time, teacher educators are "recognized as a 'certain kind of person'" by both themselves and others (Gee, 2000, p. 100).

Methods

Context

The current study was part of a larger research project that explored literacy teacher education from the viewpoints of literacy teacher educators throughout the United States. Since our research project elicited participation from literacy teacher educators spread across a wide geographic area, we employed a survey research design using an online questionnaire (Sue & Ritter, 2012). We developed the questionnaire in Qualtrics® using *Standards 2017* as a guiding framework (ILA, 2018a) and included closed- and open-ended items to gather a wide range of information. We developed the questionnaire with Sue and Ritter's (2012) design principles in mind and conducted a pilot tested to identity any potential problem areas.

Since a comprehensive listing of literacy teacher educators in the United States did not exist, we used purposive sampling to achieve a homogeneous research sample (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). To make this large task manageable, we established a shared, password-protected workspace in Google Drive and followed a systematic process to create a pool of potential respondents. First, we subdivided the United States into four separate regions. Within each region, we consulted official websites for each state's education agency and made a list of all university-based teacher education programs. For each teacher education program, we accessed their university's website and searched publicly available sources (e.g., class schedules, course syllabi, web pages) for the names and email addresses of literacy teacher educators. Our efforts resulted in a finalized pool of 2,533 potential respondents.

We used the email distribution feature in Qualtrics® to invite all potential respondents to participate. Through this feature, we sent an informative email that included a hyperlink to the questionnaire. The questionnaire remained active for four months, and we sent three monthly reminders by email to encourage participation among non-respondents. When the questionnaire closed, we received questionnaires from 205 respondents.

Data Collection and Analysis

As a research team, we opted to analyze data for the current study descriptively using frequency counts and percentages (Sue & Ritter, 2012). To achieve the research goal, the lead researcher (i.e., the first author) filtered completed questionnaires to include only those from respondents who shared information regarding literacy leadership practices and retrieved relevant data. Data included pre-defined and free text responses from two checklist items that each included an 'Other' field (see Appendix). The lead researcher downloaded data into an Excel spreadsheet

and conducted a preliminary screening for data errors. Once data were prepared for analysis, the lead researcher conducted data analysis in three different stages.

In the first stage, the lead researcher stored data from the two checklist items in an Excel spreadsheet. These data consisted of reported frequencies and percentages for each of the pre-defined responses. In the second stage, the lead researcher assembled free text responses in a Word document and transformed them into quantifiable values for data analysis (Sue & Ritter, 2012).   The lead researcher worked through these data systematically by assigning preliminary codes to data excerpts and grouping similar codes together. In the third stage, the lead researcher merged both data sets together and conducted comparisons to review, refine, and organize data into distinct groups based upon similarities. Once groups were finalized, the lead researcher tabulated final frequency counts and percentages for individual literacy leadership practices and groups. To confirm accuracy of findings, the lead researcher shared raw data and data analysis documents with members of the research team.

Findings

Of the 205 questionnaires collected, 132 respondents shared information about their literacy leadership practices. As shown in Table 1, a large majority of respondents were females who were 40 years of age or older. Many respondents also held doctorate degrees and had completed four or more years of teaching experiences as both PreK-12 classroom teachers and literacy teacher educators. Almost all respondents reported that they were employed as full-time faculty members in university-based teacher education programs located throughout the Midwest, Northeast, South, and West regions of the United States. Within their respective teacher education programs, several respondents indicated their involvement with training preservice teachers for teacher certification in multiple grade-level bands.

Table 1
Demographics of Respondents

Characteristic	*n*	%
Gender		
Female	110	83%
Male	21	16%
Prefer not to answer	1	> 1%
Age Range		
30-39 years	17	13%
40-49 years	50	38%
50-59 years	26	20%
60-69 years	33	25%
Over 70 years	6	4%
Years of Teaching Experiences in PreK-12		
Less than 1 year	4	3%
1-3 years	12	9%
4-6 years	34	26%
7-9 years	20	15%
Over 10 years	62	47%

Years of Teaching Experiences in Teacher Education		
Less than 1 year	2	1%
1-3 years	9	7%
4-6 years	28	21%
7-9 years	22	17%
Over 10 years	71	54%
Highest Degree Earned		
Bachelor's degree	1	> 1%
Master's degree	14	11%
Doctorate degree	117	88%
Professional Status		
Part-time faculty member	10	8%
Full-time, non-tenured faculty member	28	21%
Full-time, tenure-track faculty member	30	23%
Full-time, tenured faculty member	64	48%
Teacher Education Program Grade-Level Bands		
PreK/Primary	86	65%
Elementary/Intermediate	117	88%
Middle/High School	82	62%
Location of Teacher Education Program by Region		
Midwest	27	20%
Northeast	43	33%
South	43	33%
West	19	14%

We retrieved a total of 1,416 responses from completed questionnaires that revealed ways in which respondents engaged with literacy leadership practices. As shown in Table 2, data analysis generated 15 different literacy leadership practices that represented five distinct groups. To determine respondents' levels of engagement for each group, we tabulated associated frequencies and percentages. Three groups accounted for 86.29% of the total responses, while the remaining two groups accounted for only 13.7% of the total responses. We determined that these groupings represented high and low levels of engagement and provided a summary of these findings below.

Table 2
Literacy Leadership Practices

Literacy Leadership Practices	*n*	%
Share Information with Others		
Conduct research independently and collaboratively	113	7.98%
Make presentations at international, national, state, and local conferences	111	7.84%
Disseminate research findings in publications	95	6.71%
Design and implement professional trainings	88	6.21%
Describe effective professional practices in publications	83	5.86%
Read Scholarly Literature		
Read professional journals that report effective practices	129	9.11%
Read professional journals that report research findings	126	8.90%

Read professional books	123	8.69%
Participate in Continuous Learning Activities		
Attend professional learning activities hosted by professional organizations	113	7.98%
Attend professional learning activities hosted by a state education agency	85	6.00%
Attend online professional learning activities	83	5.86%
Attend professional learning activities hosted by a school campus or district	73	5.16%
Professional Affiliations and Service Work		
Maintain associations or memberships in professional organizations	126	8.90%
Serve as an elected officer, board member, or committee member	57	4.03%
Serve as a peer reviewer	3	0.21%
Engagement with Preservice Teachers and PreK-12 Practitioners		
Contact, observe, or visit with PreK-12 administrators and teachers	4	0.28%
Collaborate with other literacy teacher educators	3	0.21%
Mentor preservice teachers	1	0.07%
Overall Total	1416	100%

High Levels of Engagement

With respect to high levels of engagement, respondents reported 12 different literacy leadership practices that represented three distinct groups. Of these groups, respondents demonstrated the highest levels of engagement with literacy leadership by sharing information with others. Respondents shared information to build the knowledge base for literacy, improve their own teaching practices, strengthen PreK-12 literacy teaching and learning, and advance a collective understanding of literacy teacher education. Specifically, respondents were involved with independent and collaborative research endeavors and made presentations at international, national, state, and local professional conferences. Respondents also shared information in the form of publications to disseminate research findings and describe effective professional practices. Additionally, respondents designed and implemented professional trainings for other literacy teacher educators and PreK-12 school personnel.

Respondents demonstrated the second highest levels of engagement with literacy leadership by reading scholarly literature written by experts in the field. Reading scholarly literature was a way for respondents to enrich their own understandings of literacy and maintain current understandings of literacy issues and teacher training practices. Respondents reported reading professional journals that describe effective literacy teaching and learning practices, professional journals that disseminate research findings, and professional development books that cover a range of topics in educations.

Lastly, respondents demonstrated the third highest levels of engagement with literacy leadership by participating in continuous learning activities. Similar to reading scholarly literature, continuous learning activities provided respondents with opportunities to enhance and refine their knowledge and skills for literacy and teacher training. These data showed that respondents attended professional learning activities hosted by professional organizations, state education agencies, online providers, and PreK-12 school campuses and districts.

Low Levels of Engagement

With respect to low levels of engagement, respondents reported six different literacy leadership practices that represented two distinct groups. Of these groups, respondents demonstrated the second lowest levels of engagement with literacy leadership by serving as leaders within literacy-focused professional organizations and participating in other forms of professional service. Specifically, respondents made few mentions concerning ways in which they contribute their time to the field of literacy as appointed or elected leaders of professional organizations. Respondents also made nominal mentions about performing other types of professional service activities, such as serving as peer reviewers in processes that evaluate the work of other literacy professionals.

Lastly, respondents demonstrated the lowest levels of engagement with literacy leadership by facilitating meaningful interactions with preservice and PreK-12 practitioners. When literacy teacher educators facilitate formal and informal interactions with prospective and practicing PreK-12 classroom teachers, they reinforce the importance of collaboration, collective knowledge sharing, and problem solving. Within this group, respondents reported engagement with three related literacy leadership practices that altogether accounted for less than 1% of the total responses. These literacy leadership practices encompassed contacting, observing, or visiting with PreK-12 school administrators and classroom teachers; collaborating with other literacy teacher educators; and mentoring preservice teachers.

Discussion

Education is an ever-changing profession, and PreK-12 classroom teachers must enter schools well prepared as literacy leaders who engage in lifelong learning, reflect upon their practices, collaborate with other practitioners, and advocate for powerful literacy teaching and learning (ILA, 2018a). While there is a growing body of literature for literacy leadership among PreK-12 practitioners, there is a paucity of literature that focuses on literacy teacher educators. Given that literacy teacher educators play an important role in developing PreK-12 practitioners as literacy leaders, it seems reasonable to presume that literacy teacher educators themselves are literacy leaders. To address this research gap, we conducted this exploratory study to contribute preliminary insights and initiate a needed conversation.

Our findings revealed 15 different literacy leadership practices that represented five distinct groups in which literacy teacher educators demonstrated different levels of engagement. Regarding high levels of engagement, literacy teacher educators reported that they share information with others, read scholarly literature, and participate in continuous learning. Based on these findings, it appears that literacy teacher educators largely engage in literacy leadership practices as lifelong learners and professional collaborators. Since this study was exploratory in nature, however, we were not sure as to whether these literacy leadership practices were more practical or theoretical in nature. We also found it interesting that these reported practices appear to mirror the professional behaviors of PreK-12 classroom teachers. Since an overwhelming majority of literacy teacher educators who participated in this study had completed several years of teaching experiences in PreK-12 settings prior to their induction in higher education, we wondered the extent in which these individuals had developed a distinctive teacher educator identity.

Our findings also showed that literacy teacher educators demonstrated low levels of engagement with serving as appointed or elected leaders within professional organizations, participating in service work, and interacting with preservice teachers and PreK-12 practitioners. Since these literacy leadership practices encompass interactions with preservice and practicing PreK-12 professionals in the field, we found these low levels of engagement to be particularly disturbing. When literacy teacher educators engage in frequent and meaningful interactions with preservice teachers and practicing PreK-12 professionals in the field, they are committed advocates who promote best practices in literacy. Examples of such interactions include collaborating with PreK-12 classroom teachers to coordinate and design coherent and purposeful learning experiences for preservice teachers (Korth, Erickson, & Hall, 2009) and training preservice teachers to connect theory and practice through reflective conversations and writings (Hamilton, Vriend Van Duinen, 2018). In a similar vein, we were disappointed to see no explicit references regarding ways in which literacy teacher educators develop reflective capacities among preservice teachers or how these teacher educators themselves engage in recurring cycles of reflection and action. Being that reflection has been a mainstay in teacher education for several decades, we wondered how literacy teacher educators help preservice teachers develop behaviors, knowledge, and skills needed to engage in deliberate and systematic inquiry about their teaching practices. We further wondered how literacy teacher educators themselves are models of reflective practice. Clearly, much more research is necessary to gain deeper understandings about these phenomena.

Implications

Our findings have provided initial understandings of ways in which literacy teacher educators practice literacy leadership and pointed to important implications. It is clear from the extant literature that literacy teacher educators often enter the field with little to no deliberate preparation (Goodwin et al., 2014), and thereby encounter great conflict and stress when they leave the role of classroom teacher in the PreK-12 setting and assume a new role as teacher educator in higher education (Dinkelman et al., 2006; Murray & Male, 2005). To create a smoother transition, we recommend that administrators of teacher education programs (e.g., chairs, department heads, deans, directors) develop and implement induction and mentoring programs with novice literacy teacher educators. Induction and mentoring programs are common for new teaching professionals in PreK-12 contexts and even required in some states (Goldrick, 2016). However, there are no widespread programs in place to support literacy teacher educators who are new in their roles (Ducharme, 1993). Such programs should familiarize novice literacy teacher educators with specialized aspects of their work, including responsibilities associated with the roles of collaborators, leaders, learners, teachers, and scholars-in-teaching (Klecka, Donovan, Venditti, & Short, 2008). Novice literacy teacher educators must also understand how these roles embody core elements of literacy leadership (ILA, 2018a) and position them as role models who attempt to influence the future behaviors, practices, and thinking of future PreK-12 classroom teachers (Wold et al., 2011).

Once an intentional and strategic induction and mentoring program is in place, we encourage administrators of teacher education programs to also develop and implement programs that promote continuous professional growth for mid- to later-career literacy teacher educators.

These programs should enhance the literacy leadership practices of literacy teacher educators by advancing their "ability, expertise, and capacities" throughout the duration of their career (Kosnik et al., 2015, p. 56). Such programs should help literacy teacher educators maintain current and relevant understandings about literacy and literacy teacher education; sharpen research skills with which to study literacy, teaching, and learning; and help facilitate productive collaborations with colleagues, PreK-12 professionals, and other literacy stakeholders. Administrators of teacher education programs may also consider building partnerships with professional organizations to assist with continuous professional growth offerings that address state- and nationally-based literacy initiatives.

To illustrate an example of a continuous professional growth program, Draper (2008) detailed how she, as a content area literacy teacher educator, organized a Content-Area Literacy Study Group (CALSG) at her university. Members of the CALSG group were secondary teacher educator colleagues from a wide range of disciplines, such as biology, history, mathematics, and theater. Under Draper's leadership, the CALSG group met bi-monthly and "discussed theories related to content-area literacy, read and discussed articles on various topics related to literacy, and considered instructional activities related to content-area literacy instruction and their possible usefulness in various content-area classrooms" (p. 66). Draper was released from teaching one three-hour course each semester so that she could effectively facilitate structured activities associated with the CALSG group, including related scholarly endeavors that have resulted in multiple joint scholarly presentations and publications. In addition to research productivity, Draper noted that participation in the CALSG group promoted intellectual discourse that enhanced each group member's understandings about content-area literacy and led to improved preparation practices for preservice secondary teachers across disciplines.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

Although the current study was exploratory, there were limitations with the methodology worth noting that may affect generalizability of our findings. We acknowledge limitations with our research sample because of its small size. Since a comprehensive list of literacy teacher educators was nonexistent, our sampling procedures relied upon the availability and accuracy of publicly available information on university websites, which may have been incomplete, out of date, or unavailable. Respondent-based factors may have also attributed to the low response rate, such as availability, hesitancy to respond, or receipt of emails. We also acknowledge limitations with our data that may influence the scope of our analysis. We based our findings on self-reported data from a questionnaire that we disseminated at a single point in time. Thus, data were limited to the experiences, interpretations, and views of respondents, as well as their own understandings of literacy leadership. Additionally, the questionnaire did not include a multitude of questions that elicited a wide range of information about literacy leadership practices. As such, respondents may have not provided an exhaustive account of their endeavors or attributed certain endeavors as forms of literacy leadership.

Our work was exploratory in nature and provided an initial glimpse about ways in which literacy teacher educators engage as literacy leaders. To further develop knowledge about this area and minimize the aforementioned limitations, we propose that future researchers conduct follow-up studies. These studies should use sampling techniques that generate larger sample sizes. To do so, future researchers may consider contacting administrators of teacher education programs to

request accurate and current lists of literacy teacher educators or collaborating with professional organizations that maintain large membership enrollments of literacy teacher educators. Future researchers might also consider using qualitative research designs, such as phenomenology or case study, to examine the literacy leadership practices of literacy teacher educators more comprehensively.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations in the current study, our findings have contributed new understandings within an emerging area of research. Literacy teacher educators play an important role in teacher training and understanding the ways in which they practice literacy leadership may help teacher education program administrators provide more explicit, intentional, and systematic guidance and support for them. To sufficiently prepare PreK-12 classroom teachers for the task of literacy leadership, literacy teacher educators themselves must be lifelong learners, reflective practitioners, professional collaborators, and committed advocates.

There is still much to learn about literacy teacher educators and how they develop as literacy leaders throughout the trajectory of their careers. Providing proper guidance for literacy teacher educators will strengthen their knowledge and skills for the benefit of preservice teachers and the field of literacy education. Moreover, supporting literacy teacher educators stands to induce greater job satisfaction, which, in turn, may influence productivity and retention.

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Appendix
Questionnaire Checklist Items

As a literacy teacher educator, in what ways do you engage with continuous and ongoing professional learning with literacy?
(check all that apply)

- [ ] Read professional journals that report research findings.
- [ ] Read professional journals that report effective practices.
- [ ] Read professional books.
- [ ] Attend professional learning activities hosted by professional organizations (e.g., ILA).
- [ ] Attend professional learning activities hosted by a state education agency.
- [ ] Attend professional learning activities hosted by a school campus or district.
- [ ] Attend online professional learning activities (e.g., webinars, MOOCs).
- [ ] Other [   ]

As a literacy teacher educator, in what ways do you practice literacy leadership?

- [ ] Maintain membership in professional organizations (e.g., ILA).
- [ ] Serve as an elected officer or board member in a professional organization.
- [ ] Design and implement professional learning activities on a consultant basis.
- [ ] Conduct research.
- [ ] Disseminate research findings in publications.
- [ ] Describe effective professional practices in publications.
- [ ] Present at national, state, and local conferences.
- [ ] Other [   ]