Breaking Through the Noise: Literacy Teachers in the Face of Accountability, Evaluation, and Reform

Catherine M. Kelly
St. Catherine University, cmkelly@stkate.edu

Sara E. Miller
Longwood University

Karen Kleppe Graham
Arkansas State University at Jonesboro

Chelsey M. Bahlmann Bollinger
James Madison University

Sherry Sanden
Illinois State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons
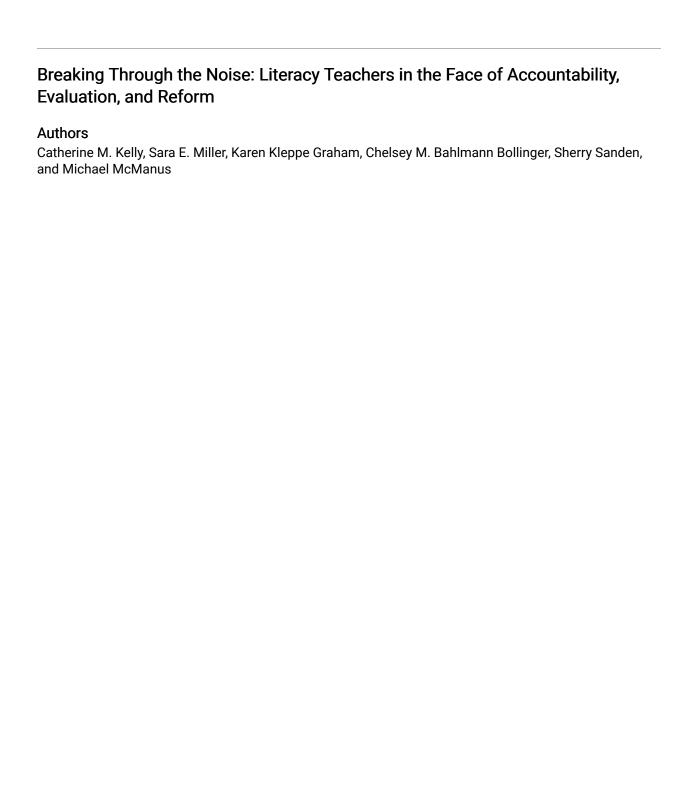
Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Elementary Education Commons, and the Language and Literacy Education Commons

Recommended Citation

Breaking Through the Noise: Literacy Teachers in the Face of Accountability, Evaluation, and Reform

Authors

Catherine M. Kelly, Sara E. Miller, Karen Kleppe Graham, Chelsey M. Bahlmann Bollinger, Sherry Sanden, and Michael McManus

READING HORIZONS

Breaking Through the Noise: Literacy Teachers in the Face of Accountability, Evaluation, and Reform

Catherine M. Kelly, *St. Catherine University*
Sara E. Miller, *Longwood University*
Karen Kleppe Graham, *Arkansas State University at Jonesboro*
Chelsey M. Bahlmann Bollinger, J*ames Madison University*
Sherry Sanden, *Illinois State University*
Michael McManus, *University of Central Florida*

──────── **Abstract** ────────

In an era of increased accountability, it is important to understand how exemplary teachers navigate the demands placed on them by their schools, districts, and states in order to support student learning aligned with their beliefs of effective instruction. To understand these negotiations, the authors examined tensions facing exemplary literacy teachers through a qualitative interview study. Participants were 19 experienced Pre-K through sixth-grade teachers from across the United States. Results of the study indicate that teachers experience discrepancies between their beliefs and state and local mandates, and they discuss a variety of strategies for negotiating these discrepancies. Findings suggest that schools can support effective literacy instruction by cultivating cultures of autonomy for teachers and strengthening teachers' sense of agency.

Keywords: literacy instruction, elementary teachers, mandates, exemplary teaching, agency

In *Reading Today*, Lewis-Spector (2014) characterized challenges facing today's teachers through a discussion of changes to teacher preparation, teacher evaluation, and teacher tenure: "We cannot successfully reform classrooms for high literacy achievement without understanding the relationship among the multiple factors that affect learning and teaching, including the relationship between teacher preparation, teacher evaluation, and teacher tenure" (p. 5). Increasingly, teacher evaluation systems are designed to hold individual teachers accountable for student gains as evaluated by test scores (Steinberg & Donaldson, 2016). With evolving teacher evaluation processes, increased demands on students through standardized testing, and state and local mandates implemented in schools and districts, teachers are left to balance competing needs, oftentimes choosing between what is best for students and the accountability measures in place for teachers.

Recognizing these challenges, our research team of six teacher educators designed a study to examine and share the voices of exemplary literacy teachers working to provide effective instruction for their learners. The focus of this study was to understand how teachers break through the "noise" of accountability measures and mandates to implement practices they believe best serve their students.

Literature Review

Exemplary Literacy Teachers

Research provides robust findings regarding what exemplary teachers of literacy should know and be able to do (e.g., Blair, Rupley, & Nichols, 2007; International Literacy Association, 2018; Neuman & Gambrell, 2013; Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005). Effective teachers balance time dedicated to literacy instruction, classroom organization, task setting and content, and skills instruction in a variety of grouping scenarios (Wray, Medwell, Fox, & Poulson, 2000). In addition, effective teachers provide information, interact with students, use a variety of questioning techniques, and manage learning and nonlearning tasks and behaviors (Topping & Ferguson, 2005). Exemplary teachers employ instructional practices that are authentic, motivational, focused, and differentiated to meet the diverse needs of students (Scott, Teale, Carry, Johnson, & Morgan, 2009). All this said, what makes an effective teacher differs based on context and what measures are used to define effectiveness (Fletcher, 2014).

Mandates and Accountability

Teachers face social and political pressures including accountability measures and mandates resulting in an emphasis on student test performance, lowered autonomy, and less flexibility in the classroom (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2008; Ryan et al., 2017). With the No Child Left Behind era came a "'pressure cooker' accountability culture" (Cobb, 2012, p. 112) in which teachers struggle to maintain instruction that aligns with their philosophical beliefs about teaching and learning (Rooney, 2015). Research has shown accountability measures influence teaching practices (Au, 2007; Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009). High-stakes tests and accountability mandates intrude on teachers' professional autonomy (Luna & Turner, 2001). Rooney (2015) posited, "Teachers perceive limited professional discretion to constrain their ability to enact their visions of good and pleasurable teaching" (p. 477). While many teachers are drawn to the profession because of the autonomy presented in designing curriculum (Serbanescu & Popescu, 2014), the current context has chipped away at this autonomy.

Despite these difficulties, exemplary teachers tend not to let such pressures impact instructional goals for their students (Buly & Rose, 2001). Some teachers may even prefer to teach in these environments rather than those in which success is not recognized through student outcomes (Boyd et al., 2008). When working conditions are positive, uncertainty is reduced and teachers' satisfaction with their position is increased (Rooney, 2015). The emphasis, however, is on when conditions are positive. For many, working conditions cause teachers to struggle with implementing instruction they believe to be critical for their students' success.

Teacher Retention

Hughes (2012) posited, "Experienced teachers are better teachers" (p. 245), which is a concern when teacher turnover is high. Though data are inconsistent, the number of teachers leaving the profession is approximately 8% each year, which amounts

to over 250,000 teachers in the United States annually (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014). Among factors that impact a teacher's decision to leave the profession, school climate has been found to be a strong predictor (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ryan et al., 2017). Contributing to school climate are teacher salaries, student behavior, administrative support, parent involvement, working conditions, professional prestige, and collegiality (Hughes, 2012). When conditions are negative in one or more of these areas, teachers are more apt to consider leaving the profession. In particular, "teachers want to work in schools where they have greater autonomy, higher levels of administrative support, and clearly communicated expectations" (Hughes, 2012, p. 247). According to Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017), 25% of those who left the teaching profession indicated "dissatisfaction with testing and accountability pressure" and 21% stated "lack of administrative support" influenced their decision to leave (p. 5).

The Current Study

Despite the challenges of teaching in an era of accountability, many effective educators remain in the field. Our research team was interested in learning about the ways exemplary literacy teachers experienced tensions in their practice. In addition, we wanted to better understand how exemplary literacy teachers have learned to navigate these challenges and, through this study, share their voices as they work through the "noise" of mandates and accountability measures to provide promising instruction for their students. The following research questions guided our study: (1) What are the visible and hidden discrepancies between Pre-K to sixth-grade teachers' literacy pedagogical beliefs and local school/district expectations? (2) How do in-service teachers negotiate between their pedagogical beliefs about literacy and the expectations of their schools/districts?

Methodology

During the 2014 Literacy Research Association annual conference, a subgroup of the Teacher Education Research Study Group (TERSG) met to discuss contemporary issues facing literacy teachers and the current climate of accountability, evaluation, and reform. Our subgroup included six teacher educators teaching in 4-year institutions covering the midwestern, northeastern, and southeastern United States. A dominant area of mutual concern was the impact of external pressures on literacy educators, and we developed this study to explore those issues.

Theoretical Perspective

This work reflects a theoretical perspective that views teacher decision-making through a sociocultural lens, which Wertsch, Del Rio, and Alverez (1995) explained as "the relationships between human mental functioning on one hand, and the cultural, institutional, and historical situations in which this functioning occurs, on the other" (p. 3). Schools as the contexts of teacher decision-making are social institutions imbued with historical and cultural significance and influence. In this study, we were interested to learn about the ways teachers compared their instructional beliefs with the institutional expectations and requirements in which their instruction was embedded. Exploring teachers' perspectives through a sociocultural lens provided an opportunity to better understand how those often disparate social paradigms interacted to influence teacher beliefs and decision-making.

We integrated a sociocultural perspective through a critical theory lens in the tradition of Freire (1994), who argued, "One of the tasks of the progressive educator, through a serious, correct political analysis, is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be" (p. 9). Our goal was to discover ways teachers might react to obstacles placed by external mandates that they perceived to diminish their capacities to provide promising instruction for their students. As Popkewitz (1999) explained, "The critical theory tradition 'makes' the idea of social change in pedagogical practice explicit through discussions about the joining of a language of critique with a language of possibility" (p. 9). Would teachers remain silent to the "noise" of accountability and reform efforts that acted to drown out their own decision-making, or would they talk back to this noise with their own "language of possibility"?

Research Design

This qualitative interview study (Roulston, deMarrais, & Lewis, 2003) was the culminating research event preceded by an instrumental case pilot study (Stake, 1995), informing the design of our larger study. Influenced by findings of the pilot study, the goal for the current study was to explore the ways in which exemplary elementary literacy teachers recognized tensions between their understandings of promising practices in literacy and the demands placed on them at the district, state, and national levels.

The design of the current study, which included in-person and telephone interviews, allowed us to look individually and collectively at exemplary elementary teachers across various school settings and geographic contexts in examining our research questions. This design allowed for sensitivity within the local context and offered multiple viewpoints within a broader context (Merriam, 2009). The methodological choices also informed our joint belief in supporting literacy teachers to be reflective and overcome "noise" through advocacy, as a way to share these teachers' concerns (Lewis-Spector, 2014). Participants primarily discussed their current positions, but occasionally made references to past teaching positions when answering questions about the tensions they experienced in their teaching practice.

Though this study was relatively small in scale (N = 19), participants were situated across the United States in a range of school/district contexts to provide a more expansive view on the research questions. The study design, relying on interview data, allowed us to build "a holistic snapshot [that] analyses words [and] reports detailed views of informants" (Alshenqeeti, 2014, p. 39), capturing their ideas in their own voice (Berg, 2007). However, interviews have limitations as research data due to the potential for subconscious bias and inconsistencies in interview technique and analysis. We took measures to minimize limitations by conducting a pilot study and by giving interviewees a chance to review their interviews and clarify any statements they made (Alshenqeeti, 2014).

Participants

In order to explore the central research questions and develop criteria for participant selection, we conducted a review of the research on exemplary literacy teachers. Key studies were identified from the Center for Improvement in Early Reading Achievement archive compiled by faculty at the University of Michigan as well as other studies addressing characteristics or behaviors of effective literacy teachers (e.g., Cotnoir, Paton, Peters, Pretorius, & Smale, 2014; Fisher & Frey, 2013; Morrow, Tracey, Woo, & Pressley, 1999; Taylor,

Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 1999). Based on the review of these studies, we developed a position statement that exemplary reading teachers do the following:

1. Understand the importance of home-school communication

2. Engage all students through small-group, whole-group, and cooperative learning activities based on diverse student needs

3. Allow time for independent reading

4. Teach skills through authentic and scaffolded high-quality reading and writing instruction to meet the needs of diverse students

5. Teach skills explicitly and spontaneously

6. Encourage self-regulation through a well-managed classroom

7. Integrate literacy across the content areas

8. Have high expectations for all learners

9. Create print-rich classroom environments

10. Articulate their reasoning behind all instructional decisions made

These components aided in the selection of participants for this study and became known as the TERSG Top 10.

Using the TERSG Top 10 and an active teaching position in a Pre-K to sixth-grade classroom as our selection criteria, we employed a convenience, or nonrandom, sample to identify participants (Farrokhi & Mahmoudi-Hamidabad, 2012) of exemplary literacy teachers (see Appendix). Participants were those with whom we had taught and/or worked so as to determine their fit for the study based on the selection criteria. Experiences with discrepancies were not a required criteria as part of participant selection. The 19 participants taught in a variety of U.S. geographic regions across nine states, including districts ranging from very small to large, rural to suburban, with a mix of socioeconomic statuses leaning toward more mixed and lower income schools. The participants' experience in teaching averaged approximately 16 years, with expectations they would remain in the classroom for 10–15 additional years.

Data Collection

After obtaining informed consent for the study, we interviewed the 19 participants using a semistructured interview protocol wherein the questions were a guide, but we probed for more information and redirected conversations as needed. The interviews, conducted via face-to-face or electronic meetings, were digitally recorded, transcribed, and member-checked with participants. Participants were given pseudonyms, which are used throughout the article.

Data Analysis

This analysis occurs within a larger qualitative study focusing on contemporary issues facing today's elementary literacy teachers and the current climate of accountability, evaluation, and reform. As we read through our individual participants' transcripts, we coded

according to observed trends or patterns we saw in the responses related to our research questions. Initial codes were as follows: willing to adjust, lack of consistency, meeting needs of students, scripting of literacy instruction, motivations, ineffective interventions, speaking up, feeling frustrated, and circumventing requirements. In our pattern coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994), we examined descriptive codes for commonalities and consolidated them into a smaller number of themes, allowing us to respond to the research questions.

We then began our group analysis by engaging in repeated readings of the interview transcripts for all participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to familiarize ourselves with the data corpus. As we noted ideas for coding the interviews, we kept Miles and Huberman's (1994) caution in mind: "Pattern codes are hunches: some pan out, but many do not" (p. 72). We understood not all of the codes recorded individually would be used as is, and codes were consolidated, revised, and sometimes discarded following our group analysis and discussions. Pattern codes were as follows: taking action, inadequate materials, concerns over programs, impact of fellow teachers, teacher voice, teacher expertise, pedagogical concerns, teacher leadership, and administrator leadership.

Once we were familiar with the data, we refocused the analysis and collated the relevant coded data extracts from our list of individualized codes. We used open-ended thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to look across all of the interviews for repeated themes. With these codes in mind, we systematically looked at each interview question as a group to identify common themes. The findings are described below.

Findings

The findings from this study are discussed by looking at a number of overarching themes, each representing ideas expressed by multiple teacher participants across grade levels and states. Analysis of the participant interviews indicates all participants valued their pedagogical beliefs about literacy instruction and used those beliefs to guide their literacy instruction. However, many participants felt tensions in their teaching contexts when they were unable to be autonomous in decision-making. Using participants' responses from the interviews, we defined this autonomy as the ability to use knowledge of students' interests and abilities combined with an understanding of effective practices to support literacy development in their classroom. The following sections discuss discrepancies identified by many participants, how they negotiated these discrepancies, and the factors impacting these choices.

Discrepancies in Literacy Beliefs

The first research question in this study was designed to investigate the discrepancies exemplary literacy teachers negotiated between their beliefs and the expectations of their school/district. It was clear in every interview, regardless of geographical location, years of teaching, or grade level, that what districts and/or administrators see as effective literacy instruction did not always align with teachers' beliefs. After completing a review of the data, we determined that participants in this study identified areas of discrepancy that were visible or easily understood in educational circles. Participants' responses about these discrepancies fell into three broad categories: curriculum requirements and literacy mandates, materials that support literacy instruction, and the structure of the literacy block.

Curriculum requirements and literacy mandates. One area where tensions frequently arose for teachers was literacy mandates involving curriculum or other specific literacy practices. Many of the teachers spoke about mandates they

agreed with, but a number of participants also discussed mandates with which they disagreed. For instance, a number of teachers talked about Accelerated Reader (AR) and how it was used in their schools in ways that conflicted with their beliefs about literacy instruction. First-grade teacher Linda explained that in her school AR was was a required component to literacy instruction. She explained her objection this way:

> I strongly believe that you need to teach children to read, and they need to read for the pleasure of it. They shouldn't read for the carrot that's dangled in front of them. And Accelerated Reader, AR, is very big at our school, huge trips and all kinds of things related to that….They are still very much grounded in that "AR is a holy grail" and that's what we want our kids to do for reading.

Lindsey, a first-grade teacher, had a similar experience and was frustrated by the way her colleagues were using AR to limit students' reading selections and turned reading into "a competition or race." Another example is when schools/districts required specific programs to be implemented with fidelity. For example, Jason, a fourth- and fifth-grade teacher, shared:

> The district takes an approach that is very narrow-minded in that everyone must be practicing with fidelity some type of program, where we have in the past been able to have that more balanced approach that allows students to achieve depending on circumstance.

Liz, a second- and third-grade teacher, believed in using a balanced approach, but her district expected the use of a specific program that took time away from what she wanted to implement. She explained:

> I feel that something that I find very valuable is read-aloud and think-alouds, and there is not very much emphasis or time for that because of the expectations of the district with the program that we're using and the amount of time it takes to implement it the way that we are expected to.

She felt conflicted about how to incorporate all components of literacy instruction while meeting the strict requirements of a purchased program.

Teachers also discussed how their school/district requirement to implement scripted programs went against their beliefs. Allison, a second-grade teacher, stated:

> So when they brought in a scripted program for the teachers that they wanted aligned to the Common Core…and they wanted basically the scripted program to basically tell teachers how to teach step by step, and it didn't encompass the best practices for literacy…I took pieces from the [program] and I took best practices and implemented it. It was my own switch to it. But it was disheartening when that came in. It was not for the students.

Wanda, a third-grade teacher, shared this opinion:

> If you give me something to teach in my room and say, "You have to read it by the script," that's not going to work for me. So scripted teaching is not what I would choose to teach. How I do things in my classroom is not scripted. I use life experiences and teachable moments and that is who I am as a teacher.

In each of these examples, it is clear that some school/district mandates created tension for these participants and caused them to struggle to find a balance between their beliefs and the curricular requirements.

Materials that support literacy instruction. Tensions also arose for teachers around materials to support literacy instruction, including whether the school/district purchased literacy materials and whether the materials in place aligned with teacher beliefs and/or provided teachers with what they needed to teach all students. For example, participants discussed tension when they did not have the materials they felt they needed to teach all their students. Lindsey, a first-grade teacher, said, "I have been in classrooms that did not have adequate instructional materials to teach reading." Meredith, a fourth-grade teacher, discussed how she was left to buy her own materials for her classroom: "I'm always baffled by this… but schools want you to teach with all these fabulous trade books and… the latest and greatest, but they give you no resources." Bea, a third-grade teacher, similarly stated:

> There's a lot of contradiction sometimes in what the county or school system says they believe in and then the materials they provide for you to actually implement in the classroom. The materials you're given don't always support your belief. ...There's not a lot provided for individualizing things.

Helena, a third-grade teacher, discussed being given materials that she did not think were appropriate for her students:

> When I taught sixth grade in Arizona, my district just said to read a whole-group novel. Their focus was everybody in the grade level reading the same novel. I had a class, which they weren't identified as such, but they were ESL. They couldn't read anything. They didn't even know basic sight words. Yet I was supposed to have them read The Giver, I think it was. So I read it aloud to them.

The types of materials that teachers in the study were given to implement literacy instruction clearly impacted perceived tensions. The comments about materials are also closely aligned, and in many cases overlap, with the examples of literacy mandates in the previous section. A number of participants also discussed provided materials and the way they were instructed to use those materials.

Structure of the literacy block. Participants discussed tensions around the required structure of literacy block, how time was dedicated to literacy, and whether these matched participants' beliefs. Andrea, a second-grade teacher, stated:

> In my previous district I felt it was inconsistent because they were, you have to be at this point. Everything is to fidelity. We follow the workshop model. We're doing mini-lesson for 10 minutes and they walked in and that's what they should see. That's not how children work or sometimes your class may need more guided practice and less independent practice. But it was always all components need to be every day.

Audrey, a first-grade teacher, also discussed this issue, describing "the way the classroom teachers within a grade level are required to teach the same thing at the same time, leaving little flexibility to accelerate or remediate based on the group of students."

Jason, a fourth- and fifth-grade teacher, and Meredith, a fourth-grade teacher, also struggled with their required schedules. Jason said, "I carve out time to implement some teaching strategies that I know work from past experience and have had major success even though our current model does not allow for that time." Meredith explained:

> The way our reading time is structured, I don't have enough time to teach guided reading. My mini-lesson is supposed to be "the meat" to my lesson, but for a lot of my students, unless I'm teaching them in a small group, they don't get it. So I have to teach them in their small groups where they really get that individual instruction.

For these participants, a lack of autonomy about how they utilize their literacy block created barriers in their practice.

Negotiating Discrepancies

The second research question looked at how exemplary literacy teachers negotiated the discrepancies arising in their work settings between their beliefs about literacy instruction and expectations of the school/district. How teacher participants in this study reacted to inconsistencies varied in a number of ways but fell into one of four categories: (a) they spoke up about their literacy beliefs; (b) they did not speak up and followed mandates, (c) they did not speak up, but did what they believed was right anyway; or (d) they had one of the above reactions, but left the school/district. It is important to note that sometimes the same teacher reported negotiating specific discrepancies using different strategies. For instance, if they felt strongly they might speak up about one issue and then decide to not address another issue.

Spoke up about their literacy beliefs. Some participants, confident in their knowledge and wanting to share their ideas with colleagues and/or administration, voiced their pedagogical opinions and how these differed from expectations. For instance, Nicole, a fourth-grade teacher, said, "I definitely didn't stay silent. I shared my opinion… and people were kind of willing to listen to me." Lilly, a fourth-grade teacher, stated, "I try to quietly help people.…I know how to implement the strategies and I kind of meet with them after school or help them out during a prep because there's a lot of people who don't know how to correctly do a balanced approach." Additionally, Audrey, a first-grade teacher, said, "I have discussed issues with my supervisor and she agrees that as ESL teachers we need to do what we believe works for ELLs [English language learners] and what research shows to support our students."

Other participants spoke up by fighting curriculum mandates. Those who responded with this strategy (and one even used the word fought) firmly believed curriculum mandates went against best practices for their students and tried to get them changed, or at least modified to fit students' needs. For example, Mia, a kindergarten teacher, said, "I have voiced my opinions about how things should be taught and what's developmentally appropriate." Donna, a third-grade teacher, stated, "I had a meeting with my principal when I disagreed with the use of AR for grading." Helena, a third-grade teacher, directly approached her administrator: "I went to the principal, and I said, 'This is not in our curriculum. It's not supposed to happen.'" Juanita, a first-grade teacher, explained her approach:

> Any time I try something different that I don't think is working a certain way that I feel my students should go, I will talk it over with an administrator and say, "Will you allow me to try this instead? Can we go this way and just try it and see where it leads?" … So I do try to at least

> say, "Can you give me permission to fail?" is basically what it comes
> down to. And they are very, very supportive of that.

In Juanita's case, the administration allowed her to implement curriculum based on her students' needs, leading her to feel supported. Not all participants had this level of success when they spoke up. In some instances they discussed how they were able to change people's minds or redirect the outcome, but other times they were unsuccessful. In either case, the participants who spoke up when faced with a discrepancy reported that they tried to maintain some of the instructional practices they knew were best for students regardless of the school/district policy.

Did not speak up and followed mandates. There were two facets to this response as described by participants: They either felt no need to speak up because they believed in key district/school mandates or did not speak up because they felt their voices would not be heard or they were uncomfortable expressing their view publicly. In these cases, some participants reported taking little or no action because they expressed conflict avoidance or feared reprisals. For instance, Andrea, a second-grade teacher, said, "Some teachers—like me—I'm going to do what I'm told to do because I feel like that's professional." Donna, a third-grade teacher, had a similar reaction: "I don't really have expectations that are different but if I did, I would probably do what the boss wanted me to do, honestly."

A number of other participants shared a similar sentiment. Bea, a third-grade teacher, stated, "I guess I just try to go with the flow." Mia, a kindergarten teacher, reported, "I have altered my teaching practices to make the administration happy." Susie, a second-grade teacher, shared that she will advocate for students at times, "but I don't know if I would say I fight that hard curriculum-wise. I don't know. Like the testing, it just seems like we just have to do it and I guess I've never really raised a huge fuss about it." These participants seemed to express a resignation that expressing their concerns or counter-viewpoints would be unproductive and not elicit any change.

Did not speak up, but did what they believed was right anyway. Other participants did not speak up overtly, but stated that they took action when their pedagogical beliefs were in conflict by doing what they believed to be best for students, regardless of the expectations. These participants felt inconsistencies were best resolved with action, not solely with words. Wanda, a third-grade teacher, said, "I did what I always do: make it work for me." Kendra, a second-grade teacher, agreed but acknowledged the struggle with this approach: "I am confident in my reading practices and stay true to my beliefs about learning to read while also respecting the programs in place at my school and district. At times, this can be a challenge." Linda, a first-grade teacher, said, "Sometimes, I just kind of like, I close my door and do my thing…. 'cause you know, I'm like, 'Oh, I didn't know!' I play the dumb teacher card." Lilly, a fourth-grade teacher, discussed how she refused to follow mandates that went against her belief system: "I did not use the AR system in my classroom and allowed my students to choose library books based on their interest. I utilized alternative resources to assess their comprehension of the stories read."

Left the school or the district. Three of the participants reported that they left the school or district because of discrepancies between their beliefs and expectations. Additionally, most of these participants tried one of the above strategies before making the decision to leave. These participants chose this option because they felt there was no way to negotiate the discrepancies. Andrea, a second-grade teacher, decided to switch districts because of these tensions: "There was so much pressure that you should be doing exactly what they say and other people could let that roll off where I couldn't."

Nicole, a fourth-grade teacher, explained how she made this decision:

> You go to your principal, you go to the curriculum person, or you go to
> the superintendent.…I felt I had to leave because I wasn't being heard. I
> didn't think I was being valued as much as I gave the students value. But
> I also realized I can only control what I can control.

Allison, a second-grade teacher, said, "I reacted by pushing through and just kept doing what was best for my students. And, you know, I left the district because of it."

Factors That Impacted How Teachers Negotiate Discrepancies

Two key factors across interviews appeared to influence how these participants chose to respond to tension between their beliefs and expectations for literacy teaching: administrator support of teacher decision-making and alignment of literacy teaching practices with colleagues. These factors addressed participants' amount of comfort and the strength of their support system. Although teachers in this study reported on visible discrepancies in the workplace, such as required curriculum and state and local mandates, they also discussed more hidden or unseen factors in how they chose to negotiate the discrepancies, such as internal and interpersonal conflicts.

Administrator support of teacher decision-making (comfort). Participants discussed whether the administration supported teachers in making decisions for their students in their classroom. A perceived lack of support appeared to lessen teachers' sense of professionalism and satisfaction with their position. For example, Andrea, a second-grade teacher, stated:

> You could use the resources, but your schedule was, "When we walk in,
> we should see guided reading." But what if Joey over here had a great
> thing and you're like, teachable moment, let's seize on that?…But the
> administration doesn't let us do that.

Mia, a kindergarten teacher, was focused on "a literacy-rich environment," but her administration was focused on "sight words and memorization." She felt she needed to adjust her practices to appease the administration focus on isolated skill instruction.

On the other hand, when teachers had administrators who allowed them to make decisions in their own classroom, they appeared to feel more successful. For example, Bea, a third-grade teacher, stated:

> I luckily have a principal...that's supportive of what I need to do, and
> I think he knows, you know, that you have to make certain things look
> good for the county, but at the same time, he's fine with you doing what's
> best for the children.

Denise, a third- through sixth-grade teacher, said, "The principal lets me set my own curriculum and pacing guides and then he will approve it." Liz, a second- and third-grade teacher, explained:

> I would say ultimately even though there may be inconsistencies between
> my beliefs and the district's beliefs, in the past we've had an administrator
> who supports what we do in the classroom and understands that what we're
> doing is best for the children even if it veers away a little bit from whatever
> program it is that we're implementing and are supported in doing that.

Juanita, a first-grade teacher, shared that she adopted the current practices in her district before they were required because of the administrative support she received: "My principal kind of gave me the go-ahead to try it and see where it's going to lead. So I never did anything without at least discussing it with administration." Kendra, a second-grade teacher, said, "I was very vocal with my principal about my beliefs about reading instruction. While we didn't always agree, we both respected the other's view."

Alignment of literacy teaching practices with colleagues (support system). Teachers often felt tension when they held differing views on literacy teaching practices than their colleagues on the same team or in the building. Nicole, a fourth-grade teacher, stated, "Some of the teachers are more worksheet driven, and that's just not who I am. And they would just make me copies of the worksheet, which was nice, but I never used them because it wasn't me." Linda, a first-grade teacher, also felt this tension:

> There's four of us on the team. And there's one teacher who strictly uses the basal, even though the other three of us, we create lesson plans together, and we're using a mentor text, and we're teaching the strategies, and that kind of thing. And it doesn't seem to be a problem that the other teacher is using a basal, like that's—she tries different lesson plans than we do, so it's known that she's not doing the same thing, but it's... I don't know. I guess the principal is OK with her results, so... we just kinda let her roll.

One participant, Donna, a current third-grade teacher, decided to leave her previous grade level because of tensions with colleagues: "I left first grade. This was prompted by a disagreement with another teacher about teaching philosophy and methodology."

Discussion

As current buzzwords for advancing student academic achievement, accountability, evaluation, and reform have, in some circles, appeared to offer opportunities to address perceived deficiencies of the U.S. system of education. For others, and perhaps most notably for teachers on the front lines, these words have created the kind of "noise" that might drown out teachers' own knowledge, autonomy, and agency that could support student learning in real time. This "noise" is especially evident when teachers' understandings and beliefs about instruction differ from the philosophy and expectations foisted on them by national, state, or local mandates, and teachers are often left to sort out those discrepancies with little support or acknowledgment of their very real implications.

Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) state, "People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are" (p. 3). As outlined in the findings, teachers discussed the tensions they felt by juxtaposing what they were asked to do and who they saw themselves to be, and then how they responded. In the sections below, we address discrepancies teacher participants in our study and others perceive to impact their work with children in their classrooms, and we examine ways that issues of teachers' autonomy and sense of agency influence and are influenced by how they negotiate those discrepancies.

Teacher Beliefs Versus External Expectations

Analysis of the teachers' responses in the current study highlights similarities in the types of visible discrepancies that teachers perceived to exist, including differences between teachers' pedagogical perspectives and district curricular requirements to meet the needs of students, differences between teachers' desired instructional materials and those supplied or mandated by the school/district, and teachers' preferences for the structure of the literacy block and school/district expectations. That such similarities existed in these teachers' responses might appear somewhat surprising at the outset, considering that these teachers work in varied contexts across nine states. However, these findings mirror past scholarship exploring teachers' reactions to literacy environments that have become dominated by high-stakes testing and administrative oversight.

For example, MacGillivray, Ardell, Curwen, and Palma (2004) examined how teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District reacted to the large-scale mandated use of a scripted language arts curriculum in its schools. MacGillivray et al. found that teachers in that study often expressed frustration over a perceived failure of the mandated curriculum, including materials and timing, to meet students' academic needs. This finding was consistent with opinions expressed by teachers in the current study; comments of both groups of teachers often reflected a belief that district/school requirements did not meet student needs in the same ways that instruction based on their own decision-making could.

What is apparent from participants' reactions in these studies is that teachers feel a very real sense of responsibility for student learning. However, roadblocks set up by the mismatch between their beliefs and external mandates sometimes created discrepancies that were more hidden, leading to internal and interpersonal conflicts. While teachers would prefer to focus their efforts on creating and implementing student learning opportunities, professional energy for this work was sapped by a loss of autonomy and the agency to act in their students' best interests.

Teacher Negotiation of Discrepancies

After our inquiry into the discrepancies experienced by these effective literacy teachers, our analysis led us to consider how teachers negotiated between their pedagogical beliefs about literacy and the expectations of their schools/districts. As described in the findings, while the teachers negotiated the tensions they experienced in a variety of ways, overwhelmingly they focused on their sense of agency within their work environments. Some of the teachers' comments and actions suggested they have a high sense of agency: actively meeting with the principal, questioning experiences when faced with tension, having direct conversations, and speaking up in meetings to advocate for students.

On the other hand, incidences of lack of agency mentioned by the teachers in this study stemmed from their professional and personal knowledge of the specific needs of the students in their classroom and their inability to enact this knowledge due to perceived or real systemic barriers or mandates. The participants in this study handled tensions with a continuum of responses ranging from leaving the school to closing their door and passively refusing to comply. In instances of strong agency as well as lack of agency, it appeared the teachers' sense of agency or control may have influenced how they addressed discrepancies and tension. There are important implications, then, to help support teachers in the negotiation of discrepancies they may face.

Implications

Based on the findings from the current study, we suggest that educational systems will benefit from providing opportunities for teachers to develop agency as well as diversity of thought and practice. Below we outline implications from this study for practicing teachers, school and district leadership, teacher education, and research to act in support of better enabling teachers to break through the "noise" of accountability, evaluation, and reform.

Implications for Practicing Teachers

At times, new teachers may find that in practice, their professional experiences vary widely from what they experienced as students or anticipated during their preparation. A simple awareness of this fact may help to quell the feelings of discontent that often arise for new teachers. Some teachers with the strongest commitments to their beliefs and love of teaching may end up leaving the profession in their first few years, having dramatically overestimated their potential for autonomy and the ability to act as an agent of institutional change. An understanding of the need for an adjustment period may prepare new teachers for the transition to the workforce and the resolution of the dissonance many experience.

Accompanying this awareness, teachers must be prepared to identify and learn to address in productive ways the discrepancies that often exist between teacher expectations and school and district requirements. Teachers can seek opportunities with their administrators to understand and respect each other's points of reference rather than focusing on points of disagreement. Experiencing movement toward finding common ground can empower teachers and help to assert the agency and efficacy that support strong instructional leadership.

Implications for School and District Leadership

It is important for a school to develop a culture of autonomy for teachers (O'Hara, 2006), which includes supportive professional development, peer support systems, and a balance of accountability measures and respect for teacher knowledge and experience. Ensuring that teachers and administrators have access to worthwhile professional development, aimed at strengthening their capacities to achieve shared purposes, was alluded to in several teachers' interviews in our study. Administrators can support teacher autonomy and agency by drawing on the professional knowledge of teachers to drive development opportunities.

Implications for Teacher Education

Because of the prevalence of challenges in teaching, it is a responsibility of teacher education programs to develop preservice teachers' ability to recognize and negotiate these challenges. Cobb (2012) stated in-service teachers need support "to deal with the demands of mandates and societal change strategically" (p. 126). In order to develop effective strategies for handling these demands, teacher education programs need to support the development of skills and strategies for these negotiations and to reconcile what is taught in university preparation programs with local, state, and federal mandates for the classroom.

Because exemplary teachers tend not to let the pressures of mandates and accountability measures impact their instructional goals for their students (Buly & Rose, 2001), it is critical for teacher educators to consider how teacher education programs are preparing preservice and in-service teachers to "anticipate and adapt to the ever-changing conditions in the classroom. The mandates of today may not be the mandates of tomorrow. The administration of today will not be the administration of tomorrow" (Cobb, 2001, p.

127). Institutions of higher education dedicated to supporting the developing of effective preservice teachers must consider these needs and challenges. Our data suggest that teacher education programs should find ways through courses, fieldwork, and clinical internship to provide teacher candidates with opportunities to reflect on and develop strategies to further develop their ability to adapt knowledge and skills to contexts that require negotiations.

Implications for Research

This study leads to numerous potential avenues for future research, such as administrative leadership styles in supporting teachers, collaborative versus competitive school environments, teacher support systems, and achievement outcomes related to teachers' feelings of discrepancy. As teacher educators, we find it crucial to develop ways to support future teachers in negotiating the discrepancies they are likely to encounter. A key area of future research should focus on the ways teacher candidates and early-career teachers are mentored to understand and negotiate discrepancies they may encounter and the strategies mentors suggest for negotiating tensions, for longevity, and for meeting career goals.

Conclusion

Bandura (2006) posits:

> Unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act, or to persevere in the face of difficulties. Whatever other factors serve as guides and motivators, they are rooted in the core belief that one has the power to effect changes by one's actions. (p. 170)

This sense of agency goes beyond just feeling capable, but rather becoming agents of change. Teachers in this study referenced how their satisfaction and confidence in their practices were impacted by their ability to implement instruction in ways that align with their beliefs. When the teachers had autonomy with regard to decision-making, they expressed a greater sense of agency. This agency allowed them to use their knowledge of their students, combined with an understanding of effective practices, to support literacy development. We posit that as teachers develop strong beliefs about literacy development and pedagogy as their teaching practice develops, their agency also strengthens. In fact, it is this finding of the importance of agency that leads us to consider an addition to the TERSG Top 10 identification criteria of exemplary literacy teachers to include agency, or even more pointedly, activism for effective literacy instruction to meet the needs of all students.

The findings of this study suggest that when school/district leadership listens to and respects exemplary literacy teachers' knowledge of effective practices and student needs, teachers are more satisfied with their teaching context. Finding ways to help preservice and in-service teachers develop their sense of agency to speak to their knowledge and developing school contexts that support collaborative discussions regarding dissonance with curricular decisions may be necessary steps to keep our nation's exemplary literacy teachers in the classroom.

Appendix: Participant Demographic Data

Participant (Pseudonym)	Number of Years Teaching	Grade Level Currently Teaching	Grade Levels Previously Taught	Number of Additional Years Expected to Stay in Classroom	State Teaching in Currently	Student SES population	District Context	District Size	Highest Level of Education	Degree(s)
Allison	12	2	K, 4, 5	20+	NJ	High income	Rural	Small	MEd	Early Elementary/Urban Studies; School Counseling
Andrea	18	2	K–5, ELL	20	WI	Mixed income	Suburban	Small	MEd	Early Elementary Education; ESL
Audrey	10	1	1, ESL	20	NC	Low income	Rural	Small	MEd	Elementary Education
Bea	16	3	K, 2	10–15	VA	Mixed income	Suburban	Large	MEd	Elementary Education
Denise	4	3–6	3–6		AR	Low income	Rural	Very small	BS	
Donna	16	3	1		AR	Low income	Rural	Small	MEd	
Helena	20	3	1, 2, 3, 6	15	TX	Mixed income	Suburban	Large	BS	Business Management, Elementary Teacher Credential, Master Reading Teacher with ESL and GT endorsements
Jason	12	4–5	6	10	PA	Low income	Rural	Medium	MEd	Elementary Education and Special Education
Juanita	20	1		10	IL	Mixed income	Rural	Small	MS	BS: Elementary Education and Special Education
Kendra	20	2	2	10–15	NC	Low income	Rural	Small	MEd	Elementary Education
Lilly	13	4	Multiage LLD	20+	NJ	Low income	Urban	Large	MEd	Elementary Education / Special Education; Reading Specialization
Linda	24	1	K, K/1, 2, 3, ED	10–15	VA	Low income	Rural	Small	MEd	BA: Elementary Education; MEd: Curriculum and Instruction
Lindsey	20	1	Pre-K, 1	10	NC	Low income	Rural	Small	MEd	Elementary Education
Liz	10	2–3	2–3	10	PA	Low income	Rural	Medium	MEd	BSED: Elementary Education; MEd: Reading Education/ Reading Specialist
Meredith	25	4	Elem SPED, PreK, K, 1, 3, 5, 6	8–10	WI	Mixed income	Rural	Small	BS	Elementary Education with Minors in Early Childhood Education and Physical Education
Mia	13	K	Pre-K, 2, 3, 4	18	NJ	Low income	Urban	Large	MEd	Early Childhood, Reading Specialization
Nicole	11	4	6	25	MN	Mixed income	Suburban	Large	MEd	Elementary Education; Reading Specialist License
Susie	3	2	2	20	IL	Mixed income	Rural	Small	BS	Early Childhood Education
Wanda	17	3		15	IL	Mixed income	Rural	Small	MEd	Elementary Education; MEd: Reading

References

Alshenqeeti, H. (2014). Interviewing as a data collection method: A critical review. *English Linguistics Research, 3*(1), 39–45.

Au, W. (2007). High-stakes testing and curricular control: A qualitative meta-synthesis. *Educational Researcher, 36,* 258–267.

Bandura, A. (2006). Toward a psychology of human agency. *Perspectives on Psychological Science,* 1(2), 164–180.

Berg, B. L. (2007). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences.* London, England: Pearson.

Blair, T. R., Rupley, W. H., & Nichols, W. D. (2007). The effective teacher of reading: Considering the "what" and "how" of instruction. *The Reading Teacher, 60,* 4 32–438.

Boyd, D., Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2008). The impact of assessment and accountability on teacher recruitment and retention. *Public Finance Review, 36*(1), 88–111.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.

Buly, M. R., & Rose, R. (2001). Mandates, expectations, and change. *Primary Voices K–6, 9,* 3–6.

Carver-Thomas, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). *Teacher turnover: Why it matters and what we can do about it.* Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved from

Cobb, J. (2012). Navigating mandates: Teachers face "troubled seas." *Language and Literacy, 14*(3), 112–132.

Cotnoir, C., Paton, S., Peters, L., Pretorius, C., & Smale, L. (2014). *The lasting impact of influential teachers*. Washington, DC: Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved from Farrokhi, F., & Mahmoudi-Hamidabad, A. (2012). Rethinking convenience sampling: Defining quality criteria. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 2,* 784–792.

Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2013). A range of writing across the content areas. *The Reading Teacher, 67*(2), 96–101.

Fletcher, J. (2014). A review of "effective" reading practices for young adolescent 11 to 13 year old students. *Educational Review, 66*, 293–310.

Freire, P. (1994). *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving "Pedagogy of the Oppressed."* New York, NY: Continuum.

Goldring, R., Taie, S., & Riddles, M. (2014). *Teacher attrition and mobility: Results from the 2012–13 Teacher Follow-up Survey* (NCES 2014-077). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014077.pdf

Holland, D. C., Lachicotte, W., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hughes, G. (2012). Teacher retention: Teacher characteristics, school characteristics,

organizational characteristics, and teacher efficacy. *Journal of Educational Research, 105,* 245–255.

International Literacy Association. (2018). *What effective pre-K literacy instruction looks like* [Literacy Leadership Brief]. Newark, DE: Author.

Lewis-Spector, J. (2014). Hot topics in education policy: Teacher preparation, evaluation, and tenure. *Reading Today, 32*(2), 4–5.

Luna, C., & Turner, C. L. (2001). The impact of the MCAs: Teachers talk about high-stakes testing. *English Journal, 9*1(1), 79–87.

MacGillivray, L., Ardell, A. L., Curwen, M. S., & Palma, J. (2004). Colonized teachers: Examining the implementation of a scripted reading program. *Teaching Education, 15*(2), 131–144.

Merriam, S. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation (3rd ed.).* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Mintrop, H., & Sunderman, G. (2009). Predictable failure of federal sanctions-driven accountability for school improvement—and why we may retain it anyway. *Educational Researcher, 38,* 353–364.

Morrow, L. M., Tracey, D. H., Woo, D. G., & Pressley, M. (1999). Characteristics of exemplary first-grade literacy instruction. *The Reading Teacher, 52,* 462–476.

Neuman, S. B., & Gambrell, L. B. (Eds.). (2013). *Quality reading instruction in the age of Common Core Standards.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

O'Hara, D. P. (2006). Teacher autonomy: Why do teachers want it, and how do principals determine who deserves it? (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. AAI3227718)

Popkewitz, T. S. (1999). Introduction: Critical traditions, modernists, and the "posts." In T. S. Popkewitz & L. Fendler (Eds.), *Critical theories in education: Changing terrains of knowledge and politics* (pp. 1–13). New York, NY: Routledge.

Rooney, E. (2015). "I'm just going through the motions": High-stakes accountability and teachers' access to intrinsic rewards. *American Journal of Education, 121,* 475–500.

Roulston, K., deMarrais, K., & Lewis, J. B. (2003). Learning to interview in the social sciences. *Qualitative Inquiry, 9,* 643–668.

Ryan, S. V., von der Embse, N., Pendergast, L., Saeki, E., Segool, N., & Schwing, S. (2017). Leaving the teaching profession: The role of teacher stress and educational accountability. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 66*(1), 1–11.

Scott, J. L., Teale, W. H., Carry, D. D., Johnson, N., & Morgan, D. (2009). Effective literacy instruction for urban children: Voices from the classroom. *The Reading Teacher, 63,* 338–341.

Serbanescu, L., & Popescu, T. (2014). Motivations for the teaching career. *Procedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences, 127,* 691–695.

Snow, C., Griffin, P., & Burns, M. S. (2005). *Knowledge to support the teaching of reading:*

Preparing teachers for a changing world. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Steinberg, M. P., & Donaldson, M. (2016). The new educational accountability: Understanding the landscape of teacher evaluation in the post-NCLB era. *Education Finance and Policy, 11*, 340–359.

Taylor, B. M., Pearson, P. D., Clark, K., & Walpole, S. (1999). Effective schools/accomplished teachers. *The Reading Teacher, 53*, 156–159.

Topping, K., & Ferguson, N. (2005). Effective literacy teaching behaviours. *Journal of Research in Reading, 28*(2), 125–143.

Wertsch, J. V., Del Rio, P., & Alverez, A. (1995). Sociocultural Studies: History, action, and mediation. In J. V. Wertsch, P. Del Rio, & A. Alverez (Eds.), *Sociocultural studies of the mind* (pp. 1–34). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Wray, D., Medwell, J., Fox, R., & Poulson, L. (2000). The teaching practices of effective teachers of literacy. *Educational Review, 52*(1), 75–84.

About the Authors

Catherine M. Kelly, associate professor of education at St. Catherine University, teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy methods and children's literature, content area literacy, research methods, and assessment in addition to supervising practicum and student teaching experiences. Her research interests focus on effective preparation of and induction for elementary teachers, particularly for diverse school contexts.

Sara E. Miller is an associate professor in the Department of Education and Special Education and the administrative director of the Early Childhood Development Initiative at Longwood University. She teaches courses to preservice teachers and engages in consultant work with districts and organizations throughout Virginia. Prior to completing her doctoral work at the College of William and Mary in 2010, Sara worked for over a decade in public school systems in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia.

Karen Kleppe Graham is an assistant professor in teacher education in the College of Education and Behavioral Science at Arkansas State University in Jonesboro. Her research interests focus on preparing teacher candidates to be successful literacy educators and working with in-service teachers' professional development in literacy competencies.

Chelsey M. Bahlmann Bollinger is an assistant professor in the Early, Elementary, and Reading Department at James Madison University. Her research interests include technology integration within literacy instruction, children's literature, and teacher education.

Sherry Sanden is interim associate director of the School of Teaching and Learning and associate professor of early childhood literacy at Illinois State University. Her research interests include links between student literacy growth and teachers' use of children's literature in classroom contexts. She is especially interested in supporting new and experienced teachers in thinking about ways to create classroom experiences that enable children's joyful and purposeful growth into reading and writing and in viewing language and literacy as life activities and not just as school tasks.

Michael McManus teaches literacy courses at the University of Central Florida. Much of his research interest has focused on how learners use literacy to access social acceptance and support and how to nurture social and community support systems for children, families, and teachers.