Literacy Professional Learning

10 Reasons Why It's Essential

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Research Supporting the Content and Approach of LETRS Professional Learning

The LETRS® (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) Suite is comprehensive professional learning designed to provide early childhood and elementary educators and administrators with deep knowledge to be literacy and language experts in the science of reading. Its content extends across the five essential components of reading plus oral language, spelling, and writing. Each of these aspects of instruction are essential, especially for students at risk for reading failure due to life circumstances, prior instruction, language background, neurodevelopmental reading disabilities (including dyslexia), or verbal aptitude.

The content and teaching recommendations of LETRS are derived from decades of scientific reading research, as documented in an extensive reference list within the written texts. LETRS helps educators understand "how" students learn to read and write, recognize the reasons "why" some students struggle, and determine "what" must be taught to increase student success. LETRS also offers dynamic online learning by providing activities to reinforce concepts, videos of expert teaching, and practical ways to apply learning to the classroom every day.

LETRS is for all early childhood and elementary educators, and administrators who teach reading. LETRS accelerates teacher knowledge, which directly benefits the students they teach. Here are 10 reasons, based on research, why the LETRS Suite of literacy professional learning is essential for raising reading achievement and empowering educators.

1 **Prior coursework has been insufficient to prepare teachers for effective literacy instruction.** Higher education teacher preparation courses often teach only some of the essential components of reading recommended by major consensus reports such as that of the National Reading Panel (National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). The majority of teacher preparation programs do not offer courses that thoroughly prepare teachers to build all of the essential skills involved in reading (Brady et al., 2009; Greenberg, McKee, & Walsh, 2013; Joshi, Binks, Hougen, Dahlgren, Dean, & Smith, 2009; Joshi, Binks, Graham, Dean, Smith, & Boulware-Gooden, 2009; Walsh, Glaser, & Dunne-Wilcox, 2006).

2 **Teachers matter more than programs. Adopting a good, research-based curriculum is not enough.** It will sit on the shelf if teachers are unsure why they are using it or what to do with it. Successful use of a program depends on how well a teacher understands the content and the purpose for its various components and instructional routines. Mandating use of a good curriculum does not guarantee a strong implementation (Haager, Heimbichner, Dhar, Mouton, & McMillan, 2008; Piasta, Connor, Fishman, & Morrison, 2009). General education and special education teachers will be more inclined to teach foundational reading and writing skills—along with comprehension—if they are well prepared in the content and methodology of code-based, explicit instruction themselves (Cunningham, Perry, Stanovich, & Stanovich, 2004).

3 **Teachers need compatible coaching and peer support.** Even if teachers know and want to apply the type of instruction supported by scientific research, they are more likely to do so if they work in a supportive, collaborative context. Grade-level teammates, coaches and mentors, and school administrators must share goals and create a mutually supportive environment for powerful, informed instruction to be the norm in a school. Compatible coaching, in which the coach and teacher share the same goals and the same knowledge base (e.g., from LETRS), makes a significant difference in teachers' success with students (Carlisle & Berebitsky, 2011).

4 **Teaching reading _is_ rocket science.** The majority of students must be taught how to read. Learning to read is neither easy nor natural for them and they do not just pick it up through exposure to good books (Adlof & Perfetti, 2014; Olson, Keenan, Byrne, & Samuelsson, 2014; Seidenberg, 2013, 2017). Teaching reading to a student who does not learn easily or naturally is a complex and challenging professional enterprise that requires deep knowledge of content, of the cognitive and language factors that shape student learning, and of pedagogical detail (Brady, 2011; Moats, 1999).

5 **Language is a missing foundation in teacher training.** Most teachers have not had courses in language structure or language development even though learning to read and write entirely depend on, and are intertwined with, language competence at many levels. Teachers of reading must be teachers of language. For example, there are many factual details that explain how English spelling represents sounds, syllables, and meaning that teachers must know to help students remember words (Moats, 1995, 2010; Moats & Lyon, 1996; Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005; Washburn, Joshi, & Binks-Cantrell, 2011). These details include similarities and contrasts among the speech sounds, how letters and their combinations are used to represent sounds, syllables, and meaningful parts of words. Likewise, there are many aspects of academic language in text that teachers should be teaching explicitly, such as how syntax and meaning are related and how text is organized (Oakhill, Cain, & Elbro, 2015). LETRS fills these gaps in teacher preparation.

6 **Phoneme awareness and phonics are major components for which teachers need more training.** Concepts about language are elusive and challenging for many adults, even though facts and ideas about words may seem as if they should be "simple" on the surface because we expect young children to master them. In fact, many adults who become teachers of reading do not have fully developed phoneme awareness or an understanding of why words are spelled the way they are (Bos, Mather, Dickson, Podhajski, & Chard, 2001; Moats, 1995; Fielding-Barnsley, 2010; Moats & Foorman, 2003; Spencer, Schuele, Guillot, & Lee, 2008). For example, in a recent study by Spencer, Schuele, Guillot, and Lee (2008), the authors found that "the phonemic skill level of the reading and special education teachers was not sufficient to provide accurate phonemic awareness intervention. ...Many teachers had specific misconceptions about speech and print (p. 517)." LETRS treats these areas with clarity, depth, and practical guidance.

7 **Teachers' estimates of their own knowledge often diverge from objective evidence.** Before substantive professional learning occurs, teachers typically have misconceptions about their own knowledge base for teaching reading. Those who know more about reading tend to underestimate their knowledge and those who know less tend to overestimate their knowledge. Therefore, teachers themselves may not be the best judges of what they need to learn (Brady et al., 2009; Cunningham, Zibulsky, & Callahan, 2009; Cunningham, Perry, Stanovich, & Stanovich, 2004). A comprehensive course of study addresses gaps in understanding that teachers may not be aware of when they begin.

8 **Acquiring deep knowledge of reading instruction takes time.** To learn about the essential components of reading instruction and how to implement them, several years may be required (Moats & Foorman, 2003, 2008; Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005). Extended time is necessary for working teachers who must adjust and change existing practices while striving to absorb new information about an area for which they may have limited disciplinary knowledge. More practice is necessary for teachers to learn concepts than is typically provided in short-term courses or workshops (Spear-Swerling, 2009; Spear-Swerling & Brucker, 2003, 2004). As Cunningham et al. (2009) argue, teachers learn at different rates and often begin their coursework or professional development with inaccurate ideas about how much—and what—they should learn to be effective in the classroom. Many need direct feedback about the differences between their actual knowledge and what they believe they know to adopt new practices. LETRS is designed for two years of study to cover all components, although it allows for targeted learning around specific topics.

9 **When teachers know more, students learn more.** When general education and intervention teachers learn and apply the information contained in LETRS and when a supportive context is in place, such substantive professional learning has been shown to have powerful beneficial effects on student learning. Overall achievement levels increase and fewer children experience reading difficulties (Carlisle, Correnti, Phelps, & Zeng, 2009; Foorman, Schatschneider, Eakin, Fletcher, Moats, & Francis, 2006; McCutchen et al., 2002; McCutchen, Green, Abbott, & Sanders, 2009; Moats & Foorman, 2008).

10 **Effective teachers are more content and will love their jobs.** This factor is less often measured and documented, but in our four-year project with low-performing, high-poverty schools in Washington, D.C., and Houston, Texas, teachers who learned how to teach effectively brought their students from below basic up to the national average in reading (Moats & Foorman, 2008). Along with these improvements came consistently enthusiastic feedback from teachers who participated in LETRS-like courses during the four years. Teacher absenteeism diminished; interest in professional learning accelerated; pride and empowerment replaced burnout and low expectations. We have witnessed these changes in many settings across the country.

Summary

Teachers matter more to student achievement than any other factor. A skilled instructor can change the lives of students. But, many educators are not prepared to teach all students to read, especially those who struggle.

LETRS is the first step toward a critical change in practice that can alter the course of students' futures. It is a change in the way teachers teach reading, a change in the effectiveness of instruction, a change in the lives of every student.

LETRS is comprehensive literacy and language professional learning that accelerates teacher knowledge. It is based on years of teacher knowledge research, teacher learning, and reading development. It is flexible and provides the tools needed for teachers to successfully bridge learning into classroom practice.

When teachers acquire the knowledge and teaching skills in LETRS, they are empowered. It can yield tremendous change—an increase in student achievement and more fulfilled teachers. LETRS changes lives.

For more information, visit lexialearning.com/LETRS

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