

---

**“BUT I JUST WANT TO TEACH REGULAR KIDS!”  
UNDERSTANDING PRESERVICE TEACHERS’ BELIEFS  
ABOUT TEACHING CHILDREN EXPERIENCING  
DIFFICULTY LEARNING TO READ**

---

*SUSAN L. NIERSTHEIMER  
CAROL J. HOPKINS  
MARIBETH CASSIDY SCHMITT*  
Purdue University

*LITERACY,  
TEACHING AND  
LEARNING*

*An International Journal of Early Literacy*

Volume 2      Number 1      1996

“**B**UT I JUST WANT TO TEACH REGULAR KIDS!” THIS LAMENT, EXPRESSED BY one of our preservice teachers, reflects the thinking of many prospective educators as they enter the teaching profession. Additionally, future teachers’ expectations of themselves and their students are high, idealistic, and include images of *regular* kids who are hungry for knowledge and filled with enthusiasm for learning (Bird, Anderson, Sullivan, & Swidler, 1993). This optimism about children and teaching seems to stem from the beliefs that preservice teachers have developed prior to enrolling in teacher preparation programs (Kagan, 1992). However, when prospective teachers are faced with the reality of working with children experiencing difficulty learning to read and write, they are challenged to confront these previously held beliefs (Cole & Knowles, 1993; Roskos & Walker, 1993).

In a undergraduate methods course, *Corrective Reading for the Classroom Teacher*, elementary education majors are given weekly opportunities to examine their beliefs as they tutor young children who have been identified as being at risk of failing to learn to read. Over the years, we have often seen our students struggle with the mismatch between their expectations and experience as they participate in the practicum component of the course. We have observed what Cole and Knowles (1993) referred to as shattered images that occur when preservice teachers experience a clash between what they thought literacy teaching would be like and what happens when children do not act, respond, or learn as their tutors expected.

We believe that part of the disillusionment our students experience is embedded in the deeply rooted beliefs about children and literacy learning that they bring with them to the course. As instructors, we consider it essential to examine preservice teachers’ knowledge and beliefs about children who are at risk of failing to learn to read and what can be done to help them so that we can provide our students with experiences and activities to challenge their thinking about literacy learning and teaching.

The purpose of this study is to examine preservice teachers’ beliefs about teaching children at risk of failing to learn to read. As such, our data collection was guided by the research questions: Upon entering a literacy practicum experience, what prior knowledge and beliefs do preservice teachers have about (a) why some children experience difficulty learning to read, and (b) what can be done to help children who are at risk of failing to learn to read?

## Review of Related Literature

**R**esearchers have described preservice teachers’ beliefs and preconceptions about children and teaching as they enter into field experiences such as practica and student teaching. Kagan (1992) reviewed studies examining professional growth among preservice and beginning teachers, and the role of preexisting beliefs and images at early points in their teacher preparation programs. In this summary, Kagan noted that preservice teachers tend to draw upon their own prior experiences in classrooms as pupils and from information they *just know*, where a focus on self seemingly drives their beliefs. Likewise, Roskos and Walker (1993) indicated that preservice teachers’ beliefs about children who are experiencing difficulty learning to read are largely based on their subjective knowledge as pupils in school, with a heavy emphasis on self. Roskos and Walker stated that prospective teachers’ beliefs and knowledge about reading and young readers fell “more into the realm of folk knowledge about reading pedagogy than professional knowledge” (p. 332). Buchmann (cited in Bird, et al., 1993) described “private beliefs that preservice teachers have about schooling that are based on their own extensive experiences as students and also upon *folkways* of schooling” (p. 265).

Additionally, it appears the beliefs and knowledge that preservice teachers bring with them to university teacher preparation programs are idealized notions of teaching, learning, and

children. An excerpted narrative account from a preservice teacher's journal (Cole & Knowles, 1993, p. 461) illustrates one student's contrived images and expectations of herself as a teacher:

As I envision myself as teacher, I see myself standing in front of the classroom where the seats are arranged in a semi-circle allowing students a clear vision of the board, and discussing with students the lesson I had prepared for the day. I see myself using plenty of visual aids, writing important points on the board, repeating myself several times, and waiting to receive responses or questions from the class. The learning atmosphere is created by students themselves, since they are the ones who need a pleasing atmosphere in which to learn and study. It is bright but not distracting, cozy enough so that the students do not feel that they are in a strange place, and intellectually stimulating so that they are always being exposed to something *educational*.

Cole and Knowles concluded that, "for many preservice teachers, re-entry to schools delivers a mild to moderate shock when they find their images of students, teachers, and schools are inappropriate" (p. 462).

Rust (1994) found that students' unrealistic views often hold fast even as they face their first year of classroom teaching. Her study that followed the experiences of two first-year teachers described the incongruity between what the teachers expected and what they actually experienced in the classroom and the dissonance between previously held beliefs and reality.

If preservice and novice teachers do indeed have unrealistic beliefs about teaching in general, how do their beliefs impact their teaching of at-risk learners, in particular? One possibility may be a reluctance on the part of preservice teachers to see at-risk learners, in this case children who are experiencing difficulty learning to read, as their responsibility. Gomez (1994) examined preservice teachers' perspectives on teaching *other people's children*. Her research suggested that if preservice teachers were given a choice, they would not choose to teach, nor are they prepared to teach low-achieving children. Much of Gomez's work is framed in terms of prospective teachers' views of children of races, ethnicities, and economic backgrounds different from their own. However, we believe that her call for teachers who are prepared to meet the needs of diverse learners applies similarly to meeting the needs of at-risk children who are struggling in school and failing at literacy learning. This is consistent with the Holmes Group report (*Tomorrow's Schools*, 1993), which calls for making teaching and learning for understanding available for everybody's children.

Finally, since preservice teachers soon become inservice teachers, it is important to examine recent research that focuses upon the willingness of practicing teachers to accept the responsibility of teaching *everybody's children*. Allington (1994) and Allington and Walmsley (1995) identified a connection between practicing teachers' beliefs about at-risk learners and teachers' acceptance of that responsibility for teaching those children. Allington traced the history of special programs for children who find reading difficult and compared the labels that describe at-risk learners with various programs implemented over the years to paint a picture of what he refers to as *warehousing* children. Allington called for reconceptualizing special programs whereby "each teacher would be responsible for the literacy development specifically and the academic development generally of all children enrolled in the class" (p. 110). Allington and Walmsley asserted that inservice teachers often do not see at-risk children as their responsibility and that even though there have been efforts to move toward a more inclusionary focus, practicing teachers still believe that children who are experiencing difficulty learning to read should be sent to special programs and special teachers.

## Methods and Procedures

### *Theoretical Framework*

Constructivism and phenomenology are the frameworks that underpinned this research and guided the data collection, analysis, and interpretation in this study. Constructivism allowed access to preservice teachers' multiple, intangible mental constructions, such as their previously held beliefs and knowledge, which are socially and experientially based (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Phenomenology allowed an understanding of the nature of the preservice teachers' beliefs and knowledge from their emic perspectives (Patton, 1990). These theoretical frameworks were revisited as the findings were interpreted to inform our developing understanding of the preservice teachers' expressed beliefs, which seemingly arose from their own particular viewpoints and experiences.

### *Participants*

Over a period of three semesters, all 67 students enrolled in an undergraduate reading methods course, *Corrective Reading for the Classroom Teacher*, at a large midwestern university participated in this study. The 60 female and 7 male participants were junior or senior year elementary education majors. They had already completed a prerequisite literacy methods course that focused on theory and practice related to literacy teaching in the elementary school, but they had no prior literacy teaching experience. The majority of the students were scheduled for student teaching in one of the following two semesters. The course is designed to provide preservice teachers with classroom discussion and practicum experiences in teaching reading and writing to children experiencing mild to moderate reading difficulties. The undergraduates each tutor one child per week in the university's reading clinic setting. During the classroom sessions, the preservice teachers learn assessment procedures and instructional strategies that are then applied in the tutoring practicum.

### *Research Design and Data Collection*

Qualitative methodology was used for this study as we examined the phenomena of the students' constructed knowledge and beliefs about at-risk literacy learners (Patton, 1990). The design included data and investigator triangulation (Denzin, cited in Patton, 1990). Data triangulation was achieved through examination of multiple data sources and investigator triangulation was accomplished as the researchers met regularly to discuss and compare findings and viewpoints, as well as to problem-solve design and data collection challenges as they occurred.

To ascertain students' beliefs about children who are at risk of failing to learn to read, for three consecutive semesters an open-ended questionnaire was administered on the first day of class. Before any teaching had taken place and with no indication from the course professor that there were *right* answers, the students were asked to write their responses to the following questions: (a) Why do some children experience difficulty learning to read? and (b) What can be done to help children who are at risk of failing to learn to read? Additionally, formal interviews were conducted before the second week of the course with key informants purposively selected (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990) on the basis of their willingness to share impressions and information with the researchers. The key informants were identified by the course instructor as students who were actively engaged, perceptive participants in the course and able to articulate

their responses and reactions to their experiences. These students provided individual voices of the participants and opportunities for clarification and better understanding of preservice teachers' perspectives and beliefs about at-risk literacy learners.

### ***Data Analysis***

The undergraduates' responses to the questionnaires were analyzed using within- and cross-case analysis (Patton, 1990). First, each student's written responses were analyzed as single cases, to identify themes or patterns within them. The researchers worked individually and then met to compare and discuss each team member's coding of the responses. From this process, emerging categories were generated that were then used to reanalyze and continue analyzing the data. Second, the within-case analysis was extended by conducting a cross-case analysis of all undergraduate students' responses. In the cross-case analysis, the researchers searched for patterns or validated patterns that had emerged in the within-case analysis. We looked across all data to identify similar as well as discrepant cases (Patton, 1990). Finally, overall findings were generated by synthesizing the within-case and cross-case analyses.

Students' responses during formal interviews were analyzed the same way as the written responses. First, they were analyzed as single cases, then similarities in their responses across cases were noted in a search for patterns or recurring themes.

## **Results and Discussion**

The central theme that emerged from the preservice teachers' responses to the two questions asked was that they assigned responsibility for causes of reading problems and the responsibility for helping children who experience difficulty learning to read to *someone else*. Instructional or school-related factors were not cited as reasons children experience difficulty learning to read, nor did preservice teachers believe that it was a classroom teacher's responsibility to provide help for these students. Instead, the undergraduates *assigned responsibility* for reading problems to parents and the home environment they created for their children, or to the children themselves, neither of which fell within the realm of a teacher's responsibility. When preservice teachers were asked what they believed should be done to help these children, they *assigned responsibility* to someone else, a person outside of the classroom such as a Reading Recovery teacher, reading specialist, or parents. Student responses to each of the questions were examined to demonstrate how these prospective classroom teachers absolved themselves of responsibilities for teaching children with reading problems.

### ***Assigning Responsibility for Reading Problems***

When the preservice teachers answered the question, "Why do some children experience difficulty learning to read?," their responses indicated two primary sources of responsibility: the child and the child's parents.

***The child.*** The most frequently offered explanation centered on beliefs that something was wrong with the child. Students cited cognitive, neurological, emotional, and physiological problems such as hearing loss, vision problems, and malnutrition. Diane believed, "Some children, I'm sure have neurological impediments that made it harder to learn to read." Jim listed the following reasons: "Visual difficulties, hearing difficulties, and other physical difficulties." Sara thought, "Some children may be undernourished. Some children may just

learn at a slower rate; their minds may not process everything.” Tara said, “Some children may not be ready, may not be able to [read]—brain damage, etc.”

Other students offered explanations such as learning disabilities, ADD, dyslexia, developmental delays, and low self-esteem. For instance, Carla responded, “There are several reasons why some children experience difficulty learning to read. These include lack of interest, lack of attention, and learning disabilities. Learning disabilities should be identified and dealt with.” Julie added, “. . . it may be a learning disability which affects their development (dyslexia, etc.).” Molly and Linda also pointed to dyslexia. “There are also obviously cases of dyslexia, etc. that may prove to be road blocks for some children until these situations are improved,” Molly wrote. Linda stated, “Some children may experience difficulty because they have an eye problem or may be dyslexic. Students need to be tested for many different problems if their reading difficulty is extreme.” Similarly, Tanya related, “Some children may have an underlying learning disability that teachers need to be aware of.” Brian, too, said, “. . . having learning disabilities or handicaps which cause them not to be able to keep up with other students. When these problems go undetected students fall behind.” Alexa stressed, “It may be an attention span disorder since reading requires paying attention to every word and meaning, or it could be that a child has a vision problem or trouble recognizing words again.” Misty added, “Some children may be learning disabled and just take longer to learn. All students have their own rate at which they develop.” Katherine stated, “Children could have a mild learning disability that shows up only in reading. Children may have a lack of concentration and get frustrated easily. Children may have low self-esteem or confidence in their abilities to read.” Lack of confidence was also mentioned by Tanya, “The children may also have a hard time because they don’t want to learn to read or they have had a bad experience with trying to read (i.e., reading aloud in groups).” It is interesting to note that while students freely labeled the causes of problems, they rarely offered explanations or definitions for the terms they used to describe them.

A final, but much less frequently offered cluster of responses dealt with the belief that some children experience problems learning to read because they cannot deal effectively with print. Examples of these difficulties included excessive time needed to associate letters with sounds, trouble recognizing words, trouble understanding written code, and not having sufficient practice. Diane noted, “Other children might be easily frustrated when they have difficulties understanding the written codes, which might add to their difficulties in learning language.” Misty pointed out, “Others just take longer to associate letters with sounds. After learning basic rules, there are always exceptions to the rule that must be memorized.” David reasoned, “Some children have difficulty because they do not understand sound-letter relationships, phonic rules, or other rules that would help a child learn to read.” Stephanie shared, “Others may have a hard time relating the sound to the letter. Still others, like me, could read the words, but have a hard time with comprehending the message.” Abby thought the difficulties occurred because, “Something is not making meaning for them. A letter, a word, phrase, or all of print has meaning—I think some kids lose the ability to understand that and therefore have problems reading.”

***The parents.*** The second most frequently offered explanation for why children experience difficulty learning to read reflected preservice teachers’ beliefs that parents and the home environment they create are responsible for children’s reading problems. A lack of early or adequate literacy experiences, parents who do not or cannot read, excessive television viewing, poverty, and dysfunctional families were cited as related and contributing factors. Sara’s response illustrates her beliefs about the impact of home on a child’s ability to learn to read. “I think some children have trouble because they were not read to at a young age or at all. They also may have had a rough experience growing up and were worrying about something else.” Kim,

too, said, “I think the main problems come from a home situation.” Mark and Bill pointed specifically to the parents’ role in their children’s failure to succeed in reading. Mark said, “Perhaps home environment. Probably the parents can’t read too well. Maybe the parents show no interest at all in the child’s education.” Bill believed, “Some children aren’t given enough attention in their preschool years. Some parents either neglect or do not have the time to talk to and read to their children.” Tonya reasoned, “I think that some children have difficulty learning to read because they are not exposed to books early on. Their parents don’t read to them or don’t know how to read either. I also think that if children do have books available but are not told or helped or even read to by someone [a child] will not pick up a book and look at it.”

Julie’s response supported the notion that a difficult family situation can contribute to reading problems. “Some may not have been exposed to reading early on. Others may have encountered financial problems which may have stood in the way of the child’s literacy development (i.e., couldn’t afford books, parents worked night and day, etc.).”

Likewise, Nancy commented, “Each child comes from a separate household and has had different experiences. Some children grow up in families where parents do not share in reading activities with them. Some children do not have books.”

In addition to citing home situations, some students also pointed to activities that might take children away from reading, such as excessive television viewing. Donna pointed out, “I think too often it seems easier to let a child sit in front of the TV or play video games than to take them to the library to get them books.” Mattie agreed, “I also believe that children need to have less television time and more quality time reading. I feel that watching the television is filling our children’s time and they don’t make time for quality reading.” Mark wrote, “Maybe the child is too interested in TV, computer and video games, or too involved in other activities.”

For these undergraduates, inadequate parenting, resulting in inadequate early literacy experiences, is the cause of children’s reading difficulties. Although Cathy also ascribed to this position, she approached the subject by explaining what she considers the effects of more positive family environments and experiences, including reading to children early in life, older sibling literary role models, and literacy materials. “Some children might experience difficulty learning to read because of their socioeconomic backgrounds, family backgrounds, family structure, etc. Some families value the importance of reading. In these families, children are probably read to daily at a very early age (even infancy). Some children have older brothers and sisters who read, and they see their siblings as sort of role models. Some families purchase a great amount of books, computer programs, or videos that encourage their children to learn to read.”

### *Assigning Responsibility for Instruction*

In response to the question, “What can be done to help children who are at risk of failing to learn to read?,” the majority of preservice teachers assigned responsibility to someone else. Those cited most often were parents or specialists who could work with students outside of the classroom.

**Parental responsibility.** First of all, the undergraduates stated that they believed the teacher should work with parents, who in turn should read to their children and support their children’s literacy efforts. Kim, Julie, and Dana spoke of the need for parental involvement in the literacy development of their children. Kim stated, “For a child at risk it would be very important for the teacher to work with his or her parents to ensure the child will not fail.” Julie reasoned, “Conferences with parents could make them more aware of the problem and parents and teachers

could work together to help solve it.” Dana said, “The teacher can work with the parents on making sure books are read at home each day for some added practice with the parent or guardian as the overseer.”

Diane’s response links assigning responsibility to parents to assigning responsibility to specialists, such as tutors. “I think that working closely with the parents and family and other reading specialists will increase the likelihood that an at-risk child will succeed in learning to read.” Her allusion to *other reading specialists* was a sentiment that was evident across many of the preservice teachers’ responses. They agreed some type of school-initiated intervention held the key to helping these children.

**Specialist responsibility.** The second and overwhelming response to this question was that children experiencing difficulty learning to read should be tutored by special teachers in some type of school-initiated intervention. This, they said, might take the form of assistance from a reading specialist or participation in other kinds of individual instructional programs that occurred outside of the classroom. Misty remarked, “I have observed the Reading Recovery program and noticed what this program can do for children who are at risk of failing to learn to read.” Alexa also recommended Reading Recovery. “Programs like Reading Recovery which focus on what the child can do and builds from there are the most helpful.” Dana wrote, “These students can be tutored inside or out of school.” Amy’s response captured the essence of the majority of explanations, “If a child is at risk of failing to learn to read then individual one-on-one tutoring is essential. Given the opportunity to have individual reading help will greatly increase the child’s chances to learn to read.” Cathy agreed, “I feel there needs to be a program to help children who are at risk of failing to learn to read in every school system. I also believe that it is important to get these at-risk children into such a program as early as possible (first and second grade).” Amy supported all of the above students’ comments, “Tutoring individually will take away the embarrassment the child feels and will also give the child more opportunities.”

In sum, the central theme that emerged from the analysis of the preservice teachers’ beliefs was that of *assigning responsibility* both for the cause of children’s problems and for the efforts to help them. Often the responses indicated that reading problems were inherent to the child and the preservice teachers labeled those children accordingly. The undergraduates also cited non-reading factors that caused problems for children.

In the responses of the future classroom teachers, accepting responsibility for at-risk literacy learners rather than assigning it to someone else, did not appear in the data as a belief embraced by this group. The classroom teacher was rarely mentioned as a source of help or someone who, at least, shared responsibility for teaching those children experiencing difficulty learning to read. Special programs and special teachers were viewed as sources outside of the classroom that could solve the dilemma of how to help a struggling child learn to read. It was noted that the preservice teachers seldom considered the possibility of teaching effective strategies to children to help them gain independence in dealing with reading tasks. These findings echo those of Gomez (1994) who reported that prospective teachers view children’s learning problems as “consequences of children’s outside-of-school lives; beyond the purview of teachers, school, and schooling” (p. 321).

### Educational Implications

This study has far-reaching implications for teacher education because it relates to an already common concern that practicing teachers abrogate responsibility for teaching the hardest-to-teach children to specialist teachers. Research conducted by Allington and Walmsley



(1995) warns us that many teachers operate from, “it can’t be done” or “it isn’t my job” perspectives, believing that the children’s abilities make it impossible for them to succeed with regular classroom instruction or that only specialist teachers would know what to do.

If preservice teachers harbor these beliefs before they even complete teacher education programs, it is unlikely that they will begin to accept responsibilities for teaching at-risk learners when assuming the role of classroom teacher. It is imperative that teacher educators recognize future teachers’ beliefs as they enter our classes and then provide experiences and activities that will inform them as they construct their understandings about teaching and learning. We need to afford prospective teachers opportunities to observe and participate in successful interventions for those children who experience difficulty learning to read and write. For example, at Purdue University, preservice teacher educators collaborated with the Reading Recovery faculty to infuse features of the Reading Recovery professional development model into their students’ experiences. Specifically, they participated in behind-the-glass sessions where they engaged in reflective discussion as they observed their peers tutoring children in the clinic setting. Evidence from this collaborative research effort suggested the undergraduates discovered new ways to look at teaching and learning, the most significant of which was to view the child differently (Hopkins, Schmitt, Nierstheimer, Dixey, & Younts, 1995).

Placing more emphasis on assessing preservice teachers’ beliefs and providing appropriate experiences in teacher education programs will help to ensure that prospective teachers develop “it *can* be done” and “it *is* my job” perspectives (Allington & Walmsley, 1995) about teaching children at risk of failing to learn to read.

## References

- Allington, R.L. (1994). What’s special about special programs for children who find learning to read difficult? *Journal of Reading Behavior*, 26, 95-115.
- Allington, R.L., & Walmsley, S.A. (1995). Redefining and reforming instructional support programs for at-risk students. In R.L. Allington & S.A. Walmsley (Eds.), *No quick fix: Rethinking literacy programs in America’s schools* (pp. 19-44). New York: Teachers College Press and International Reading Association.
- Bird, T., Anderson, L.M., Sullivan, B.A., & Swidler, S.A. (1993). Pedagogical balancing acts: Attempts to influence prospective teachers’ beliefs. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 9, 253-267.
- Cole, A.L., & Knowles, J.G. (1993). Shattered images: Understanding expectations and realities of field experiences. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 9, 457-471.
- Gomez, M.L. (1994). Teacher education reform and prospective teachers’ perspectives on teaching “other people’s” children. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 10, 319-334.
- Guba, E.G., & Lincoln, Y.S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105-117). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hopkins, C.J., Schmitt, M.C., Nierstheimer, S.L., Dixey, B.P., & Younts, T. (1995). Infusing features of the Reading Recovery professional development model into the experiences of preservice teachers. In K.A. Hinchman, D.J. Leu, & C.K. Kinzer (Eds.), *Perspectives on literacy research and methods* (pp. 349-357). Chicago: National Reading Conference.
- Kagan, D.M. (1992). Professional growth among preservice and beginning teachers. *Review of Educational Research*, 62, 129-169.

- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Patton, M.Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Roskos, K., & Walker, B. (1993). Preservice teachers' epistemology in the teaching of problem readers. In C.K. Kinzer & D.J. Leu (Eds.), *Examining central issues in literacy research, theory, and practice* (pp. 325-334). Chicago: National Reading Conference
- Rust, F.O. (1994). The first year: It's not what they expected. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 10, 205-217.
- Tomorrow's schools: Principles for the designs of professional development schools*. (1993). East Lansing, MI: The Holmes Group.