



Castleton University

In preparation for my testimony, I have reviewed the draft of the Literacy Bill VT H0101 that is being created in support of Act 173, the DMG's 2017 report, "Expanding and Strengthening Best Practice Supports for Students Who Struggle," and the AOE's "Blueprint for Early Literacy Comprehensive System of Services, PreK through Third Grade," (July, 2019). Castleton strives to prepare teachers who are able to support the five "opportunities for improving services and supports" from the DMG Report:

1. Ensure elementary Tier 1 core instruction meets the needs of most students;
2. Provide additional instructional time outside core subjects aligned to the core instruction, to students who struggle, rather than providing interventions instead of core instruction;
3. Ensure students who struggle receive all instruction from highly skilled teachers;
4. Create or strengthen a systems-wide approach to supporting positive student behaviors based on expert support; and
5. Provide students having more intensive support needs with specialized instruction from skilled and trained experts.

While what I share today about how we prepare teachers is focused on our K-3 reading preparation, it is important to note that we have created a parallel literacy/special education course structure at the secondary level for those planning to teach discipline-specific courses. At Castleton, our students major in the liberal arts and license at either the elementary or secondary level. And at either level, our students may endorse in Special Education. Our licensure programs are 42 credits, twelve of which are dedicated to student teaching.

From the remaining 30 credits we have allotted to our elementary licensure program, we have carved out six dedicated reading, writing, and special education credits, which, at the elementary level, are facilitated through a Reading course and an Elementary Special Education course that before COVID we stacked together on a Tuesday, Thursday schedule from 9:30 to 12:15. The Reading-Writing course is built on the principles of those theories of learning that span an introduction to the "Science of Reading" to theories of socially mediated knowledge. We work through the ranges of instructional practices associated with the traditional components of Reading: Phonemic Awareness; Phonics; Vocabulary; Fluency; and Comprehension. Both courses are built on the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which provides a framework by which to prepare our future elementary teachers to think through and break down barriers to learning by carefully designing learning opportunities that support multiple pathways toward supporting successful reading behaviors. Our courses share a combined capstone Case Study requirement that provides our students with practice in data collection, consultation, and analysis in regard to reading behaviors across a heterogeneous group of four students over the course of a semester.

We have built a synergistic relationship with five principal-recommended teachers of reading in a community school who, while facilitating their K-6 students' reading programs, are simultaneously mentoring our preservice teachers in their classrooms. Because our students attend their placements during class time, both course instructors are able to be in the field as well. Our course/field model is designed to cycle through instruction and assessment of reading behaviors in both small groups and with individuals in order to keep a close eye on progress monitoring, instructional goals, and possible interventions needed for each student. The K-6 students in each class are grouped across ability levels and paired with a preservice teacher from Castleton. Additionally, our students have the benefit of consulting with the special educator who is assigned to each classroom in order to be better supported in their understandings of how their studies of reading difficulties transfer into practice. Our students design and implement individualized learning experiences by utilizing the Principles of Universal Design for Learning in order to provide for all of the learners in their small groups.

Our goal is to prepare analytical teachers who closely observe data sets and learn how to scaffold support where young readers struggle and enrichment opportunities to feed their curiosities. Our preservice teachers learn to collect data of the observations they make during the sessions they facilitate through either a planned literacy activity or assessment. They utilize this data, their course readings, and mentor input to produce a comprehensive Case Study as their final outcome, with a deeper concentration on one student who is typically identified as a struggling reader.

We work to provide our preservice teachers with practice in working with children with complex reading struggles while they learn alongside their more able peers. In these courses, our students plan for individualized instruction and practice individualized reading and writing assessments. These opportunities are described, analyzed, and reflected upon in their case study where our preservice teachers must demonstrate complex thinking about reading across their semester-long interactions with their small heterogeneous groups.

Our recent COVID induced approach has taught us to adapt to accommodating our preservice teachers who are learning remotely and who are most often in their hometowns. Our instruction has shifted to an inquiry-based approach that is supported through weekly Zoom meetings where we lay out the agenda for the week and share our crowd-sourced research across the five traditional components of reading instruction, assessment, and Universal Design for Learning. Our capstone project for this approach has been to scaffold our preservice reading teachers' universal design and implementation of a Reading Walk, which is based off of the increasingly popular StoryWalk®Project created by Anne Ferguson of Montpelier, VT that she developed in collaboration with the Kellogg-Hubbard Library. [Example StoryWalk \(shared with permission\)](#).

In our courses, we do not teach specific programs. We do teach our preservice teachers to be consumers of knowledge as well as producers. We work toward preparing our preservice teachers to work from the individual instructional needs of each student. Learning to read is a complicated endeavor that is impacted

by both individual and cultural factors. For this reason, we prepare our future reading teachers to be flexible in their instructional approaches. From the Handbook of Learning Disabilities:

The environment, language, and reading disorders reflect the complexities of individual differences, the impact of early atypicalities upon subsequent brain development, and the role of both critical periods and cultural factors as they impact the growing organism. Much as a log jam alters the flow of the river and causes collateral pathways and pools, each brain's unique development forces us to respect that there will never be a singular cause or treatment for dyslexia (2014, p. 28; Nicholls, 2010, P. 78).

The Universal Design Framework provides exceptional guidelines across its unifying principles to provide suggested strategies, assistive technologies, and interventions in support of each learner's development, which helps our preservice teachers to learn to design much more inclusive and differentiated instruction.

The AOE's 2019 Blueprint for Early Literacy Comprehensive System of Services, Pre-K through Third Grade recognizes our approach to reading instruction as an interrelationship between what they call "code-based skills" and "meaning-based skills." The report states:

To become readers, children must develop two broad sets of skills: 'code-based' skills and 'meaning-based' skills. Code-based skills include the ability to map letters to their respective sounds and in combination to read words. Meaning-based skills include understanding the meaning of text, or comprehension and include oral language use and vocabulary. To be a competent reader, code-based skills are necessary but not independently sufficient (p. 14).

Castleton strives to prepare preservice teachers who design and implement universally designed instruction and assessment across both code-based and content-based reading skill-sets so that they enter the field with a foundational set of understandings about reading instruction and assessment that is ready to be deepened through systematic and sustained professional development.

Respectfully submitted,

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References:

Handbook of Learning Disabilities (2014). Edited by H. Lee Swanson, Karen R. Harris, and Steve Graham.

Universal Design for Learning: <http://www.cast.org/our-work/about-udl.html>