

Early Literacy in Vermont:

Findings From the Vermont Educator Preparation Program Course Syllabi Review: Early Childhood, Early Childhood Special Education, and Elementary Education

Region 1 Comprehensive Center
Vermont Agency of Education

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Executive Summary

A primary focus for the Vermont Agency of Education (AOE) has been on increasing student literacy. This focus, coupled with the passage of Act 28 in 2021, which provides funding and technical assistance to improve literacy outcomes, prompted the AOE to request support related to literacy from the [Region 1 Comprehensive Center](#) (R1CC). Specifically, the AOE wanted to better understand the degree to which Vermont certified teachers, who attended Vermont educator preparation programs (EPPs) were prepared to use evidence-based literacy instructional practices. This project reviewed 20 course syllabi from a sample of six Vermont EPPs. These EPPs support 60% of educators recommended for certification in early childhood, early childhood special education, and elementary pathways. The syllabi were reviewed using two Innovation Configuration (ICs) maps from the Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform (CEEDAR) Center's: [*Evidence-Based Reading Instruction for Grades K–5*](#) (Lane, 2014) and [*Evidence-Based Practices for Writing Instruction*](#) (Troia, 2014).

The review found that many of the EPPs offered reading and writing courses whose syllabi contained evidence of the 10 essential components identified by the IC maps. In addition, findings from these six EPPs include the following:

- The syllabi from five EPPs covered all 10 essential components for evidence-based reading instruction.
- Syllabi from one EPP did not cover six key reading components: decoding, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, explicit and systematic instruction, and organization for instruction. These foundational skills are necessary for students to learn to read (Foorman et al., 2016).
- The writing essential components were less prevalent in the syllabi. 2 EPP syllabi included 4/10 essential components of evidence-based writing instruction, one EPP included 5/10, 2 EPPs included 7/10, and 1 EPP included 9/10 essential components.

The findings from this syllabi review are based on information found in syllabi from a sample of six EPPs that volunteered to participate in the review. Although this review has inherent limitations, the results from the syllabi review and discussions with the EPPs following the review provide early insights into the degree to which Vermont EPPs are teaching preservice educators to use evidence-based practice in literacy instruction in their future classrooms. To further support these efforts, R1CC recommends:

- aligning the content of the Results Oriented Program Approval performance-based approach with the evidence-based reading and writing practices the research supports as important to student learning.
- reviewing EPP course contents which should include additional data, such as course schedules, calendars, and (if possible) observations of EPP courses and field-based experiences to learn about preservice teachers' opportunities to apply what they learn in their courses, practice skills, and receive explicit feedback on their application of skills.
- developing and delivering professional development support to strengthen programs to ensure preservice teachers have multiple opportunities in classroom settings and with students to apply, practice, and receive feedback on evidence-based reading and writing instructional practices.
- developing and delivering target professional development supports to districts in writing, focusing specifically on the areas least reflected in the course syllabi.

Introduction

Vermont desires to improve the literacy outcomes of its students. To do so, the legislature passed a series of bills related to literacy and supporting student learning, the most recent of which is Act 28 in 2021. This bill provides technical assistance and funding for

- (1) providing professional development learning modules for teachers in methods of teaching literacy in the five key areas of literacy instruction as identified by the National Reading Panel, which are phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension; and (2) assisting supervisory unions in implementing evidence-based systems-wide literacy approaches that address learning loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Vermont General Assembly, 2021)

and created the Advisory Council on Literacy. These efforts are important because although a higher percentage of students in Vermont are scoring proficient compared with national test results, the Vermont 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress reading results (n.d.a, n.d.b) showed that 32% of fourth-grade students and 23% of eighth-grade students scored below basic, and only 37% of fourth-grade students and 40% of eighth-grade students scored proficient or higher on the reading assessment.

To support their literacy efforts, the Vermont Agency of Education (AOE) requested that the Region 1 Comprehensive Center (R1CC) conduct syllabi review to show the degree to which the literacy instructional practices taught in the state's educator preparation programs (EPPs) align with evidence-based literacy practices. This review is a first step in understanding the degree to which preservice educators are exposed to evidence-based literacy practices. This information can be used to support the AOE in directing professional development and technical assistance efforts in those practices topic areas.

Educator Preparation Program Course Review Objectives and Questions

The syllabi review examined the extent to which EPP syllabi document the inclusion of evidence-based reading and writing instructional practices in their EPP courses. These courses are required for individuals pursuing certification in early childhood, early childhood special education, or elementary endorsement areas at these institutions. Using the Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform (CEEDAR) Center's Innovation Configurations (ICs), two trained reviewers and two trained faculty members examined syllabi content from a voluntary sample of six EPPs. These EPPs support 60% of educators

recommended for certification in early childhood, early childhood special education, and elementary pathways. This review addressed the following questions:

1. To what extent are evidence-based practices in reading and writing instruction represented within program syllabi from the participating EPPs?
2. Do syllabi vary in the intensity and levels of practice-based opportunities associated with the evidence-based practices in reading and writing instruction? If so, how do they vary?

Methodology

To ensure that the project most accurately reflected the content of the course syllabi reviewed, R1CC employed a comprehensive strategy to recruit, train, review, and analyze EPP programs. The key activities and processes are described in this section.

EPP Recruitment and Sample Selection

To elicit the participation of EPPs in the literacy course review, R1CC began outreach efforts by meeting with AOE staff familiar with EPP leadership to discuss the recruitment approach. Next, AOE staff introduced R1CC staff to the EPPs via email, and R1CC staff reached out to the EPPs with additional information and to schedule informational calls with EPP leadership. During these calls and via email, EPPs could ask questions and learn about the review process.

Outreach and recruitment were open for all EPPs in Vermont. R1CC staff conducted initial outreach with interested organizations and followed up with the EPPs to recruit them to participate in the review. EPPs could choose either a blind review, in which trained R1CC staff would conduct the review, or have their faculty review their own syllabi. The latter approach increased demand on EPP faculty but more closely aligned with the initial intent of the CEDAR Center syllabus review process.

The final sample included four EPPs that chose a blind review, one EPP that chose a mix of blind and self-reviews, and one EPP that chose a self-review. Exhibit 1 summarizes a description of the EPP sample. The EPPs selected the program(s) to be reviewed and the syllabi to share with R1CC. All participating EPPs were institutions of higher education. In total, the EPPs provided 18 syllabi for blind review and two syllabi for self-review. The average number of syllabi reviewed per EPP was three.

Exhibit 1. Characteristics of the Six Participating EPPs

	Institution	Number of course syllabi reviewed
Total	7	20
Program type		
• Baccalaureate	7	20
• Postbaccalaureate	0	0
Certification program		
• Early childhood education	3	8
• Early childhood special education	1	2
• Elementary education	2	7
• Early childhood and elementary education	1	3
Public/private		
• Public	4	14
• Private	2	6

EPP Syllabi Review Process

R1CC leveraged the CEEDAR Center's IC system to conduct the syllabi review. The [Evidence-Based Reading Instruction for Grades K-5](#) (Lane, 2014) and [Evidence-Based Practices for Writing Instruction](#) (Troia, 2014) maps were used to analyze the syllabi. The CEEDAR Center uses evidence standards to identify the essential components for evidence-based practices within the ICs. The IC maps show not only whether the essential components are present in a syllabus but also the extent to which the syllabus shows evidence that candidates have practice-based opportunities within the classroom environment. These maps are aligned to the Vermont literacy standards.

Once recruited to participate, all reviewers (two R1CC staff and two faculty members) received training on the IC and the process for recording reviews. EPPs submitted their course syllabi, R1CC anonymized the syllabi, reviews were completed, and data were inputted into the IC. Each EPP received a report of their data and scheduled to meet with R1CC staff to discuss the findings, share additional contextual information and implications of the findings.

During the follow-up meeting, R1CC gave the EPPs an opportunity to discuss their individual program results and share additional context about their program. Of the six participating EPPs, five EPPs met with the review team. In the meetings, representatives of the EPPs could ask the review team about the review process, the syllabi reviewed, and the IC maps and components. EPP representatives could learn about the strengths and opportunities in their core course syllabi. R1CC could also gain insights and considerations for interpreting the findings and implications.

During the meetings, the EPPs recognized that course syllabi do not always share specifics of the course content. Specifically, faculty noted that syllabi may not include all the detailed information regarding topics covered in each course activity (e.g., a syllabus might indicate to read Chapter 3 of a book but not detail all the topics in Chapter 3), so a review of the syllabi may underrepresent the essential components included in the course. In addition, the course reviewed often had corequisite field experiences that were expected to cover the same topics in tandem, so what is reflected in the syllabi did not necessarily reflect the intensity of exposure to the components.

Findings

The EPP literacy course review addressed the following primary research questions:

1. To what extent are evidence-based practices in reading and writing instruction represented within program syllabi from the participating EPPs?
2. Do syllabi vary in the intensity and levels of practice-based opportunities associated with the evidence-based practices in reading and writing instruction? If so, how do they vary?

For the first question, R1CC defined representation by reviewing course objectives and outcomes, activities (in the field and classroom), assignments, projects, tests/quizzes, and/or demonstrations that align to the reading and writing IC maps. For example, in a syllabus that described a discussion on children's literature across content areas and sharing informational texts with students, R1CC coded that as covering "organization for instruction."

The findings are organized by research question and content area. For each question, the results focused on reading instruction are first, followed by the results on writing instruction.

Essential Components in the IC Maps

K-5 Reading Instruction

1. Influences on Reading Policy and Practice in the United States
2. Foundation Concepts About Oral and Written Language
3. Phonemic Awareness
4. Decoding (Instruction and Principles)
5. Fluency (Role, Instruction, and Assessment)
6. Vocabulary (Types, Role, and Instruction)
7. Comprehension (Instruction and Strategies)
8. Explicit and Systematic Instruction
9. Organization for Instruction
10. Literacy Assessment.

(Lane, 2014)

K-5 Writing Instruction

1. Writing Is an Essential Part of the Curriculum
2. Varied Approaches to the Teaching of Writing
3. Instruction Focused on Process Elements
4. Instruction Focused on Product Elements
5. Utilizing Technology in Writing Instruction
6. Effective Assessment and Feedback for Writing
7. Instruction Focused on Writing Skills
8. Learning Through Writing
9. Promoting Independent and Reflective Writers
10. Promoting a Supportive Writing Environment

(Troia, 2014)

Research Question 1

Reading Instruction

For these analyses, if at least one course at an EPP included evidence that it covered an essential component, the EPP was considered to include that essential component. Five of the six EPPs that participated in the review had at least one course syllabus that cover all 10 essential components for the reading map. One EPP's syllabi did not cover six essential components: decoding, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, explicit and systematic instruction, and organization for instruction (see Exhibits 2 and 3).

Exhibit 2. Essential Components of the IC Reading Map Represented in the EPPs' Syllabi

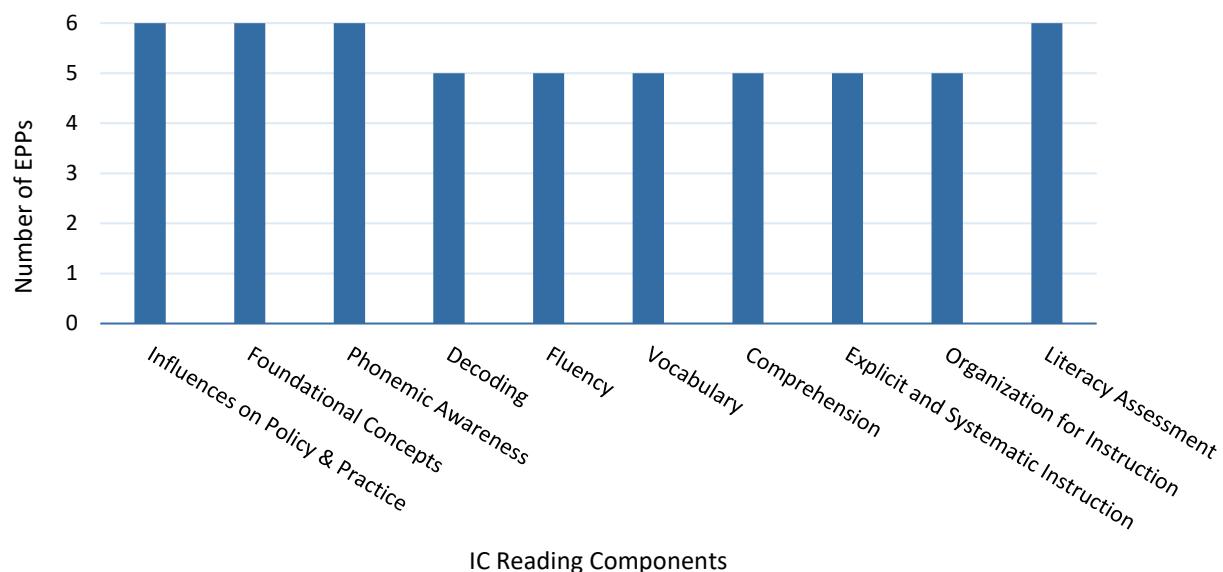


Exhibit 3. Essential Components of the IC Reading Map Across the EPPs

Reading essential component	EPP 1	EPP 2	EPP 3	EPP 4	EPP 5	EPP 6
1. Influences on Reading Policy and Practice in the United States	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2. Foundation Concepts About Oral and Written Language	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3. Phonemic Awareness	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4. Decoding (Instruction and Principles)	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
5. Fluency (Role, Instruction, Assessment)	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
6. Vocabulary (Types, Role, and Instruction)	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓

Reading essential component	EPP 1	EPP 2	EPP 3	EPP 4	EPP 5	EPP 6
7. Comprehension (Instruction and Strategies)	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
8. Explicit and Systematic Instruction	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
9. Organization for Instruction	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
10. Literacy Assessment	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Writing Instruction

None of the EPPs had evidence in their syllabi that “utilizing technology in writing instruction” was covered in any course, and EPPs ranged from covering two to nine of the 10 essential components for the writing map (see Exhibits 4 and 5). Furthermore, only one EPP included evidence of “promoting independent and reflective writers,” and two included evidence of “instruction focused on product elements.”

Exhibit 4. Essential Components of the IC Writing Map Represented in the EPPs' Syllabi

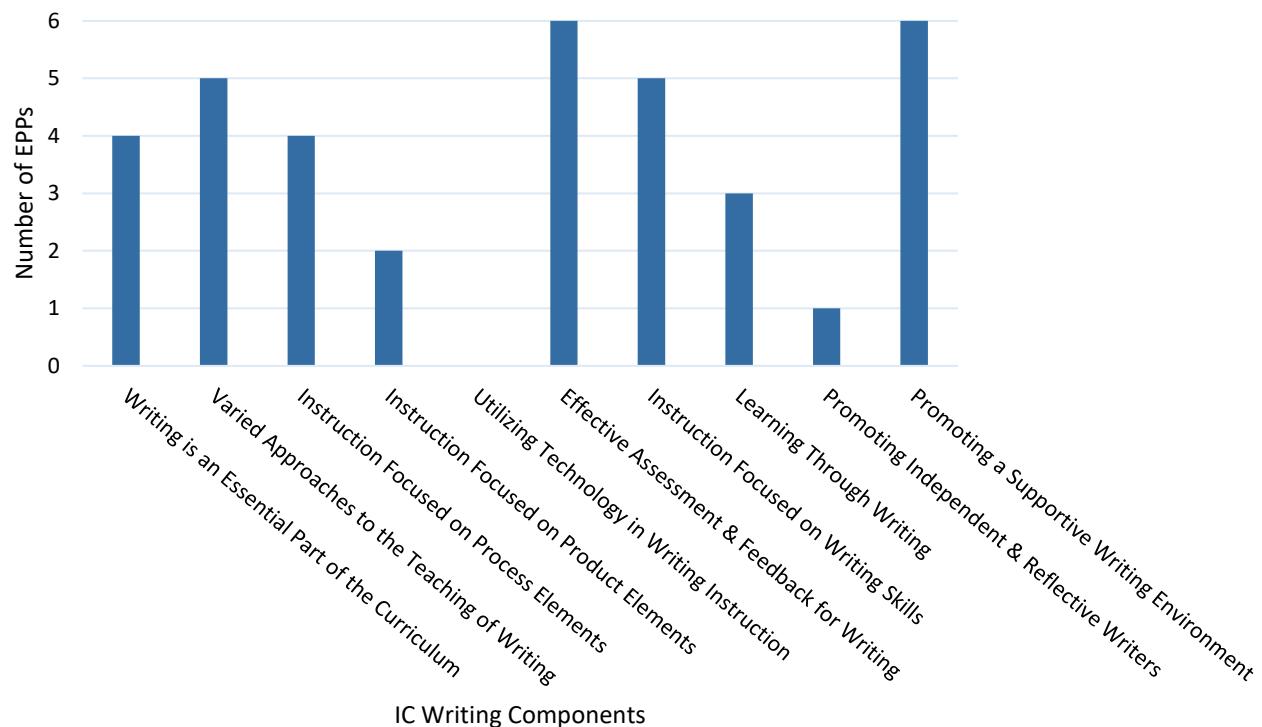


Exhibit 5. Essential Components of the IC Writing Map Across the EPPs

Writing essential component	EPP 1	EPP 2	EPP 3	EPP 4	EPP 5	EPP 6
1. Writing Is an Essential Part of the Curriculum	✓	✓		✓	✓	
2. Varied Approaches to the Teaching of Writing	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
3. Instruction Focused on Process Elements	✓	✓	✓		✓	
4. Instruction Focused on Product Elements	✓		✓			
5. Utilizing Technology in Writing Instruction						
6. Effective Assessment and Feedback for Writing	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7. Instruction Focused on Writing Skills	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
8. Learning Through Writing	✓		✓		✓	
9. Promoting Independent and Reflective Writers	✓					
10. Promoting a Supportive Writing Environment	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Research Question 2

In addition to analyzing the content in the syllabi, R1CC assessed the degree to which the syllabi provided evidence that preservice teachers had opportunities to apply the evidence-based practices. Application could involve creating lesson plans, modeling evidence-based practices, tutoring students, and other activities. Importantly, this review of the syllabi was limited to application opportunities available in the courses. Programs may offer additional opportunities as part of their prepracticum or full practicum experiences; however, that information is not captured in this review. The following findings examine the levels of practice-based opportunities aligned with the reading and writing maps found in the syllabi.

The IC system considers the degree of alignment in the following levels:

- Level 0: There is no evidence that the essential component is present in the syllabus.
- Level 1: The syllabi must contain at least one of the following: reading, test, lecture/presentation, discussion, modeling/demonstration, or quiz.
- Level 2: The syllabi must contain at least one item from Level 1 plus at least one of the following: observation, project/activity, case study, or lesson plan study.
- Level 3: The syllabi must contain at least one item from Level 1, at least one item from Level 2, and at least one of the following: tutoring, small-group student teaching, or whole-group internship.

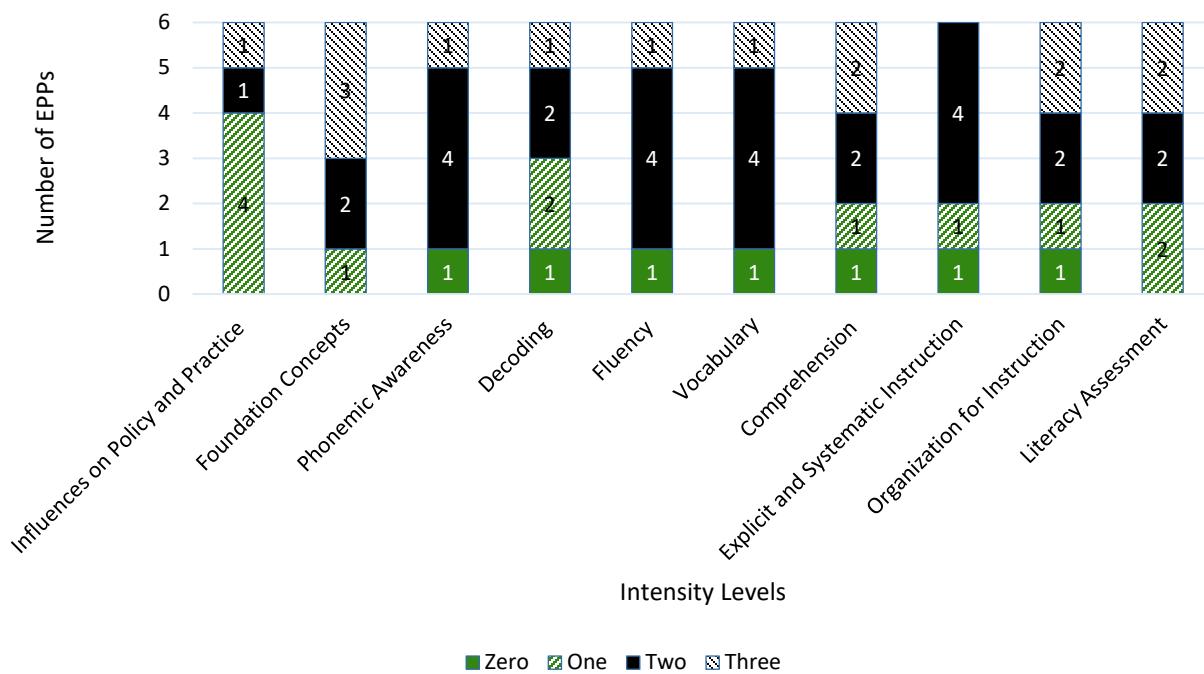
It is important to note that there is no “ideal” intensity level that each EPP should meet for each evidence-based literacy practice. The levels are generated as data points to provide information

that reflect on the strengths and gaps across the syllabi. For instance, it may be acceptable for syllabi to be at Level 1 on activities related to the “influences on reading policy and practice in the United States” component. For decoding, teacher candidates need multiple opportunities to practice decoding instruction in authentic ways with varying student populations to be confident that they can effectively teach students how to decode. Therefore, a Level 1 might not provide sufficient opportunities to hone those skills. As stated earlier, the review is limited to only exploring content in the syllabi and may not reflect higher levels of implementation, particularly if there are corequisite field experiences.

Reading Instruction

More than half of the EPPs reached at least a Level 2 of intensity across eight of the 10 essential components of reading instruction (see Exhibit 6). “Influences on reading policy and practice” had the largest number of programs ($n = 4$) that reached only Level 1, and “foundational concepts about oral and written language” had the largest number of programs ($n = 3$) that reached Level 3.

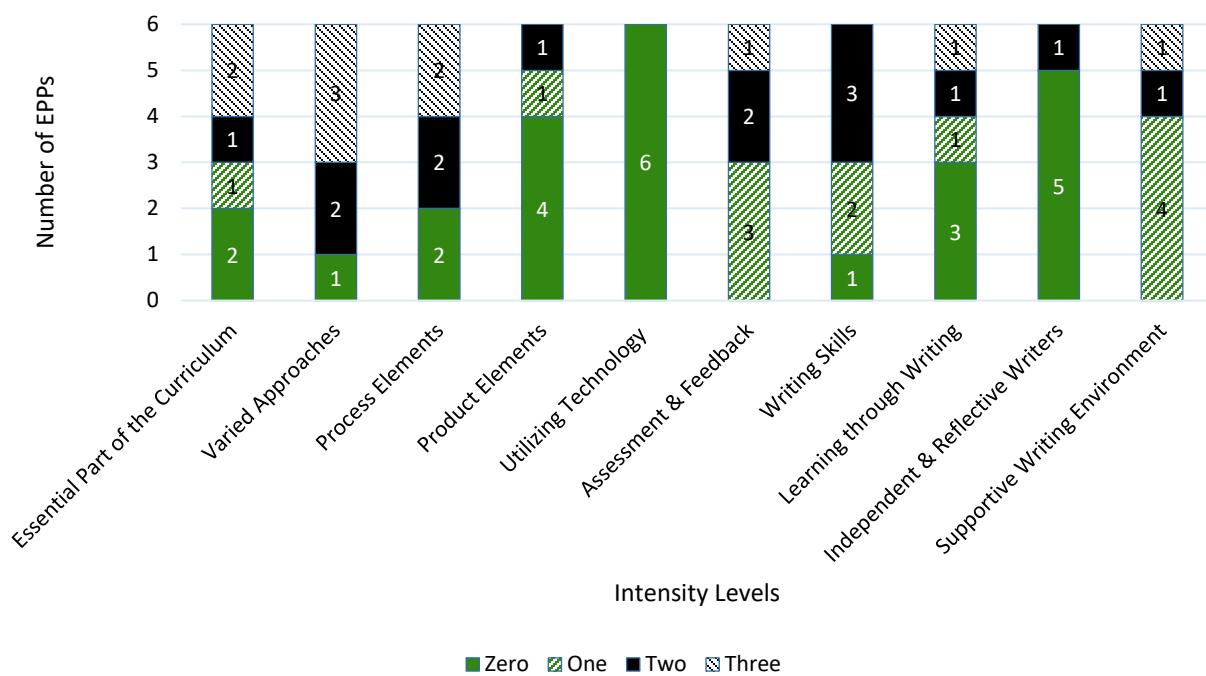
Exhibit 6. Intensity and Levels of Practice-Based Opportunities on the Essential Components of the IC Reading Map



Writing Instruction

Three of the EPPs reached at least Level 2 across five of the 10 essential components of writing instruction (see Exhibit 7). “Promoting independent and reflective writers” and “instruction focused on process elements” had the fewest number of programs reaching at least a Level 1 or 2 ($n = 1$ and $n = 2$, respectively), and no programs reached a Level 1 in “utilizing technology in writing instruction.” “Varied approaches to the teaching of writing” had the largest number of programs ($n = 3$) that reached Level 3.

Exhibit 7. Intensity and Levels of Practice-Based Opportunities on the 10 Essential Components of the IC Writing Map



Conclusions

The review of literacy syllabi in EPP programs indicates that educators completing Vermont’s EPP programs are exposed to evidence-based practices for reading and writing instruction. Areas where EPP could consider providing additional instruction regarding writing instruction include “utilizing technology in writing instruction,” “promoting independent and reflective writers,” and “instruction focused on product elements” (two or fewer EPPs focus on these essential components in their syllabi).

Through reviewing the course syllabi and conversations with EPPs, there is an interest and willingness to better integrate the evidence-based practices with the state required Results Oriented Program Approval (ROPA) review requirements. Because all EPPs need to engage in the ROPA review process to be accredited and recommend educators for licensure in the state, the ROPA requirements largely influence the content of courses in Vermont's EPPs.

Act 28 supports professional development and technical assistance to districts. The AOE can use the information from this review to identify literacy instruction supports among Vermont's educators. Specifically, the AOE could target professional development supports to districts in writing or otherwise offer professional development that increased intensity (opportunities to practice, apply, engage with) the content.

Finally, to better understand how the courses address the essential components, the AOE could conduct a deeper review of EPP program content. Specifically, adding a review of prepracticum and other corequisite fieldwork to the review of syllabi may better understand the essential components and levels of intensity addressed in preservice teacher programming. The AOE could also design a survey for Vermont's practicing educators prepared at Vermont's EPPs to provide feedback on potential strengths, areas for growth, and needed support in EPPs.

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