

## COVER STORY







# WHAT MATTERS IN LITERACY EDUCATION

Emerging priorities for 2018

By **Emily Chiariello**

**t** rue educators are crystal clear about what matters most: learning.

This year, 2,097 literacy educators and leaders responded to our What's Hot in Literacy survey, representing 91 countries and territories and educators in a variety of roles that impact literacy education for learners of all ages. This diverse and seasoned sample—they have an average of 20 years' experience, with almost 40% having more than 20—rated 17 literacy-related topics in terms of what's receiving the most attention (hot) and what's truly valuable (important). The report reveals trends (digital literacy), confirms best practices (differentiation), and highlights tensions (assessment).

The detailed findings are worthy of a close read, plus this year we also sought to understand how topics interact with each other and connect to larger themes. After all, the goal of comparing what's hot with what's important is to get closer to what really *matters* for better literacy education.



Priorities for better learning: What matters for students

This year’s report highlights several topics directly related to classroom instruction. In short, we were reminded of what we already know—students learn best when instruction begins early, provides multiple opportunities for engagement, and is culturally relevant and connected to the real world.

Early learning and recognizing students’ needs

**Early Literacy and Strategies for Differentiating Instruction**—the only two topics appearing in both the top five important and top five hot topics lists—come through as mainstays of literacy instruction. Rather than giving us permission to cross these off our literacy lists, the findings are validation that educators should dig even deeper in these areas.

Take early literacy: Although there may be agreement that early literacy matters, Susan B. Neuman, early literacy development specialist and professor of childhood and literacy education at New York University, stresses that an intentional

instructional focus on literacy is critical through early childhood and early primary programs and activities.

“Although it may seem as though some children acquire these understandings magically or on their own, studies suggest that they are the beneficiaries of considerable, though playful and informal, adult guidance and instruction,” she writes in *What Effective Pre-K Literacy Instruction Looks Like*, a new literacy leadership brief from the International Literacy Association (ILA). This highlights the increased attention needed regarding both the role of play in preschool learning and family involvement at home.

Similarly, survey comments about differentiation reveal practical challenges to implementation and the need for continued, even increased, attention to be paid to such strategies.

Gaps in several other critical areas were identified when comparing the degree to which a topic is deemed important with how much attention the topic is receiving. **Mother Tongue Literacy**, for one, emerged from the survey as an area in need of greater attention overall, but particularly in the United States.

There are compelling cognitive, cultural, linguistic, psychological, and social reasons for educators to encourage and support families in maintaining home languages. Why, then, is linguistic diversity measurably more important to educators than the attention it’s currently given?

Changing student demographics, heated global debates over immigration and migration, and the cultural consequences of both are impacting the way students’ language development

needs are addressed in the classroom. Survey comments bear this out:

- “Students’ background language, knowledge, and experience should not be dismissed from the classroom.”
- “We are a nation of immigrants, but we have too many people who believe that the mother tongue should be dropped as soon as possible so that English is the only language that is spoken.”

Spotlight on 21st-century literacies

Disciplinary, Digital, and Critical Literacy share a common goal of improving how students consume and evaluate information and communicate their ideas in an ever-flattening and diverse world. The findings also provide a glimpse into what 21st-century skills require and the pace at which literacy instruction may, or may not, be keeping up.

**Disciplinary Literacy** is hotter and more important than it was last year, reflecting the increased integration of literacy across subjects and the availability of resources to support such integration.

David Liben is the senior content specialist of the Literacy and English Language Arts team at Student Achievement Partners, a nonprofit professional development group founded by the lead writers of the Common Core standards.

As schools adjusted their literacy programs to meet the standards’ requirement for a 50/50 distribution of informational and literary texts, Liben says, teachers saw students struggle

HOT VS. IMPORTANT

Hot topics are those trending and receiving the most attention among educators, policymakers, and the media, whereas important topics are those that are most critical to advancing literacy for all learners.

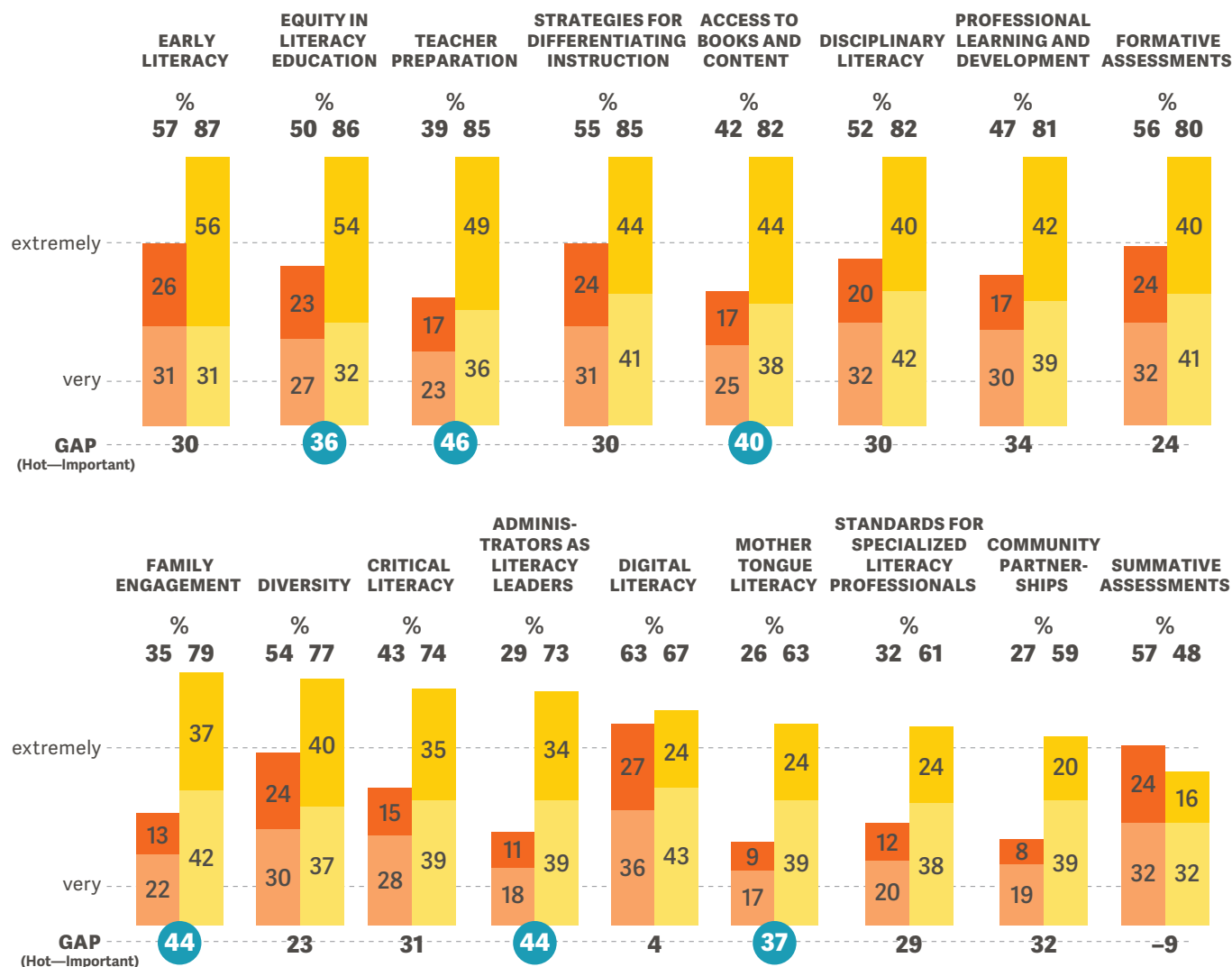
| Top Five Hot Topics                           |
|---|
| 1. Digital Literacy                           |
| 2. Early Literacy                             |
| 3. Summative Assessments                      |
| 4. Formative Assessments                      |
| 5. Strategies for Differentiating Instruction |

| Top Five Important Topics                     |
|---|
| 1. Early Literacy                             |
| 2. Equity in Literacy Instruction             |
| 3. Teacher Preparation                        |
| 4. Strategies for Differentiating Instruction |
| 5. Access to Books and Content                |

| What Needs More Attention             |
|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Teacher Preparation                |
| 2. Family Engagement                  |
| 3. Administrators as Literacy Leaders |
| 4. Access to Books and Content        |
| 5. Mother Tongue Literacy             |

**ALL TOPICS RANKED BY IMPORTANCE** are displayed below, with the percentage of each rated extremely/very hot shown side-by-side with the percentage of each rated extremely/very important. Overall, across all topics, the average hot rating is only **45**, while the importance rating (expressed by taking an average of extremely/very scores) is **75**.

**HOT**  
**IMPORTANT**  
Indicates areas with the largest gaps/unmet needs



with those texts, and the need for more and better materials to support disciplinary literacy increased. “In response to that growing need, new curricula and resources are being made available,” Liben says, pointing out that new basal reading programs include more informational text and groups like EL Learning, Great Minds, American Reading Company, and Bookworms are rolling out resources that build content literacy.

We don’t see the same forward movement in **Digital Literacy**, which rose to No. 1 on the hot topics list this year but dropped in importance from No. 8 to No. 13. In trying to understand the results, it’s worth asking: Are we on the same page (or screen) when we talk about digital literacy?

In the survey, ILA defined digital literacy as “the ability to compose and communicate using digital technologies as well as how to comprehend and evaluate information

in digital forms.” Cornell University’s definition alludes to searching and sourcing, “the ability to find, evaluate, utilize, share and create content using information technologies and the internet.” Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, regards digital literacy as a kind of civic literacy: “Digital literacy is the ability to participate safely, critically, meaningfully and justly in the production and consumption of content online.”

Compounding the need for a shared definition, there is danger in the misconception that, because young people are steeped in technology, they are digitally literate. Teaching Tolerance Director Maureen Costello says, “Today’s students may be digital natives, but that doesn’t mean they are skilled and knowledgeable users of the information they find online. Most 3-year-olds can walk and run, but that doesn’t mean they should try to cross a busy street on their own. We need to be careful not to mistake fluency with wisdom.”

If we’re still working out what digital literacy means and how to do it, then how did it shoot to the “hottest” topic in literacy? We know the internet is the main source of our news information and, Costello says, “After the 2016 [U.S. presidential] election, not only did we have the real problem of fake news—news that is not true—but we had the use of the phrase to describe news we don’t like.” She points to the fact that since the election, educational publishers have produced a plethora of lessons on fake news; at this year’s National Council for the Social Studies conference, there were 23 sessions with “fake news” in the title—more than 30 if you include those related to news and media literacy.

In response to this current climate, in 2017, Teaching Tolerance launched a digital literacy initiative including a Digital Literacy Framework, a series of K–12 lessons, a glossary of terms, and a webinar and publication to help educators learn more about digital literacy.

### Priorities for better teaching: What matters for literacy professionals

Important lessons can be gleaned from the report about what literacy professionals need. Gaps between what respondents say they value versus what they perceive as popular or trendy in

#### A CLOSER LOOK

To view the full 2018 What’s Hot in Literacy Report, visit [literacyworldwide.org/whatshot](http://literacyworldwide.org/whatshot).

### “Differentiated instruction is important in every classroom.”

—EDUCATOR, CHINA

education may reveal specific concerns among teachers and school leaders about their readiness to respond to their students’ literacy needs and challenges. Results show a desire for more preparation and knowledge for wider support and involvement across communities.

Because teachers matter, the programs to prepare teachers also matter. Yet **Teacher Preparation** that addresses the literacy needs of all learners came in as the No. 1 topic in need of more attention, both internationally and in the United States.

A U.S. teacher commented in the survey, “We have had severe budget cuts to our state and district this year and although we believe that teacher preparation is important, our new teacher training has been eliminated for the time being.” We heard from a teacher in Trinidad and Tobago who wrote, “Though there is a constant call by education ministers for the level of functional literacy standards among the national community to improve, teacher training beyond the primary school level is still quite elusive.”

A 2017 joint research advisory on literacy teacher preparation by ILA and the National Council of Teachers of English bears this out: “There is substantial evidence documenting the impact of teacher preparation courses and field-based experiences for advancing prospective teachers’ learning and teaching capabilities.... Yet public discussions and policies that dismiss the power and impact of teacher preparation course work leading to initial teacher certification largely fail to reference this evidence.”

And literacy professionals must continue to learn beyond their teacher preparation programs. In *What Effective Pre-K Literacy Instruction*

*Looks Like*, Neuman writes that “Ongoing professional development is essential for teachers to stay current in an ever-expanding research base and to continually improve their teaching skills and the learning outcomes for children.” Survey respondents agreed, with 90% of literacy/instructional coaches, 84% of reading/literacy specialists, and 76% of classroom teachers saying **Professional Learning and Development** is extremely or very important for improving teacher effectiveness in literacy instruction.

The importance of building teacher capacity is clear, but an even wider circle of literacy stakeholders exists beyond the classroom. The need for administrators to serve as literacy leaders was identified as a priority in need of more attention. Principals and administrators need extensive preparation and understanding of literacy goals, practices, and expectations in order to properly evaluate specialized literacy professionals. In the survey, 81% of literacy/instructional coaches and 76% of reading/literacy specialists said the topic of **Administrators as Literacy Leaders** is extremely or very important to them.

### Priorities for a better world: Literacy in a sociopolitical context

The ability to read, write, and communicate connects people to one another and empowers them to achieve things they never thought possible. Over the past 60 years, ILA and our global community of literacy practitioners have helped spread the transformative power of literacy across the world.

Still, so much work remains. Roughly 12% of the world’s population is considered functionally illiterate, with only basic or below-basic literacy levels in their native languages, and 126 million of the world’s youth lack literacy skills.

Two of the five topics ranked most important in this year’s survey—**Equity in Literacy Education** and **Access to Books and Content**—address this global problem (No. 2 and No. 5, respectively). In fact, 86% of all respondents said it is extremely or very

important that all students have the opportunities, supports, and tools they need, regardless of economic status, academic proficiency, geographic remoteness, and other barriers to school success. And 82% feel learners having access to relevant books and content for both pleasure and academic reading is extremely or very important.

Yet these critical areas, valued so highly by respondents, also rank high among topics in need of more attention. When it comes to equity, what explains the large gap between what's needed and what's trending? Educational equity and racial justice consultant S. Khalilah Brann believes we must ask ourselves, "When we talk equity, what do we mean? And in what ways are we defining literacy? Knowing how to braid hair, throw a football, or make soup are all literacies."

Her observations touch on a related topic surveyed this year: the need to provide students with diverse experiences and viewpoints through literacy. Though less important and less hot than last year, **Diversity** scored higher on this year's hot list than **Equity in Literacy Education** or **Access to Books and Content**.

Certainly, discussions about the need for diversity and representation in children's and YA literature are having an impact, thanks in large part to youth-centered campaigns like #weneeddiversebooks, but an emphasis on cultural representation that fails to speak to issues of structural inequity is not enough.

Founder of CREAD (Culturally Responsive Educators of the African Diaspora), Brann describes the interplay of diversity, access, and equity in literature. "It's important that all children have access to books and stories that show the diversity of experience in the lives of all children, but we must be intentional about not adding books that exoticize or perpetuate a deficit view of black and brown kids, further pushing them to the margins."

When asked where to start, Brann responds, "Why don't we survey kids and their families, the voices of those traditionally marginalized, and ask what's important to them?"

*"Critical literacy allows citizens of all ages to question the word and the world and to work toward more just images of what it can be."*

—EDUCATOR, UNITED STATES

## Literacy at the intersections

This year's biggest takeaways about what really matters for better literacy education are understood best when we examine critical areas through an integrated lens. Consider the power of an intersectional approach in creating more equitable literacy experiences.

## Family Engagement + Early Literacy

The survey results reflect a critical need for family engagement in literacy efforts. "The adults in children's lives are their first literacy teachers," says Neuman, and working with families to promote and support children's literacy development is particularly important during early childhood.

Over nearly two decades of working with children and families in underresourced urban communities, Tara Alexis McCoy says, "I have found that a child's academic, social, and emotional success and sustainability is directly linked to the level of involvement their parent or caregiver has in their life." An educator and trainer, McCoy has worked with a local literacy organization in Philadelphia and across the United States with a larger national literacy program. She believes cooperation between literacy stakeholders is critical for student success. "Our schools and families have to work as partners and not come to the table with a *they-need-to-do* attitude but with a *how-can-we-work-together* mind-set."

## Critical Literacy + Community Partnerships

The Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools program provides summer and after-school reading enrichment for children who might otherwise not have access to books. In partnership with local schools and community organizations, the program provides a reading curriculum centered on culturally relevant books. Rooted in civil rights history and the belief that literacy is essential to personal empowerment and civic responsibility, the model seeks to connect the needs of children and families to the resources of their communities.

This past summer, the young people at Camp Sweeney Freedom School, a program for adjudicated youth in Oakland, CA, had the opportunity to craft legislation that directly affects their lives. When a state assemblyman came to visit as the morning read-aloud guest, the teenagers spoke to him about challenges they face when reentering the community. That conversation sparked others and eventually led to these students helping to write Assembly Bill 1488, which would require each county in the state to form a teen transition center. The youth traveled to the state capitol and participated in a mock-committee hearing before assembly members and state officials.

## Administrators as Literacy Leaders + Access to Books and Content

In her book, *The Flat World and Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future* (Teachers College Press), Linda Darling-Hammond wrote that students of color, English learners, and those living in high-poverty communities don't have access to the same highly qualified teachers, well-resourced classrooms, and effective literacy programs as their peers. A 2015 ILA research brief on the multiple roles of school-based specialized literacy professionals connected this reality with "the increasing diversity in home languages, content knowledge, prior experiences, and cultural understanding" in making the case for "specialized literacy professionals to work collaboratively with students,



teachers, school administrators, and community members to ensure achievement for all students.”

### Early Literacy + Equity in Literacy Education

The Annie E. Casey Foundation has reported a link between third grade reading proficiency and future indicators of success, including high school graduation, college and career readiness, and the ability to break from intergenerational poverty. Many of the factors that affect a student’s chances of reading proficiently in the early grades are related to economic

stability, including food and housing insecurity, summer learning loss, and access to high-quality schools.

### Teacher Preparation + Diversity

In a preliminary report on teacher preparation for literacy instruction, ILA suggested that “Preservice teachers should be better prepared to address the needs of learners with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds across all grades and in all disciplines.”

But according to Jawanza K. Rand of the Center for Urban Education at University of Pittsburgh, only 36% of teachers recently surveyed said their teacher training programs prepared them to talk about race in the

classroom. “Schools are experiencing the highest levels of ethnic and racial diversity in the history of public education, creating challenges related to cultural discontinuity,” he says, then continues, “We can do better at acknowledging and responding to the cultural divide that exists between teachers and students by prioritizing high-quality teacher preparation programs.”

What can you and other educators do to move closer to what really matters for improving literacy in your school and community? Start by rethinking what’s important and what’s hot in literacy education, adopting these intersectional lenses, and focusing on equitable outcomes for all learners. ■

### SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What did or didn’t surprise you in this year’s report? What topics would you like to see included next year? Tell us what you think about the 2018 report by using the hashtag #ILAWhatsHot on social media or emailing us at [whatshot@reading.org](mailto:whatshot@reading.org).



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## Meaningful, joyful learning for all students

### Literacy Essentials Engagement, Excellence, and Equity for All Learners

Regie Routman

How do we ensure that all students are engaged each day in meaningful, challenging, and joyful work and have equal opportunity to learn?

That is the central question Regie Routman addresses in *Literacy Essentials: Engagement, Excellence and Equity for All Learners*.

Based on her ongoing teaching and coaching in diverse schools and districts, Regie offers K–12 teachers and leaders practical, easy-to-implement tools to help create a culture of empowerment. *Literacy Essentials* includes specific, real-world suggestions for authentic teaching and assessment, a collection of personal stories that connect to literacy teaching and learning, and an extensive online component.

*Literacy Essentials* shows what’s possible—what’s doable—when teachers and schools raise expectations for all students as readers, writers, and thinkers. Creating an intellectual culture based on trust, collaboration, and celebration of learners’ strengths lies at the heart of this inspiring book.

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