



Glean Education's Research to Practice Podcast Episode 7 - Dr. Erin Washburn (Binghamton University)

Erin Washburn: Because if we really truly believe that all children can read and that teachers can make a difference, we need to think about how we can support teachers to do that.

Jessica Hamman: Hi, and welcome to Glean Education's Research to Practice Podcast, where we talk to education experts from around the world about their latest work and bring their fascinating findings out from the journal pages and into your classroom.

Jessica Hamman: I'm Jessica Hammond, founder of Glean Education, and today we're talking with Dr. Erin Washburn, Associate Professor at Binghamton University's Department of Teaching, Learning and Educational Leadership. We'll be digging deeper into her body of work that focuses on teacher knowledge of dyslexia, English language, and the basic constructs of literacy. We'll be chatting with her about three of her recent studies entitled *Are Preservice Teachers Prepared to Teach Struggling Readers?*, *Expanding Preservice Teachers' Knowledge of the English Language:*



Recommendations for Teacher Educators, and Morphology Matters. But what do teacher candidates know about it?

Jessica Hamman: Erin, thank you so much for joining us today. I'd love to get started by asking you to tell me a bit about yourself and how you became interested in this research.

Erin Washburn: Well. Thank you Jessica. This research is honestly very personal. I started out like many people in the field of teacher education as a teacher myself. And I started initially teaching English language arts, and then found myself pretty quickly teaching reading. Many of our students had failed state assessments and needed what was called at the time, remedial reading or academic support in reading. I found myself teaching both English language arts and reading, though I wasn't necessarily trained or prepared to teach reading.

Erin Washburn: As an ELA teacher, I was trained more to think about literary elements and helping support and deepen a student's comprehension as well as learning how to analyze texts. Whereas what I found with most of my students is they were struggling to comprehend, and for many of them, to decode. I found myself early on in my career not having the necessary understandings to teach reading in that way. My research on teacher knowledge and preservice teacher knowledge comes from that place of a feeling like I did not know what I was doing, were there other people who felt the same way? And so really, that personal connection has since a trajectory for my research.

Jessica Hamman: That's such a common story. I've heard this from so many researchers and teachers themselves. It's really interesting.

Erin Washburn: Yeah. And it's funny because the more people I meet, the more people I hear have the same story. And so part of my research, not only with the desire to help inform the field, and really the fields of



literacy education, special education, as well as teacher education, but also to inform my practice as a teacher educator. I've been fortunate since I came into higher education to work very closely with schools and with teachers and to do ongoing professional development as well as work with preservice teachers and teacher education courses. And so having those experiences have helped me not only think about informing the field, but also really informing my practice and how can we do a better job of helping prepare teachers to teach reading at all levels.

Jessica Hamman: So interesting. So it seems like you really keep that research to practice connection alive by having a foot in research and then having a foot in the schools themselves.

Erin Washburn: Yes, yes. Actually, I think in many ways it's a personal conviction because I go back to that time and space in my life where I was sitting in front of my striving learners who struggled to decode text and yet, some of them were 12, 13, 14, 15 years old. I think about that in a very personal way. If, I don't have a foot in the classroom as a teacher educator, it's going to be really hard for what I do in the classroom, what my preservice teachers to be relevant.

Jessica Hamman: A good deal of your body of work focuses on survey studies that assess teacher knowledge, particularly at three different points in the teacher career timeline. So you study preservice, in-service, and postgraduate teacher knowledge. Can you tell us a bit about the background behind these studies and why you felt doing this type of survey study was an important area to investigate?

Erin Washburn: Well, As I noted earlier, I was a teacher and luckily, and thankfully I was a teacher in a district that was near a research one university that has many experts and it was sort of connections with those experts and then eventually being able to do my doctoral work at that university, allowed me to start exploring teacher knowledge. So



it was always a question I had. And then when I posed it to some of the experts at the university that I was at, they said, "Well, we're doing research in that area. Why don't you come along and do research with us?" And so those colleagues are Mal Joshi at Texas A&M University and Emily Binks Cantrell.

Erin Washburn: My work, really, I guess has piggybacked on their work. When I came to Texas A&M as a doctoral student, they were working on creating a survey of basic language constructs and I got to be part of that research team that has since adapted that survey to include items about dyslexia, as well as adapted it with my colleague Candace Mulcahy here at Binghamton University. We've adapted that survey for teachers of older driving students. So students in grades four and above. And so, like you said earlier, there's lots of people who have these questions and thankfully, I've just gotten to partner with many of the experts and other researchers that have those same questions.

Erin Washburn: The reason why we've been able to assess preservice, in-service, as well as postgraduate is because our work has evolved as we've wanted to know, is this just a preservice issue or is this also an issue in the field, and is this something we're also encountering at the graduate level?

Jessica Hamman: What were your findings from these studies?

Erin Washburn: Well, I think in, in all the work that my colleagues and I have done, we have found that whether it's preservice and in-service, or postgraduate, that teachers do well at more implicit type skills. So things such as being able to count syllables and words or things that they themselves as skilled readers can do. But then when we survey them on constructs that maybe need more explicit content knowledge, they struggle. So things such as phonics principles, the soft G or the soft C rule, or knowing which words have a prefix, a



suffix, and/or a root word or a base word, things that have more technical language involved. The technical language that I think speaks to the complexity of teaching reading and how multifaceted teaching reading is and really the expertise required to be able to teach reading, I think to a wide variety of readers.

Erin Washburn: What we found is that the understandings of some of these more technical things is pretty shallow. But I also in, in thinking about that over the past seven, eight years, I've also thought about just how complex it is to teach reading. I mean a good visual for me to think about the complexity of reading and I know many people that have encountered it is, is Scarborough's rope, and thinking about all of the underlying skills and constructs involved in language comprehension as well as those involved in word recognition. So on our survey, those are some of the things that we have assessed, particularly items related to word recognition. So things about phonology and understanding of phonics and the alphabetic principle, as well as morphology. And those are not easy things.

Jessica Hamman: Were you able to gain an understanding of why this is the case? Why in-service, preservice, and post-service teachers have a shallow knowledge of these concepts?

Erin Washburn: I think the answer to that question is yes and no. What is interesting is that in addition to surveying their content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge, we ask them, "How many literacy related courses have you taken?" prior to taking the survey. And we found that it hasn't necessarily mattered how many literacy courses they-

Jessica Hamman: Interesting.

Erin Washburn: ... have taken, as to whether or not they perform better. So, a preservice teacher that has taken three literacy courses and may or



may not perform better than it than a preservice teacher that's taken one.

Jessica Hamman: Was that a surprising finding to you? Because that's surprising to me to hear. One would assume that if they're taking literacy courses that they would be informed. Does that point to a lack of deepness of the curriculum of that particular literacy course and a shallowness of that professional development in and of itself? Or does it point to something else?

Erin Washburn: Well, I think that many people would say what is the content of those literacy courses that the participants had taken? I think that's the bigger question. And I think earlier when I said, there's a yes and a no to that answer. The no, is that because this is survey research, we don't necessarily have some of that rich followup data that might come from interviewing or from doing some focus groups and finding out more as to why don't you have this knowledge? Is it because it's not in your coursework? Or maybe it was in your coursework, but quickly covered.

Jessica Hamman: Ah, interesting.

Erin Washburn: And because teaching reading is so complex and having a deep understanding of the multiple layers of our language, it's not just something you can cover in one night in a class and then not return back to. I think about some of the work that my colleague Emily Binks Cantrell has done in which she surveyed the knowledge of both preservice teachers and teacher educators. And she looked at how the preservice teachers who were taught by the teacher educators who had stronger content knowledge did better than those who were taught by teacher educators who did not have a strong content knowledge.



- Erin Washburn: And also, another key component in that is that the teacher educators who had the stronger knowledge, were also involved in professional development themselves on these very constructs. I think that's another potential variable is that in higher education, we may or may not be involved in professional development that may challenge our understandings or grow our understandings about teaching reading. And so, that could be yet another reason why some teachers have stronger knowledge than others in our studies. I mean, I think there's lots of potential whys.
- Jessica Hamman: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Right. And future potential research from those whys.
- Erin Washburn: Absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah. And again, much of the work that I'm doing right now with local schools and partnering with professional development organizations in our area is because of this research and now having opportunities to see it all the time-
- Jessica Hamman: In action, yeah.
- Erin Washburn: In action, in our local schools.
- Jessica Hamman: Right. One of your latest articles, Morphology Matters, but What Do Teacher Candidates Know About It?, focuses on morphology. So we hear a lot about phonology, but a little less on morphology, one of the basic constructs of literacy. What did you find on this morphology study?
- Erin Washburn: Sure. So I think what's interesting to point out is that in our previous research studies, we assessed teacher content knowledge of morphology. But in this particular paper, my colleague Candace Mulcahy, and I, had taken the survey that Dr. Joshi, and Emily, and I had worked on in previous research and we adapted it to be focused on assessing teachers who were working with older striving



readers. So grades four and up. And so, when you think about our language and you think about how readers develop and progress through their lifetime, as they get older, they encounter more challenging text. And that text is full of multi-syllabic words in the English language, right?

Jessica Hamman: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Erin Washburn: And so, an understanding of how to use structural analysis to not only decode, but then to also understand what words means becomes even more important. And so that's why as we were sort of turning our attention to, okay, we've really sort of looked at what K-3 teachers know, what do teachers in the older grades know? Where there is often less of an emphasis on teaching reading and many particularly for upper elementary, middle school, and high school, and preservice teacher education programs, they're not always required to take courses on teaching reading. And so, that's why morphology became a little bit more of a focus is because we were also turning our focus onto those teachers of older striving readers. And, honestly, morphology just becomes crucial.

Erin Washburn: Morphology is awesome too, in the sense that it not only support word recognition, but also vocabulary, and explicitly teaching the morphology that is most relevant to a particular content area can be crucial for not only unlocking the code, but also unlocking the meaning within a particular content. And I think about science in particular, knowing root words and how you can learn a couple of those and you can get a lot of bang for your buck. Right?

Jessica Hamman: Right.

Erin Washburn: And I think of the same in social studies or in English language arts where you're learning words that have prefixes and suffixes and Latin roots in between, and how knowing those prefixes and



suffixes can get you quite a long way. Though I would say, as far as our survey of morphology, it really was very exploratory because we asked teachers to identify morphemes within words and we ask them to do that in simple words as well as more complex words. So words that might have a prefix, a suffix, and a root. We also asked them application questions that required them to think about how they would use morphology in their teaching. That's an area that we're wanting to continue to develop questions, as in those application questions, because I think that gets at, not only can I analyze the structure of a word, but do I know what to do with that in a teaching context?

Erin Washburn: So what we found, which I think is very similar to our previous research studies, is that the more complex the words, the more difficult it is for teachers to identify the number of morphemes in those words. Between 80 and 98% of our teachers that participated in our survey, were able to identify a word that had a prefix and a suffix when they were asked. But when we asked them to identify the number of morphemes, they had difficulty. So one of the questions we have from that work the language too technical by using that word morpheme? But, if you look at the Common Core state standards, they use morphology.

Jessica Hamman: It's pretty fascinating that we now understand that this is how we should teach reading, that structured literacy is a research-based approach that supports the understanding of phonology and morphology. We're using these technical terms when we talk about it. However, I would say that the majority of people did not learn to read like this and did not get that explicit knowledge themselves as children. They rise up and now are our teachers and our educators, so they themselves probably weren't taught these explicit words.

Jessica Hamman: My mother is an Orton-Gillingham therapist, even the child of Orton-Gillingham therapist, I didn't know about these terms until



I studied linguistics in college, so it's really fascinating. We have this expectation on teachers for something that they themselves may have not been taught as they were rising up either.

Erin Washburn: That's a great point. If you think about it, if you didn't learn that terminology as a developing reader, and then you didn't necessarily encounter that terminology in your preparation, and you're not encountering it in professional development-

Jessica Hamman: Right.

Erin Washburn: ... why would you know it?

Jessica Hamman: Exactly.

Erin Washburn: Yeah, why would you perform well on this survey?

Jessica Hamman: Right. Right. It's fascinating. What's so cool about your research is that I find it very hopeful.

Erin Washburn: Well, I think it's hopeful in a sense that no teacher or individual who's working my kids that are struggling readers wakes up and says, "Oh, I want to go do a bad job." We're all trying to do the right thing. And I think it's just knowing where to go.

Jessica Hamman: Can you fill in for our audience some of those things that you are aware of that when teachers learn that they don't know something, particularly relating to these basic concepts of literacy, where would you direct them to boost their knowledge of this content?

Erin Washburn: So the good thing is there's a lot of resources out there. One of my favorite resources in gaining an understanding of the basic language constructs is a text by Judith Birsh. It's called Multisensory Teaching of Basic Language Skills. It also comes with a workbook which allows you to not only read the chapters, but then to try your



hand at each of these skills. Because part of the process of becoming a knowledgeable reader is building your own understanding of how the structure of the English language works. If you don't have the opportunity or the time to go take a linguistics for teachers course, you can do a book study with colleagues or even perhaps on your own using the Multisensory Teaching of Basic Language Skills text. That is a great hands-on way to gain that knowledge and understanding.

Erin Washburn: I'd also like to mention Peter Bowers WordWorks. He's got a website, he does workshops and has some great ideas for thinking about how to teach and investigate morphology, as well as etymology, and phonology. There's another great training that is out there and available to many people and it's called LETRS with Louisa Moats, and that's designed to systematically build teachers understandings of the structure of the English language. There are also plenty of other resources out there, particularly things that the Reading Teacher as well as Teaching Exceptional Children have published in the past couple of years on how to use morphology. Those have been really great.

Erin Washburn: I would also recommend the What Works Clearinghouse, the new IES Practice Guides. The one that I'm thinking in particular is on foundational skills and that has a summary of the research but also has some recommendations for practice. I'd also recommend a interactive course module that's free to teachers from Reading Rockets, and it's called Reading 101. It's a great thing to do at home that also allows you an opportunity to gauge your understanding before and after you take each of the course modules.

Erin Washburn: If you're looking for activities, if you're at that place, the Florida Center for Reading Research has fantastic stuff for teaching morphology as well as phonology and phonics. But I would say as



far as building your knowledge and your understanding, I really do think the Birsh book is a great place to start.

Jessica Hamman: Excellent. And we can put links to all those in our podcast notes so people can access them.

Jessica Hamman: Before we go, I'd love to hear what you're working on now and what you're excited about research wise.

Erin Washburn: Yeah. So actually my colleague, Candace Mulcahy, and I have talked a little bit about survey 2.0, thinking about all that we've learned and obviously this would be something we would do in conjunction with Dr. Joshi and Emily Banks Cantrell. But thinking about how we can tighten that survey up and go for another national sample again to get sort of an understanding post Common Core, have teacher and preservice teachers understandings changed? Some other work that I'm doing a little bit more locally is thinking about how teachers adapt their teaching based on their knowledge and their understandings. That's more longitudinal and mixed methods. Not just surveying, but also, going out into the field and seeing how teachers are using their knowledge to adapt their instruction.

Jessica Hamman: Very exciting, very exciting. I can't wait to read that.

Erin Washburn: We're very much in the data gathering-

Jessica Hamman: Excellent.

Erin Washburn: ... phase of that right now. The survey research paired with being a teacher educator and then also working in the field, has really taught me the importance of critical reflection. So being able to think, not just, oh, how am I feeling about this? But then how is it relating back to how the student is meeting the objectives that we've set, how are they progressing, how does that reflect back to the data



that I'm collecting? And so, it's this ongoing dynamic process. There's work done by several people on adaptive expertise as well as adaptive teaching, and sort of the intersections of all of that is really interesting to me, because if we really truly believe that all children can read and that teachers can make a difference, we need to think about how we can support teachers to do that.

Jessica Hamman: Well, that's a perfect place to end it on. Erin, thank you so much for joining us today and I'll look forward to talking to you again in the future with some of your future work.

Erin Washburn: Well, thank you so much, Jessica.

Jessica Hamman: To learn more about upcoming research from Erin Washburn out of Binghamton University, you can follow her on researchgate.net/profile/Erin_Washburn. To find links to the resources mentioned in this podcast, go to gleaneducation.com/podcast and access them in the show notes.

Jessica Hamman: Thanks for listening to Glean's Research to Practice Podcast. If you're interested in learning more, head over to gleaneducation.com to listen to more episodes, access teacher resources, and join the movement to make in-service teacher education more dynamic and accessible. Bye for now.

