

Mentoring Pre-Service Teachers through on Campus Literacy Clinics

In spring of 2023, Minnesota joined a growing number of states that passed legislation related to evidenced based reading instruction. Common areas addressed in this legislation align to screening measures, curriculum, and professional development for teachers. However, few states have considered how to provide relevant, hands-on experiences for pre-service teachers in scientifically based reading instruction. One way that teacher preparation programs can provide these experiences for pre-service teachers is through on campus literacy clinics.

The model used by effective teachers implements research based literacy practices driven by appropriately interpreted data. Those literacy practices are adjusted as the progress monitoring indicates is necessary. This model of: *screen, provide instruction, monitor progress, and adjust instruction* is the model that has been implemented successfully with pre-service teachers in the on campus literacy clinic at Bethany Lutheran College (BLC) in Mankato, Minnesota. The benefits for the pre-service teacher can be seen in several important areas of pedagogy and instruction.

Community children are referred to the clinic because they have been identified by parents or teachers as having a reading deficit in either or both the word recognition and language comprehension areas. Sessions are conducted each fall and spring term and run for about 12-13 weeks. Community children register for available seats in the clinic and all instruction for the students is free of charge. Students are scheduled for two-one hour sessions a week at a time of mutual agreement between the family and the BLC pre-service teacher (referred to as a 'coach'). Coaches are responsible for creating lessons, managing instructional time and behaviors, and communicating with parents, peers, and professors throughout the semester-long clinic term. A literacy professor from the college oversees the operation and supervision of the clinic.

It is vital for pre-service teachers to not only be able to *identify* appropriate literacy screening tools, but be able to correctly *administer* the tool and *interpret the data* for instruction. The BLC literacy coach administers several different screeners to their student each term. The appropriate grade level DIBELS 8 Benchmark assessment is given at the beginning of the session, along with a phonemic awareness screener, and a phonics/spelling screener. The results of these assessments are reviewed by the coach with the guidance and input of the college literacy professor. Together, the coach and professor identify the areas of need and select the best curriculum for the sessions. Depending on the student's age and needs, DIBELS progress monitoring probes may be given every other week. At the conclusion of the session, the student is given a phonics/spelling screener as a post assessment. This assessment structure helps pre-service teachers learn and prepare for important future work as members of grade level/RTI teams.

The curriculum that is utilized in the literacy clinic is selected for its alignment to structured literacy for instruction in the foundational skills and for alignment to evidenced based practices for use in language comprehension strategy work such as vocabulary building or comprehension skill practice. Based on the intake information provided by parents and teachers and the assessment data collected by the coach, the BLC literacy professor and coach determine which curriculum(s) to use and where to start in the curriculum. A mixture of curriculums may be used

if both foundational and language comprehension skills show a deficit. In addition, games and other activities are used to reinforce lesson skills.

Students grow in confidence as teachers of reading in a collaborative and collegial manner. The literacy professor will periodically observe lessons and provide coaches feedback and direction. At the beginning of each term, new coaches are matched to experienced mentor coaches. Mentor coaches provide important guidance in clinic orientation, lesson design, and implementation. Mentor coaches will attend the first few lessons with the new coach to provide support. Additionally, coaches are able to schedule time to meet with the BLC literacy professor to discuss challenges and opportunities with their literacy clinic student.

This literacy clinic model provides the pre-service teacher with important practice in data driven and scientifically based literacy instruction. These are vital skills to have well in hand upon entering the classroom as a first year teacher. The clinic provides a deeper experience in both assessment and instruction than a typical classroom clinical experience can provide. Preservice teachers become practiced at identifying literacy needs and adept at selecting materials and practices to address those gaps.

But there is obviously another benefit to operating an on campus literacy clinic that needs to be highlighted and that is the instructional opportunity that is provided, free of charge, to community children. It is evident that there are children in our community who need additional work with literacy skills, therefore; a place that provides free, targeted interventions, delivered in the context of research based instruction, can serve an important role. According to the pre and post assessment data, as well as the anecdotal parent and teacher reports, children that are attending the BLC Literacy Clinic are growing in their fluency to decode and spell, increasing in strategic application of comprehension skills, and growing their vocabularies.

Starting a literacy clinic within a teacher preparation program can look very different, based on the support structures that may already be in place. The literacy clinic model at Bethany Lutheran College integrates clinical requirements for several methods courses in literacy, requiring students to complete at least one session of work with a child in the clinic. This ensures that teacher candidates have practice with the assessments, curriculum identification and implementation, and progress monitoring tools. Due to an expanding list of children wanting seats in the clinic, students in the education majors and related fields are also recruited and trained to work in the clinic. Although the clinic services are free to families, clinic coaches are compensated for their work in the clinic through work study hours and program scholarships. In order to fund the scholarships and purchase materials for the clinic, the program applied for several community and state based grants. Several donors also stepped forward to help with start-up costs. Collaboration with federal programs that provide reading tutoring in schools may be another lever to utilize for future sessions.

Having an on campus literacy clinic will take effort, financial investment, and time, but with both pre-service teachers gaining practical teaching experience and children gaining in reading skills, investing in an on campus literacy clinic is a win/win proposition for teacher educators and the community.

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