

# **An Undergraduate Reading Practicum: Improving Teacher Preparation**

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As a reading teacher working on a Master's degree fifteen years ago, I did not see hands-on instructional reading practice until I had completed the mandatory Reading Clinic experience. Research reveals that there is a clear link between effective professional development and increased student achievement. Darling-Hammond (1996) has argued that a more complex, knowledge-based and multicultural society is creating new expectations for teaching. These new expectations require, more than ever, that teachers know their subject areas deeply and also understand how students think in order to create learning experiences that actually work to produce learning (Paez, 2003). Especially in the area of reading instruction, current pre-service teacher education and in-service training must be modified to include a greater emphasis on supporting at-risk children in the classroom (Allington & Walmsley, Eds., 1995).

Credible research exists showing that teachers' instructional preparation increases student achievement. Darling-Hammond (1996) found that teacher preparation correlates more highly with student achievement than does class size, overall spending, or teacher salaries. It accounts for 40% to 60% of the total achievement variance after taking students' demographics into account. Munro (1991) discovered that when teachers examined contemporary learning approaches and developed their own explicit learning theories; the number of their effective teaching behaviors increased significantly. Similarly, he found that 73% of these teachers' students—especially the lowest-achieving students—showed statistically significant learning gains.

Moreover, research also tells us that teachers without sufficient teacher education preparation can actually be less effective at helping students learn. Teachers who lack effective classroom management skills, regardless of how much content they know, cannot create a classroom environment that promotes student learning. A study of alternatively certified teachers with only subject-matter knowledge demonstrated that they had “strong misconceptions” about appropriate ways to teach the content and were unable to integrate their subject knowledge with teaching practices to allow effective instruction (McDiarmid & Wilson, 1991). Teacher certification standards and even schools of education vary greatly in the ways they prepare teachers. But Kaplan and Owings (2003) assert that teacher certification can be a “strong predictor of teacher quality” when the content knowledge of teacher candidates is linked to teaching practices *and* to opportunities to try out what they have learned in well-supervised settings.

## **A Pre-professional Practicum**

In an effort to link content knowledge to teaching practice, I created a field-based practicum experience for pre-service teachers at the University of Cincinnati, Clermont College. The practicum was situated in a three credit hour undergraduate course that all early childhood

education majors must take: Developmentally Appropriate Reading Practices for Early Childhood Education. The purpose of the course modifications was to integrate early literacy practices with hands-on field experience. The design of this experience was to be much like the reading practicum with which I was involved as a graduate student in the late 1980's at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. The main difference was that that program was a pull-out program, while our pre-teachers would be working in the local classrooms in an inclusive environment with in-service teachers. The course required that ten hours be spent in early literacy settings. An observation log/portfolio of narratives relating to the observation experience became the culminating project for the course.

I chose for the course text, *Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success* (1995), published by the National Research Council. This text provided specific recommendations from America's leading researchers on how to help children become successful readers and was written in a conversational format directed toward parents, teachers and child care providers. Class time was designated to discuss the text and to expand upon intervention strategies or progress monitoring techniques that were being used in the classroom. Typically, we also shared an example of quality children's literature that could lend itself to early literacy instruction.

At the start of the quarter, the principals and the school psychologist visited us to describe how they were assessing and monitoring Kindergarten and first grade students at Batavia Elementary School. They provided our practicum students with a general introduction to the school, its goals and its students. And in particular, they provided students with an introduction to the way that the school was monitoring students progress and providing intervention where needed. Specifically, they introduced basic concepts behind the instrument they were using to guide their efforts with early readers: Dr. Roland Good's DIBELS--Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, assessment system of early literacy development (Good, 1998).

After this introduction, our pre-teachers were assigned to Kindergarten and First Grade classrooms where teachers trained them in the use of DIBELS techniques and in strategies to use in assessment and/or intervention sessions.

### Observation

Because I felt that the pre-teachers and the cooperating teachers in our practicum needed to see me in the field, I regularly traveled to Batavia Elementary to observe pre-teachers at work and to express appreciation to cooperating teachers. This was also my chance to observe some interventions at work. Here I saw my students becoming teachers, and even "uninvolved" students became engaged.

Because several students lived far from our campus and were placed in schools closer to their homes, I visited their cooperating teachers to discern the type of reading instruction that was taking place. In these other contexts pre-service teachers were experiencing Reading Recovery, Guided Reading, Repeated Reading and a host of reading interventions at work in early literacy settings.

The cooperating teachers were a key component in the success of this program. They discussed tips for organizing the classroom, talked about generating the Word Wall, and provided ideas for organizing books, and students reported feeling for the first time like “a teacher instead of a student.” Most pre-teachers had an open relationship with their cooperating teachers and regularly discussed strategy and planning. Student observation logs turned in at the end of the quarter revealed that cooperating teachers often made copies of different interventions that the pre-service teachers could try with the students and they provided booklets/articles about early literacy that proved useful. Often those articles made their way into our class discussions at the college as we related field experience to the theory we read about in our text. Common topics included: phonemic awareness, the alphabetic principle, word segmentation activities, fluency instruction, vocabulary immersion and the use of worksheets.

More specifically, however, students were working with veteran teachers cooperatively developing reading strategies and activities to uncover the “*hows*” and “*whys*” of reading performance. They discussed balanced literacy instruction and the building blocks necessary for an effective reading program to work. They conversed about struggling readers and planned interventions to scaffold the early readers’ progress to the next level of reading competence. The veterans mentored and encouraged their protégés to try new interventions and design strategies to produce success for early readers who had never thought themselves competent.

### University Learning into Classroom Practice

The National Commission on Excellence in Elementary Teacher Preparation for Reading Instruction describes a series of critical features of excellence in reading teacher preparation programs. These include a comprehensive curriculum and the development of a cohesive knowledge base for effective teacher decision making. These in turn are paired with a variety of course-related field experiences. In addition, the Commission recommends providing a forum where pre-teachers can try out supervised instruction and gain a sense of autonomy.

With these things in mind, the classroom-based practicum reported on here was designed to provide students with opportunities to monitor student learning and assist teachers with planning and carrying out intervention lessons. Contemporary approaches to teaching reading taken from our text were applied in the classroom, and pre-teachers developed their own explicit strategies under the guidance of a mentor. Through this practicum I was able to establish clear links between methods and concepts learned at the university and the adaptation and implementation of these in a “live” classroom setting. There they had opportunities to draw from their background and interact with appropriate role models (Hoffman et al., 2003) and to be a part of the planning and decision-making process. This is the kind of thing the Commission recommends for producing effective teachers. In addition, reflected on their coursework and their work in the schools through observation portfolios.

### Student Gains

In order to be making adequate progress in critical early reading skills, DIBELS sets the following benchmarks:

### *Phoneme Segmentation Fluency*

In the middle of kindergarten, students should be able to identify initial sounds of words with confidence. Students with scores of at least 18 correct sounds per minute are likely to achieve the end-of kindergarten goal. By May, 82% of the kindergarteners at Batavia Elementary were scoring 35-45 sounds per minute on phoneme segmentation fluency, and were considered “established” emergent readers. By the end of the first grade, students should have 35-45 sounds per minute on phoneme segmentation fluency. By May of 2003, 95% of Batavia Elementary first graders in classrooms where our students were assisting with intervention and progress monitoring, scored up to 45 sounds per minute.

### *Oral Reading Fluency*

In the category of Oral Reading Fluency, on-track readers should have 40 correct words per minute at the end of first grade. Seventy percent of these first graders were considered established readers by May of 2003 (scoring 40 or more correct words per minute), 18% were emergent readers with some risk indicated (scoring 20-39 correct words per minute), and only 12% were considered at risk, scoring 19 or fewer words per minute.

The fact that students made gains on these measures is undisputable. Principals Moellmann and Willis contend that the DIBLES assessment and progress monitoring approach in combination with the one-on-one tutoring and intervention provided by our practicum students were indeed factors in the success of kindergarten and first grade students. This is the first year of a continuous DIBELS approach in intervention, and the cycle of monitoring and assessing students on a regular basis and intensive one-on-one tutoring is appears to be paying off. There was, then, an evident benefit for the school and its early readers, but there was also a clear benefit to the students that could be seen in their observation logs.

### *Pre-Teacher Gains*

In this practicum, pre-teachers became involved in an invaluable field experience that centered on a vision of literacy, quality teaching and quality teacher education (Hoffman et al., 2003). To lend emphasis to the effects of the practicum experience, I have chosen to use the pre-service teachers’ words—quoting verbatim from their observation log portfolios.

Tricia stated in her May 15, 2003 entry:

I have truly learned more from this experience than any other here at Clermont. I loved being in the classroom and feeling like I was making a difference. I enjoyed trying many different interventions, and developing a professional relationship with my mentor.

Similarly, Amy M. states:

I really learned a lot from going into the classroom. I recommend doing this again with the reading classes to come. I believe that to learn how to do something it needs to be hands-on, in the classroom, not just learning by a book. I would have loved to be in more classrooms in my schooling and hope to be in the years to come. I feel like you learn so much. I would like to get the chance to be in the classroom at the start up of school year. This would be a big help to observe how the teacher starts to get her class procedures in order. Thank you for assigning this project of going into the classroom to us. I feel like I have learned so much more than what I would have learned by reading a text book.

And Jennifer:

I have enjoyed the DIBELS program, because for the first time I was not sitting in the classroom observing the students, I was actually working hand in hand with the students. Working with the students has allowed me to see some real results and some real successes. Watching these children improve and putting them on the path to becoming good readers has been a priceless experience. I feel as though I have really done something of importance with these children. I do feel that observations are important, but it is great to finally get involved.

### Conclusions

Teachers who are prepared in ways like those recommended by the National Commission on Excellence in Elementary Teacher Preparation for Reading Instruction (1995) are likely to be more successful and confident than other beginning teachers in making the transition into the teaching profession. Placing students in a carefully constructed practicum created for them the conditions that the Commission sees are needed for successful teacher preparation. Our students were able to take the knowledge base absorbed at the University and work with it in classrooms in ways that contributed to their confidence and decision-making abilities. They worked with on-going assessments and interventions derived from current research on early literacy learning. Their interactions with at-risk children and with model teachers led to responsive and flexible teaching and a growing sense of professional autonomy. (Even if a prescribed reading program was imposed, students often had the flexibility to administer interventions or share books in an important one-on-one relationship with students in these classrooms.) And these undergraduates became active and engaged members of the learning community—members willing to raise questions and make contributions--that extended from their University classrooms to the their school placements.

In the future, an effort will be made to find a way to assess this program to help determine if, indeed, teachers of reading prepared in this way are more confident, autonomous, flexible, and informed in their practice than students who simply spend time in classrooms observing. I continue to inquire about the best way to train teachers of early literacy, but the undergraduate reading practicum has emerged as an effective way to engage students, assist in schools, and learn from teachers.

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