

Spotlight on Mentoring: Managing a Mentor Training Program to Ensure that Instructional Practices are High Quality

Tempe Early Reading First Partnership

What problems has Tempe solved?

- How to create a systematic and intensive professional development program
- How to ensure that practices are implemented in the classroom with fidelity
- How to set up and manage a mentoring program and train mentors to work in partnership with teachers to set goals and plan classroom instruction
- How to use a mentoring log to organize a mentor-teacher conference and provide effective feedback based on observation and collaboration
- How to create a teacher training model in interactive and dialogic reading that helps teachers select books, plan lessons, and use appropriate questioning techniques
- How to teach vocabulary to young children

Combining research, professional development, and community outreach, the Tempe Early Reading First Partnership collaborates with elementary schools and preschool programs to prepare pre-kindergarten children for success in reading and to establish a proven model that other schools can use.

The Partnership is a collaboration among Arizona State University's Department of Speech and Hearing Science, Maricopa County Head Start, the Tempe Elementary School District, and the Arizona Literacy and Learning Center. It supports five Early Childhood Education Centers of Excellence. Arizona State University acts as the fiscal agent and coordinates training, assessment, and project evaluation. Head Start and public school administrators have participated in all the training and they are considered part of the training team. They go into the classroom and conduct observations.

Tempe has instituted an evaluation model based on an experimental/control group design. This year, they had five sites (in a public school, a private nonprofit center, and Head Start classrooms), with seven intervention classrooms and four control classrooms and two teachers per classroom. The program serves 140 children and has collected evaluation data on 86 children. More than 80% of the children come from low-income households; 57% are Hispanic; 50% or more speak a language other than English at home; and 18% receive special education services.

The program was established to help preschool teachers serving low-income students develop curricula for enhancing children's phonological awareness, vocabulary, alphabet and print knowledge, and expressive language skills. By providing professional development for preschool teachers, implementing early reading and math curricula, providing materials for classrooms, and monitoring children's progress, the Partnership has been successful in improving early reading skills and preparing children to enter kindergarten with the language, cognitive, and early reading skills needed to prevent reading difficulties and ensure school success.

Built into the program's teaching are methods for monitoring learning progress, screening for early reading problems, and creating a language and print-rich classroom environment. A key part of the program is intensive teacher training in early reading skills, including coursework that provides college credit and in-classroom mentoring by an experienced early childhood team.

Professional development consists of five key activities essential to high-quality professional development:

- Instructional classes to give staff the knowledge and skills to teach children. Three times a month, a professional development team of Arizona State University (ASU) and Arizona Literacy and Learning Center (ALLC) staff members provides courses and training sessions (e.g., lecture and practice) for mentors and preschool teachers, sharing the latest research on reading and early literacy curricula.
- Scientifically based reading research content that meets Arizona Early Childhood standards, coordinated with Early Reading First and Reading First goals.
- Intensive in-classroom mentoring to ensure that teachers know how to provide explicit and intentional instruction that starts with teacher-directed activities and moves to more independent activities.
 - Mentors from the Tempe Elementary School District pair up and spend a minimum of eight hours a week with preschool teachers from two other Tempe participants—a for-profit day care center and Head Start. Together, mentors and teachers work in their preschool classes to translate ASU and ALLC research into lesson plans and activities that will fit the needs of their students.
 - In-class mentors model/assist, spend at least eight hours a week in each classroom (two to three classrooms per mentor), and hold mentor-teacher meetings and teaching/administrative group sessions. They use videotapes of instruction and observation rubrics.
- Guided teacher practice in the classroom to ensure that training has a positive and lasting impact on classroom instruction and teaching team performance.
- Self- and peer-assessment to train teachers how to evaluate and improve their own classroom performance.

The director described the beginnings of the Partnership's mentoring program: "When we first started the project, there weren't a lot of resources available for early childhood mentors, but we did use a . . . mentoring curriculum handbook. We taught a class to our mentors and then for skills-based mentor training, we met weekly with the mentors, we previewed what the professional development would be, and they helped us, along with the teachers, develop and refine the skills checklist that we used for feedback and for mentoring trainings."

Mentors are trained to work together with preschool teachers to set goals and plan mentoring activities. Once the mentor and teacher have identified goals, they plan a modeling-observation-feedback-action cycle to ensure that effective teaching strategies are implemented and sustained in the classroom. At the start of the mentor-teacher conference, the mentor asks the teacher to reflect and talk about how the lesson went and whether the teaching objective was accomplished. The skills checklist is used to structure the conference and provides a good starting point for communicating feedback to teachers in a meaningful, collaborative, and effective way. The mentor log is part of an on-site training method that Tempe uses to help mentors work with preschool teachers to reflect on practice based on classroom observations.

Many staff members experienced growing pains early in the program. "Our first year it was like, 'What are we doing?'" reminisces one preschool teacher. Another teacher agrees, comparing the process of creating a new curriculum that could overlap their existing one to

being in a “lion’s den.” Gradually the teachers found ways to implement the new curriculum, using games such as bingo to improve alphabet knowledge, and putting on class plays that make children use new vocabulary words to improve their reading and expressive language skills.

Earning the trust of teachers has been vital to Tempe’s success, as they must critique each teacher’s performance in the classroom. One mentor finds that modeling teaching skills in front of children helps develop this trust because “it shows them I’m not going to ask them to do anything that I’m not willing to do myself.” While their support has strengthened teachers’ skills, the mentors also feel that their experience with teachers has honed their mentoring abilities.

Tempe’s director explains how the mentoring program has changed over the years. “Well, [the mentoring program has] really evolved, it’s changed every year because the teachers have grown a lot. So, I would say the first year it was a lot of relationship building and a lot more work on getting lesson plans in place, learning the curriculum and how to implement it. The second year, last year, they were really intensively involved in getting all these other skills up to par with the teachers. So we were concentrating on getting every teacher and the assistants because the assistants aren’t treated any differently than teachers and our models. So, they were really involved in these loops of all these different skills. Now this year, our emphasis has been on what we’re calling withdrawal from—we’re fading, we have really faded the support and we’re doing a lot more cross-classroom mentoring based on the needs we see still left in that classroom. So, we’re trying to pull them—they haven’t been hands-on in the classroom with kids, they’re still doing the mentoring but we’re trying to get the teachers to do more of their own self-reflection and figuring out what they’re going to do when we’re not there.”

Tempe has done extensive work in training teachers in dialogic reading and following up with on-site mentor support. Dialogic reading is used every day and is very rich in content. The teacher training model in dialogic reading begins with a class on the content and practice. Teachers then have a chance to practice. Next, the mentor models it in the classroom once or twice, and then the mentor observes the teacher doing the practice twice to reach criteria. There are skills rubrics and teachers earn stipends based on how many skills they are implementing in the classroom. Teachers then have a follow-up training.

Tempe teachers use the PEER sequence (Prompt the child to say something about the book; Evaluate the child’s response; Expand the child’s response by rephrasing and adding information to it; Repeat the prompt-evaluate sequence to make sure that the child has learned the expansion); and CROWD prompts (Completion; Recall; Open-ended; Wh- questions; and Distancing), and also include print referencing in their storybook reading.

The director adds that the program has required books for teachers to read. Each curriculum theme requires the reading of one narrative, one expository, and one pattern book. Tempe has a large Spanish-speaking population, so these children will always hear the book read in Spanish the first time and then they’ll hear it read in English the second time.

In addition, the program trains teachers in how to select books for interactive reading and how to use two explicit instructional activities to target vocabulary. Mentors help teachers choose books and plan how they will highlight and explicitly teach vocabulary words they have identified in the story. This guides teachers in thinking ahead and developing an explicit plan for teaching vocabulary during interactive reading.

(Excerpts from <http://community.uui.asu.edu/features/terf.asp>;
Excerpts from Tempe Early Reading First Partnership Interview)