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A COLLEGE-COMMUNITY SERVICE PROGRAM TO IMPROVE STUDENT READING

Service learning at Le Moyne College extends the learning of undergraduate students in teacher education beyond the college classroom while fulfilling an education department's practicum requirement by assisting in the improvement of elementary students' reading comprehension skills. A partnership created among Blue Cross-Blue Shield Insurance Company of Central New York—whose corporate sponsorship covers the cost of transporting tutors from the college campus to the elementary school—Elmwood Elementary School of The Syracuse City School District, and Le Moyne College (BEL) provides a tutoring program for third graders who have been judged by their teachers to be less-skilled readers than many of their classmates. Each academic year, 60 Le Moyne students provide extensive tutoring in reading and writing instruction twice a week, and the tutoring is credited with changing the tendency for Elmwood's New York State Pupil Evaluation Program scores to fall below the state reference point.

Third graders who score between the 24th and 50th percentiles on the Degrees of Reading Power Test administered by the state education department receive tutoring. Many of these third graders enter Elmwood with significant delays in language development at the kindergarten level and, without additional help, are unable to make the gains needed to function on a third-grade level in reading. Tutoring in an urban school, coupled with administering pretests and posttests

to elementary students, demands a true commitment to teaching from preservice teachers. Field experience provides them with an opportunity to demonstrate and to develop teaching skills and competencies. Undergraduates who volunteer for the tutoring service program during their first, second, and third years receive strong motivation to pursue a teaching career as well as a service portfolio they can present when making application to organizations such as Kappa Delta Pi.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

Since its inception, the BEL tutoring program has gradually refined its central elements and adopted these guidelines in an effort to maintain the ideal amount of structure, flexibility, and integrity of reading instruction needed to operate effectively.

Only valid, reliable, and effective reading interventions are used in the tutoring program. The foremost consideration of the tutoring program is that previous educational research has shown all reading interventions used by tutors to be effective. The interventions also must demonstrate that the positive effects of the interventions are great enough to be of educational importance and that these positive results have been demonstrated in more than one research study (Yin 1980). Initially, the program trained tutors in two such techniques for increasing reading fluency—listening passage preview and oral passage preview (Rose and Sherry 1984). However, developers of instructional materials

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for the BEL tutoring program have incorporated into the *Tutor Manual* (Wright 1992) a range of reading interventions that are both simple and effective for paraprofessionals to use, such as repeated reading (Donhower 1987) with attentional cues (O'Shea, Sindelar, and O'Shea 1985).

Teachers select students to be tutored and choose specific reading interventions to be used by tutors. At present, teachers choose from four procedures for building reading fluency, three strategies for providing students corrective feedback for reading errors, an intervention that uses the student's own made-up stories as reading tests, and a structured writing activity. The group of interventions chosen to fill the tutoring hour are known as the Individual Tutoring Plan (ITP), which is a unique collection of reading interventions matched to the needs of one student. Students with delayed skills need increased opportunities for drill and practice in reading-related activities to become more fluent readers (Haring, Lovitt, Eaton, and Hanson 1978). Tutors can give children valuable opportunities to drill and practice in reading skills, implement a number of reading interventions, and measure and interpret student reading progress using a valid and reliable reading assessment procedure.

Quality tutoring requires frequent communication between teachers and tutors. Despite the constraints of busy schedules, the tutoring program facilitates frequent communication between the classroom teacher and tutor using tutoring logs kept in a central location. After each tutoring session, tutors record the work completed, student behaviors, and important progress made.

Student progress in reading is monitored on a regular basis to ensure that children make appropriate gains in tutoring. Children make substantially greater gains in reading when their reading skills are frequently monitored and charted using curriculum-based measurement procedures (Deno 1985; Deno, Mirkin, and Chiang 1982). Tutors in the BEL tutoring program use a computerized version of curriculum-based measurement (Fuchs, Hamlett, and Fuchs 1990) at each tutoring session to track student reading growth by administering brief, timed Cloze-type tests to measure children's fluency in completing reading comprehension items (Fuchs, Fuchs, and Hamlett 1993).

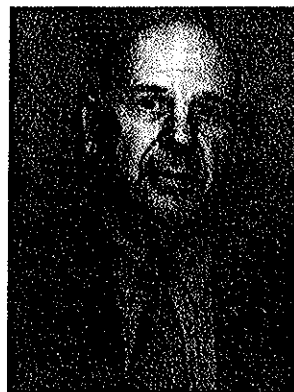
EARLY SUCCESS

Results from each year of the program indicate that tutored students achieved a rate of growth in reading comprehension that compares favorably with typical readers. Fuchs, Fuchs, and Hamlett (1993) recently collected normative data charting reading growth for typical readers across elementary grade levels in the range between 0.39 and 0.84 additional correct responses per instructional week on timed reading software tests. Despite being selected for the BEL program because of mild to moderate delays in reading skills, the students who received tutoring achieved a median rate of improvement on the computerized reading tests of 0.68 additional correct responses per instructional week, and this three-way partnership in service learning continues to help students achieve lasting increases in literacy skills and perform better in school.

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