

ABSTRACT OF CAPSTONE

Amanda M. Hedrick

The Graduate School
Morehead State University
March 24, 2022

BUILDING BETTER BEARS:
IMPROVING THE AMERICORPS SERVICE MEMBER EXPERIENCE

Abstract of Capstone

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the
Ernst and Sara Lane Volgenau College of Education
At Morehead State University

By

Amanda M. Hedrick

Portsmouth, Ohio

Committee Chair: Daryl R. Privott, Associate Professor

Morehead, Kentucky

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Shawnee State University (SSU) founded Project BEAR: Building Emerging and Achieving Readers, an AmeriCorps program, to support literacy development and improve school readiness in the Appalachian region. After the first 2 years of program implementation, areas for growth including enhanced service member recruitment, member onboarding, and ongoing professional development with coaching that focused on 10 early literacy key concepts were identified. This executive summary and capstone project demonstrate how professional development grounded in adult learning theory can improve service member retention and build service member competency. The capstone product, a Blackboard classroom with an onboarding suite and 10 early literacy modules, was designed to improve service member recruitment, onboarding, and training. Providing service members with a solid foundation in early literacy concepts and key strategies to implement in early childhood classrooms should also improve children's literacy development and school readiness outcomes. The capstone product can be a valuable resource for other AmeriCorps programs, volunteer organizations, or nonprofit agencies that work with volunteers to improve early childhood literacy, as the 10 learning modules serve as a professional development tool across contexts. The program director identified several opportunities to improve Project BEAR based on service member feedback, which included focusing the recruitment video on the benefits to prospective service

members, streamlining human resources paperwork in the onboarding process, enhancing the blending and segmenting module, and placing a greater emphasis on differentiation and accommodations for individual learners. Although the previous training program, Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) Early Childhood (EC), remains a vital component of service member preparation, service members reported the 10 early literacy modules enhanced their confidence, knowledge, and understanding of how to apply content in the classroom.

KEYWORDS: AmeriCorps, Service, Volunteerism, Professional Development, Blackboard

Candidate Signature

Date

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By

Amanda M. Hedrick

Approved by

Christopher Beckham, PhD
Committee Member Date

Missy Marsh, EdD
Committee Member Date

Daryl R. Privott, PhD
Committee Chair Date

Timothy Simpson, PhD
Department Chair Date

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DEDICATION

This capstone is dedicated to my family and the families I have loved and served. To my husband, Jason, thank you for all the unwavering support, keeping the household running, and the occasional distraction when it was much needed. You are the best decision I ever made. I also dedicate this work to our boys, Dalton and Cole. Dalton, being your mom was the greatest blessing of my life. I am proud of your passion and your desire to know everything about everything. When you were 8 years old, you asked me why I was not a doctor. Well, I am working on it. I hope I have taught you to be a lifelong learner and to never stop believing in yourself. Cole, I cannot thank you enough for our video chats. Throughout this work, you have always asked me what I am working on and how it is going, even when you are consumed by the birth of your beautiful baby girl, Oakley. I am so proud of the husband, father, and Airman you have become.

To my family—my dad, who taught me to work hard, even if that meant getting up at five in the morning and working past dark—thank you for setting the bar high for me. To my mom, the most selfless woman I know, thank you for listening to my endless stories every morning on my way to work. You were my calm before the storm. To my papaw, who taught me to listen, to be fair, and to respect others. I loved our talks on the front porch and knowing I could handle a grievance hearing in a way that would make you proud. To my granny, you taught me leaders also reside in households. Thank you for loving and leading our family. To my sisters, thank you

for cooking a little more, picking up the kids a little more often, and giving me grace when I took a few days to respond to a text. I love you both.

And finally, I dedicate this work to the children and families that I have loved and taught over the last 21 years. Being an early childhood educator is my life's passion. Because of each of you, I had more sunny days than rainy, and more joy than sorrow.

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This work was possible because of the people who have impacted my life’s journey, including the men and women who have taught me how to lead. Leadership is both a blessing and a curse. It gives you the opportunity to impact others in a way only leaders can—developing talent, providing opportunity, and investing in the potential of others they are often unable to see in themselves. However, leadership also brings immense responsibility that can often lead to heartbreak and unrest. All things worth doing are worth doing well and with all your heart.

I would also like to acknowledge the Boundaryless Team: Karin Admiral, Karol Johansen, and Kara Schotter. Semesters were easier beside you; we were stronger together. Connected by struggles and successes, we overcame the challenges of time, space, and a worldwide pandemic. I will be forever grateful for your friendship and support.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my colleagues at Shawnee State University, past and present. Thank you for providing a warm, welcoming community where I could learn and grow. To be able to serve the community where I was born and raised is an honor. Thank you for believing in me and investing in me. The lessons learned have shaped me into the person that I am, and I am grateful for each of you.

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Executive Summary

What is the Core of the Capstone?

Introduction

Shawnee State University (SSU), located in Portsmouth, Ohio, is just yards away from the banks of the Ohio River in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. SSU is seated in Scioto County, and most students who attend the institution come from Scioto County or the surrounding counties, including Pike, Adams, Lawrence, Jackson, and Ross. Scioto County has 10 public school districts, one career and technical center, one private school system, one charter school system, and several Christian schools. According to 2020 census data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021b), the population of Scioto County is 74,008, and only 16% of the population Age 25 and older have earned a bachelor's degree. The median household income is \$28,840 and 36.5% live in poverty. In terms of race, residents identify as 88.5% White, 6.3% Black, 1.9% Latino, and 1.1% Asian. Less than 2.3% of the population speak a language other than English in their home. Although the high school graduation rate is 82.7%, less than 23% are college ready upon high school graduation (ACT, 2019). SSU has explored a variety of initiatives to improve the lives and well-being of residents of the region, and the AmeriCorps program, Project BEAR (Building Emerging and Achieving Readers) is one of these initiatives.

Problem Statement

Project BEAR must improve program operations to effectively serve students lacking school readiness. Ohio's Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA),

administered annually to all children in public and community kindergarten programs, has shown students throughout the southern Ohio region have not been entering kindergarten on track for reading success (Ohio Department of Education, n.d.). In Scioto County, only 35.95% of all students entering kindergarten were on track in language and literacy development (Ohio Department of Education, n.d.). In Portsmouth Elementary School, closest geographically to SSU, only 11.1% of students entering kindergarten were on track in language and literacy development. In fact, the data reveal that only two elementary schools in the list are above 50% student readiness (see Table 1 for results from all public Scioto County elementary schools), demonstrating that a greater emphasis must be placed on school readiness for children to become literate and succeed in school.

SSU founded the AmeriCorps program Project BEAR to address this community need. Each year, the grant-funded program is evaluated on the number of service members who complete their service term, how many children are served through the program, and the number of children served who demonstrate growth in language and literacy concepts. Continued funding is dependent on program objectives being met and documented in an annual progress report submitted through AmeriCorps's eGrants portal (Serve Ohio, n.d.-a).

Increasing the service member retention rate was a goal for Project BEAR that was proving problematic. Retention rates for Project BEAR are calculated based on the number of service members who enroll to serve in the program and then successfully complete their 1-year term of service. During the 1st year of the

program, Project BEAR initially enrolled 14 service members, had four service members resign within the first 2 months, and then had two additional service members enroll. Twelve of the 16 total service members completed their service, resulting in an overall retention rate of 75%.

Table 1

Scioto County KRA Language and Literacy Data 2020–2021

Elementary school	Percentage of students	
	On track (263–298)	Not on track (202–262)
Bloom-Vernon	26.3%	73.7%
Clay	66.7%	33.3%
Green Primary	64.3%	35.7%
Minford Primary	41.3%	58.7%
Stanton Primary	18.2%	81.8%
Northwest	30.0%	70.0%
East Portsmouth	25.0%	75.0%
Portsmouth	11.1%	88.9%
Valley	50.0%	50.0%
Portsmouth West	19.2%	80.8%
Wheelersburg	43.3%	56.7%

Interviews with the four Project BEAR service members who resigned gave program directors insight about how to better prepare service members to serve and what supports should be put into place to retain service members (H. Venturino, personal communication, June 3, 2020). Service members reported they were overwhelmed by the trainings, the program was not what they thought it was going to be, and they were not adequately prepared for the level of commitment required to serve in the program (Anonymous, personal communication, October 4, 2019). The

professional development provided during the first 2 weeks of the program, totaling 80 hours of content, was focused on early childhood development and emergent literacy; this feedback caused the program director to reconsider how the professional development was planned and delivered.

A disconnect between what was taught to service members and what they implemented in the classroom was the final problem encountered by Project BEAR. After completing the two weeks of content training, service members spent several weeks observing master teachers in early childhood classrooms who modeled early literacy instruction using the 10 key concepts. Service members were then expected to implement the early literacy content in their classrooms using the applied strategies they observed from the master teachers. Yet, during classroom walk-throughs months later, most service members were not actively engaged in delivering experiences focused on the 10 early literacy key concepts. Despite the trainings offered, service members failed to implement what was taught and observed during service (C. Partlow, personal communication, October 16, 2019).

Based on data collected during the interview process, only one of the 16 service members who enrolled during the 1st program year had the background knowledge of working with young children in a formal education setting. Lacking this context could have impacted service members' ability to make sense of the knowledge offered at the onset of service. Adult learning theory could offer some guidance about these challenges of content mastery. For example, the theory of andragogy is a constructivist approach to learning that "involves facilitating adults to

draw on their experience and so create new learning based on previous understandings” (Cox, 2015, p. 29). Essentially, service members need to understand how content will help solve real-world problems. Providing a greater context for the goal of their service and allowing service members to develop an understanding of the current state of literacy learning should expand their knowledge and be a resource for future learning.

Purpose

The purpose of this executive summary is to demonstrate and document the impact of changes to the recruitment, onboarding, and training of service members in the AmeriCorps program, Project BEAR. The purpose of this capstone project was to understand how the Blackboard classrooms and ten learning modules impacted Project BEAR, how service members engaged with the content, whether service members successfully completed checks for understanding, and whether discussion posts demonstrated content mastery. The executive summary also describes what experiences service members with service terms beginning in Fall 2021 reported as most and least enjoyable during recruitment, onboarding, and training to inform future programmatic decisions.

The executive summary and capstone project adds to the research and resources available for other AmeriCorps programs, early childhood programs, and administrators working with tutors, early childhood educators, or literacy coaches. The Blackboard classroom provides a model for other volunteer organizations to increase member recruitment and retention, which increases the impact the service

organization makes in its target communities. The Blackboard classroom can also serve as a training tool to improve student literacy outcomes in early childhood settings by building teacher capacity in early literacy concepts. Project BEAR's overarching goal is to increase school readiness of children entering kindergarten and, when service members, teachers, and administrators work together and share resources based on the science of reading, more children should be on track for school success when they enter kindergarten.

Guiding Questions

This study was guided by three questions:

- How can recruitment efforts be improved?
- How can the service member onboarding process be improved?
- Do service members feel prepared to deliver high-quality literacy instruction in early childhood classrooms after completing the Blackboard classroom with the 10 literacy modules?

This study has practical implications that can provide volunteer management organizations a better understanding of the needs of AmeriCorps service members, which is critically important for retention and program success. This study also offers theoretical insight by examining adult learning theory as it is applied in the field, which will provide individuals who design professional development experiences a framework to build future professional development programs.

Review of Literature

AmeriCorps service is one example of volunteerism. Volunteering is the act of giving of one's gifts or talents to benefit or serve another. Volunteerism has been valued at over \$167 billion (AmeriCorps, 2018). Over 1 million people have served domestically since 1994, providing a great opportunity for researchers to gain knowledge and understanding of how volunteer organizations work and to improve these organizations. Yet, there has been very little published research on volunteerism. As noted by Maki et al. (2015), only a "handful of studies have considered any established theory as a framework for understanding AmeriCorps service" (p. 256).

Although the focus of this study was on using the Blackboard classroom and 10 literacy modules to prepare AmeriCorps members for service in Project BEAR, the scope of the literature review included the professional development of educators and volunteers serving in other volunteer programs. Criteria for selecting relevant scholarship to inform the study included searching for peer-reviewed articles and studies through the Camden-Carroll Library at Morehead State University using search terms such as "training," "professional development," "retention," "volunteer," "AmeriCorps," "literacy," "experiential learning," "adult learning theory," "volunteer training," and "volunteer training program."

Volunteerism. According to Gomes de Aquino et al. (2020), "Volunteer work is performed by citizens who donate their time and use their skills freely for the purpose of making a difference in society and benefitting other people, a group, or an

organization” (p. 145). Volunteers play a vital role in society, especially in nonprofit organizations. Volunteers serve for a variety of reasons, and Cavalcante’s (2016, as cited in Gomes de Aquino et al., 2020) theoretical model identified five motivations that lead individuals to join service organizations:

1. Altruism – Individuals join to help others, make a difference, and to give people a better chance in life;
2. Social Justice – Individuals want to improve the quality of life throughout the community and reduce injustices;
3. Affiliation – Individuals expect to make new friends with similar interests and have something to do in their free time;
4. Learning – Individuals engage in volunteerism to learn a new skill, acquire new knowledge, to tackle a new challenge;
5. Self-Interested – Individuals may join to feel better about themselves, to seek recognition, or to boost their self-image. (p. 148)

Understanding why individuals choose to serve is important for understanding why individuals may end their service. If a volunteer’s expectations for their service experience are not met early in their service term, they may question their motivations for serving and feel dissatisfied in their current volunteer role (Gomes de Aquino et al., 2020). For example, if an individual joins a volunteer organization due to self-interest — to feel like a better person or boost their self-esteem — and fails to get the recognition they seek, they may become discouraged and choose to resign. As most individuals do not specifically express their motivation for joining a given volunteer

organization, volunteer program directors must be prepared for a variety of possible motivations for joining and design opportunities to target the five motivating factors.

To retain volunteers, Walker et al. (2016) found volunteers must understand expectations of service, what role the organization will fulfill, and what role the service member is expected to fulfill. Early childhood classrooms can be demanding. Volunteers may be overwhelmed by the sights, sounds, and smells, but may also feel rewarded when they see a child write their name for the first time, hear a child utter their first sentence, or smell the fresh modeling compound a child rolls out to form letters on the table. Incorporating a more thorough interview process and requiring, at a minimum, one classroom visit may ensure prospective members are a good fit for the program and the program is a good fit for prospective service members.

AmeriCorps service is considered volunteerism; however, it is distinct from other types of volunteerism because AmeriCorps members receive a modest living stipend, an education award, and in some cases healthcare, housing, and childcare benefits (AmeriCorps, n.d.-a). AmeriCorps engages more than 80,000 Americans in intensive service each year at nonprofits, schools, public agencies, and community and faith-based groups across the country with a focus on community improvement and economic opportunity (AmeriCorps, n.d.-a). AmeriCorps service members for Project BEAR receive an annual stipend that varies based on their service term, which ranges from \$1,000 to \$11,600 for serving 100 to 1,200 hours per year, respectively. Service members are also eligible for the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award, which can be used to repay student loans or to cover costs of future educational expenses at

any institution that accepts the GI Bill, on a sliding scale based on their service hour commitment amounts for national service positions (AmeriCorps, n.d.-d; see Table 2). A variety of commitment types provides greater flexibility for service members to be able to juggle the demands of life and other responsibilities such as university coursework or employment (AmeriCorps, n.d.-b).

Table 2

Fiscal Year 2022 Education Award Amounts for National Service Positions

Participation type	Minimum hours	Award amount
Full-time	1,700	\$6,495.00
Three-quarters-time	1,200	\$4,546.50
Half-time	900	\$3,247.50
Reduced half-time	675	\$2,474.27
Quarter-time	450	\$1,718.25
Minimal-time and Summer Associate	300	\$1,374.60
AmeriCorps Affiliate	100	\$365.52

Note. Adapted from “Segal AmeriCorps Education Award amounts for national service positions approved in Fiscal Year 2022 (October 1, 2021–September 30, 2022),” by AmeriCorps, n.d., <https://americorps.gov/members-volunteers/segal-ameri-corps-education-award/find-out-more>.

AmeriCorps applicants may serve in three programs: Volunteers in Service to America, National Civilian Community Corps, and AmeriCorps State and National. Project BEAR is an AmeriCorps state program administered by Serve Ohio, the state’s commission on service and volunteerism, which was created to empower local

communities to mobilize AmeriCorps members and volunteer resources for the purpose of building a stronger Ohio (Serve Ohio, n.d.-b). Serve Ohio administers grants in Ohio under the federal National and Community Service Trust Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Congressional budget allocations for the 2022 fiscal year signal service is a national priority, demonstrated by the following statement:

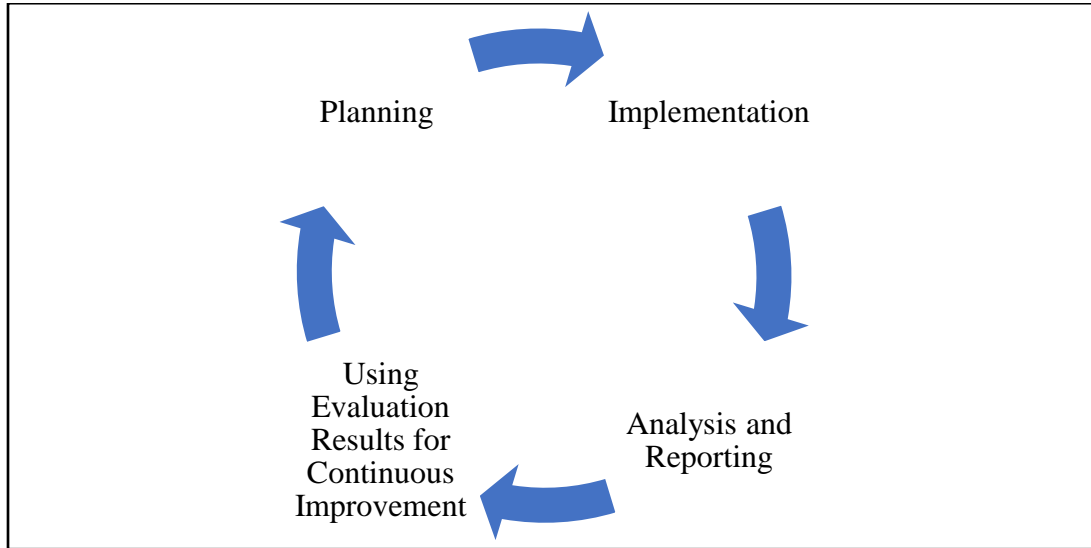
On May 28, 2021, President Biden proposed a strong budget for national service and volunteerism, providing AmeriCorps with \$1.2 billion, an increase of \$89.2 million over the current year enacted budget, to support AmeriCorps and its state and local partners in engaging Americans of all backgrounds in results-driven service to improve lives, strengthen communities, and foster civic engagement. (AmeriCorps, n.d.-c, para.1)

Project BEAR exemplifies a results-driven AmeriCorps service that focuses on improving school readiness by delivering direct literacy instruction in early childhood classrooms across Scioto and Pike counties in southern Ohio.

Professional Development. In this section, literature that showcases effective professional development related to learning environments are reviewed and lessons for volunteers highlighted. AmeriCorps programs are results driven and, to receive continuation funding, data must demonstrate program success. If volunteer program leaders can incorporate knowledge about how to better prepare volunteers through high quality professional development, communities should see increased benefits, and programs should achieve greater outcomes. Program evaluation is a powerful tool and can increase a program's ability to serve and positively impact communities.

Project BEAR uses assessment data collected in classroom settings to enable service members and classroom teachers to determine which educational strategies to use, when to adjust instructional techniques, and when students have achieved mastery. Specifically, improving Project BEAR will equate to serving more children in more classrooms effectively and efficiently. By examining successes and failures from the first 2 years, and reviewing the data, Project BEAR can be better prepared to serve in the future. Interventions can be tested, training protocols can be modified, and services can be adjusted to best meet the needs of the community. To achieve this goal, AmeriCorps programs use a program evaluation cycle to plan, implement, analyze, report, act, and improve (AmeriCorps, n.d.-e), demonstrated in Figure 1.

During the planning phase, a logic model was completed to identify a community need, specify interventions that would be used, and outline intended outcomes. During the implementation phase, services were provided, and data were collected. At the ends of Years 1 and 2, the data were analyzed and reported to Serve Ohio, the state's Commission on Service and Volunteerism. As demonstrated by the program evaluation cycle, evaluation results are used for continuous improvement. Based on service member feedback, training was identified as one area of improvement (Anonymous, personal communication, October 4, 2019).

Figure 1*Program Evaluation Cycle*

Note: Adapted from *Evaluation resources*, by AmeriCorps, n.d.,

<https://www.americorps.gov/grantees-sponsors/evaluation-resources>.

AmeriCorps programs require service members to complete 10% to 20% of their total service hours through professional development. According to the AmeriCorps member service agreement, if a service member serves 900 hours during their 1-year commitment, 90–180 hours of that service must be completed by acquiring trainings or other forms of professional development (Serve Ohio, n.d.-c). During Program Years 1 and 2, service members completed 80 hours of professional development before entering classrooms to serve. However, service members still reported limited knowledge of what strategies they should implement in the classroom setting (Anonymous, personal communication, October 4, 2019). To better

prepare service members, program directors needed better awareness of how to design the professional development provided (H. Venturino, personal communication, December 9, 2020).

Gagné's nine events of instruction (University of Florida, n.d.) provide an important framework for designing online learning modules (see Table 3). Ullah et al. (2015) examined the effect of using Gagné's nine events of instruction in teaching. In Phase 1 of their study, traditional lecture methods were used without considering Gagné's nine events. In Phase 2, lectures were based on Gagné's nine events, and they observed the learners' satisfaction and approval rating increase by 20% on average. Learners also reported increased understanding and retention of the lecture content. These results suggest that individuals developing and facilitating professional development opportunities can improve learning outcome achievement if the nine events are used.

Smith (2017) stated effective professional development takes place over an extended amount of time during which participants have opportunities to practice new concepts and skills, reflect upon newly implemented strategies, and receive feedback, rather than through one-off, single-session workshops. Hattie (2009, as cited in Smith, 2017) extensively reviewed teachers' professional development research and found four types of professional development learning activities had the greatest impact on student achievement:

- Observation of actual classroom instruction

- Microteaching with observation and feedback
- Use of video to provide teachers with feedback
- Practice evaluating the effect of their teaching on students' learning

This information should be considered when developing a quality professional development program for volunteers who will be engaged in learning environments.

Table 3

Gagné's Nine Events of Instruction

Event	Description	Example
Gain attention	Pull the participants in so they will watch and listen to instruction	Ice breakers, current events, case studies, videos
Inform learners of objectives	Allow participants to organize their thoughts and prioritize attention	Provide learning objectives in slides, syllabus, projects
Stimulate recall of prior learning	Encourage participants to build on previous knowledge	Recall and make connections to previously covered content
Present the content	Show and explain the material participants will learn	Use variety of methods and interactive tools
Provide learning guidance	Tell participants how to learn	Guided activities, rubrics, instructions, timelines
Elicit performance	Allow participants to practice	Group and individual projects, labs, smaller activities
Provide feedback	Discuss what participants are doing correctly and where they can improve	Peer evaluation, self-evaluation, self-assessment, rubrics
Assess performance	Help participants recognize content they have not yet mastered	Exams, quizzes, written assignments, projects, rubrics
Enhance retention and transfer to the job	Prepare participants to apply knowledge in a variety of contexts	Reflection, discussion boards, summarize what they have learned

Zaslow et al. (2010, as cited in Baker, 2018) completed a comprehensive review of selected literature published between 1990 and 2008 examining 68 different reviews of professional development programs to identify core features that characterize effective professional development. They found professional development for early childhood educators was most effective when it encompassed the following six qualities:

- Articulates specific objectives,
- Includes opportunities to link knowledge and practice,
- Fosters collaboration among teachers within classrooms or schools,
- Matches frequency and timing of sessions to content and intent,
- Teaches assessment strategies, and
- Aligns with the organizational structure and learning standards of the educational context. (Zaslow et al., 2010, as cited in Baker, 2018, p. 232)

Baker (2018) examined a professional development program implemented with over 200 Boston kindergarten teachers. He found, although the professional development met these six qualities, teachers' implementation of the new curriculum introduced during the professional development program varied greatly from classroom to classroom. Teachers who invested extra time synthesizing the material enhanced their understanding and implemented the new curriculum with greater fidelity. This study suggested effective professional development must provide time

for individuals to make sense of the content and apply it effectively in the classroom setting.

Shaw (2020) examined the perceived professional growth of music educators participating in a yearlong professional development experience through a case study. Five educators voluntarily participated in the study, and each agreed to be interviewed and provided evidence of teaching practices through sharing lesson plans and lesson demonstration videos. One participant, who drastically changed the way he taught to benefit the diverse students in his classroom, defined quality professional development as “that which supplies teachers with resources that can be implemented immediately and sought practically useful repertoire as a desired outcome of his professional development experience” (Shaw, 2020, p. 449). The same principle can be applied to volunteer experiences. When volunteers develop practically useful skills, it not only attracts new and retains current volunteers, but it can also positively impact organizations, programs, and communities where volunteers serve (Alfes et al., 2016).

Competent, qualified teachers are highly desired, but many novice teachers struggle to adjust to the many demands of teaching and learning. Teacher training programs should place greater emphasis on building adequate skills, knowledge, and behaviors to tackle the demands of classroom teaching. Job-embedded professional development can help build the necessary repertoire of skills. In a study of over 130 teachers from urban schools, Gaikhorst et al. (2015) found high-quality professional development improved teacher quality and teacher retention. In this study, classroom

teachers met every 2 weeks for 1 year. Group meetings, classroom applications, and lectures were provided. Teachers reported having the opportunity to network and share ideas with other professionals as the most important feature of the professional development model.

In a study with 58 parent volunteers from 26 elementary schools in Taipei, Tseng and Chen (2019) thoughtfully designed a training course to create a stable and knowledgeable volunteer force to assist school librarians by undertaking duties including managing the library collection, promoting reading, and providing instruction on information literacy. The researchers found optimal training courses for volunteers should encompass the three elements of basic concepts, practical skills, and interactivity. They facilitated volunteer competency workshops over a 3-year period and adapted their training program based on feedback, data collected, and volunteer observations. In 2017, technology was integrated into the trainings, allowing instructors to gather instant feedback about participants' understanding and comprehension of the material. The use of game-based learning platforms such as Kahoot increased participants' engagement and satisfaction levels (Baszuk & Heath, 2020). The researchers of both studies concluded fun and interactive learning atmospheres improved training programs.

Louch et al. (2017) conducted a study of hospital volunteers to determine what would influence their continued participation in the volunteer program and found training was essential. During the onboarding process, volunteers should have a clear understanding of the performance measures that will be used to evaluate their

service and program success. Program success relies on more than just retention rates, but to achieve greater academic achievement as demonstrated by assessment scores, volunteers need to persist to the end of their service terms.

Louch et al. (2017) also found volunteers wanted feedback as part of their experience. Organizations that provided adequate training for the position, valued contributions of service members, and took pride in their accomplishments positively impacted the volunteer experience (Walker et al., 2016). Professional development should be tailored to provide performance data to volunteers. During the onboarding process and initial trainings, volunteers should have a clear understanding of what goals they are working toward in the classrooms. By giving volunteers the prerequisite knowledge of typical child development, they should understand what skills, knowledge, and behaviors children should be demonstrating and appropriate intervention strategies to put into place if they are not meeting those developmental benchmarks. By collecting and analyzing data, volunteers can assess if their service is making a difference. Volunteers are in classrooms every day working with students, collecting documentation, completing assessments, and gathering anecdotal records, and training should emphasize these areas to ensure they can interpret data.

Experiential Learning. Rosier et al., 2016 stated, “Experiential learning involves active and purposeful processes contextualized in direct or simulated ‘real world’ activities in which students have the opportunity to construct and regulate their own personal and professional learning” (p. 487). According to Rosier et al., employers generally expect graduates to be work ready when they graduate from

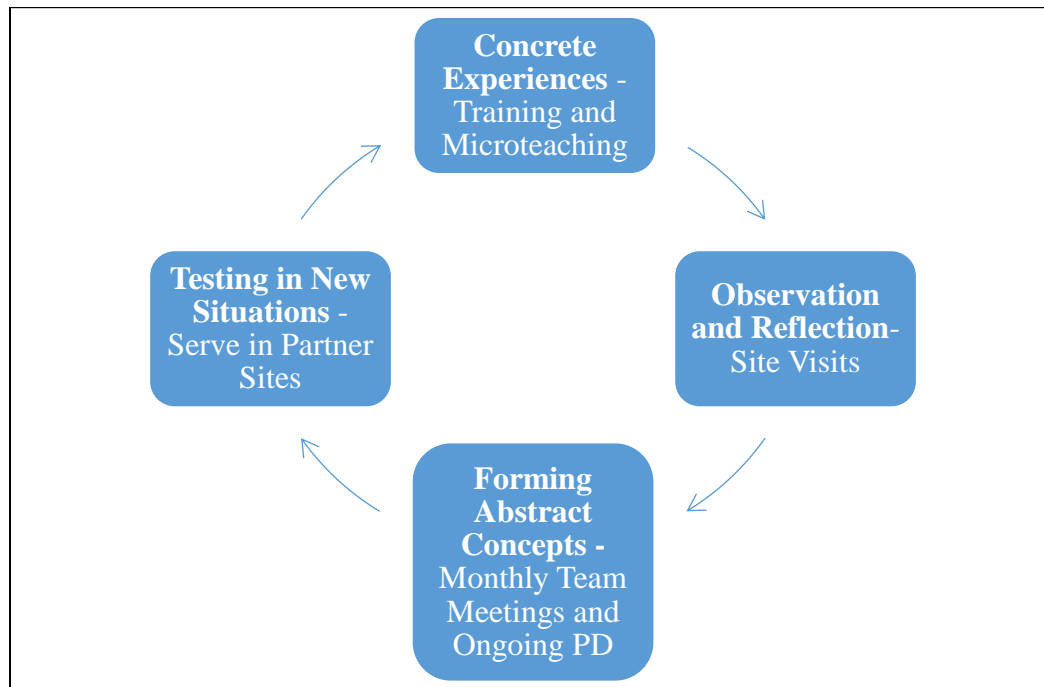
university. Due to financial constraints, businesses often lack the ability to adequately orient and train new employees. Graduates anticipate their education is relevant to meet current demands of employers. When there is a disconnect between what is learned in the classroom and what is required on the job, students struggle to build the confidence, skills, and knowledge required to perform successfully, making it more challenging to meet the demands of professional life (Rosier et al., 2016).

A goal of the AmeriCorps program is to prepare volunteers with skills they will use when they enter the workforce full time. As a service-embedded training program, AmeriCorps gives volunteers the opportunity to serve and learn while fostering civic responsibility. Whether learning on the job or learning while serving, experiential learning can be a positive way to develop understanding and make meaning from real-life experiences.

Facilitators of professional development should thoroughly understand theories associated with experiential learning to use and apply this knowledge. Yardley et al. (2012) considered the theoretical basis of experiential learning and how it was applied in the field, so workplace supervisors and curriculum designers could put these concepts into practice. “Experience gained in authentic workplaces that are concurrently involved in education and delivering real-life services is the most important medium through which people learn to practice” (Yardley et al., 2012, p. 161). Students can gain valuable insight into potential careers, network with future colleagues, meet a professional mentor, build their resume, and develop civic responsibility through volunteerism. Students who volunteer also acquire essential

soft skills such as improved communication (e.g., listening, public speaking, writing, presenting), teamwork (e.g., collaboration, customer service, interpersonal skills), and critical thinking (e.g., problem solving, flexibility, creativity; Rosier et al., 2016). To fully understand the value of experiential learning, applying Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Rosier et al., 2016) as it relates to the volunteer program demonstrates the continuous learning cycle and intended benefits (see Figure 2). By providing opportunities for reflective observation and active experimentation in the field, volunteers can continue to perfect their craft and sharpen their skills.

According to Rosier et al. (2016), "The educational benefits of experiential learning are well documented and include strengthened connections between students, institution and community and enhanced student engagement and retention" (p. 488). Although immersing volunteers in a new environment to serve will undoubtedly provide the opportunity for volunteers to grow and construct new knowledge, exposure alone is inadequate for ensuring volunteers develop their skill sets. High-quality professional development must accompany the service to provide volunteers with opportunities to reflect upon their observations in the field, understand how to apply what they have learned, and know how those applications evolve depending on their service site and audience.

Figure 2*Kolb's Learning Cycle*

Note: Adapted from “The benefits of embedding experiential learning in the education of planners,” by J. Rosier, C. Slade, T. Perkins, C. Baldwin, E. Coiacetto, T. Budge, and A. Harwood, 2019, *Planning Practice and Research*, 31(5), 486–499. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02697459.2016.1229899>. Copyright 2016 by the Taylor and Francis Group.

Individuals learn and make meaning of their own experiences, and concurrently learn from others and their environments; learning does not happen in isolation. An individual’s perception of a situation affects the meaning they derive from the occurrence, and factors such as available resources, assigned readings, and

educational settings may influence and affect learning. Yardley et al. (2012) stated, “The fundamental role of interpersonal interaction, combined with the importance of the contexts in which learning episodes are situated, locates experiential learning theories within the broader theoretical family of social learning theory” (p. 162). As volunteers seek to understand their role in the classrooms through hands-on learning, they work in a collaborative environment connecting experiential learning to social learning.

Social Learning Theory. The roots of social learning theory can be traced to Lev Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1978). Just as individuals learn from their environments and real-life experiences, environments and other individuals in those environments are impacted by the relationships and interactions that occur within that environment. Learners influence learning. By placing learners in sustained learning communities, learning happens over time with knowledge and understanding increasing throughout the experience.

However, learners must continue to make sense and meaning of their experiences as new challenges present themselves or their growth will stall. Understanding the rationale behind volunteers’ actions is necessary for the supervising teacher to provide adequate training and intervention if necessary. For example, if a volunteer is observed asking questions beyond the abilities of a 3-year old child, the facilitator of the professional development should determine whether the volunteer lacks the relevant child development knowledge or if they have previously used those questioning techniques effectively. Without understanding the

volunteer's rationale, the facilitator's subsequent training efforts may not adequately inform the practice of the volunteer or ultimately meet the needs of the child.

For volunteers to understand the application of experiential learning and social learning theory to their roles, facilitators should encourage discussions about volunteers' experiences and how student achievement could vary from setting to setting. Each setting has a different set of students and cooperating teacher that can influence the learning process requiring service members to adjust accordingly.

Volunteers' previous experiences should be considered when tailoring professional development. Understanding prerequisite knowledge is critical to tailor training appropriately for each volunteer and allow more experienced volunteers the opportunity to contribute from their experiences, which may instill a greater sense of purpose and confidence across the volunteer group. Volunteers would have the opportunity to learn from their peers, which should help with assimilating lessons into practice. For example, Martinez et al. (2010) found retired educators were better prepared to serve because of their vast knowledge of the educational system. Volunteer program directors preferred retired educators because their level of expertise increased their readiness to serve. Martinez et al. (2010) concluded, "Older adults, as our society's only increasing 'natural resource,' offer potential volunteer activity that, if harnessed, could make a profound positive difference in unmet social needs" (p. 264).

Adult Learning Theory. Based on enrollment verification and identification data provided during the Project BEAR onboarding process, service members range

in age from 18 to 66. The vast age range and accompanying variety of service member life experiences highlight the importance of using adult learning theory to design the required professional development to meet the needs and preferences of a diverse group of service members. Understanding the theoretical foundations of adult learning can lead program directors to design effective facilitation strategies to achieve program goals.

Chen (2014) outlined several tenets that are foundational to adult learning: self-directedness, reflection, and transformative learning. “Adult learners are self-directed and their learning is optimized when their experience is recognized and utilized in the learning process” (Chen, 2014, p. 407). These tenets were considered in the development of the Blackboard classroom and 10 early literacy modules. The modules can be completed at their own pace, which should appeal to adult learners wanting to self-direct their experience. The modules require service members to reflect on their previous beliefs about learning to read, which in turn may lead to a transformative experience in which the service member is challenged to reconcile how teaching early literacy differs with their previous understanding or their own lived experiences.

Engaging service members in reflection on their understanding through journaling and discussion boards is a critical component of the 10 early literacy modules. Cox (2015) found providing space and time for nonjudgmental listening, open questioning, and reflection is a critical component of the coaching process. Adult learners need to know, desire more autonomy, possess abundant experience,

learn when they are ready to learn, prefer to see the use of what they are learning, and are internally motivated (Cox, 2015). Service members are encouraged to post questions to seek clarity and confirm their understanding throughout the modules.

Early Literacy. Early childhood is defined as the period from birth to Age 8 and includes learning early literacy skills, foundational skills learned from birth to kindergarten entry, and early reading and writing skills expected in kindergarten through the early elementary grades (Paulson & Moats, 2018). “Conventional reading and writing skills that developed early maintained a consistently strong relationship with those same variables measured later” (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010, p. 280). The National Early Literacy Panel (2008) report outlined 11 variables that consistently predicted later literacy achievement:

- alphabet knowledge (AK): knowledge of the names and sounds associated with printed letters
- phonological awareness (PA): the ability to detect, manipulate, or analyze the auditory aspects of spoken language (including the ability to distinguish or segment words, syllables, or phonemes), independent of meaning
- rapid automatic naming (RAN) of letters or digits: the ability to rapidly name a sequence of random letters or digits

- RAN of objects or colors: the ability to rapidly name a sequence of repeating random sets of pictures of objects (e.g., “car,” “tree,” “house,” “man”) or colors
- writing or writing name: the ability to write letters in isolation on request or to write one’s own name
- phonological memory: the ability to remember spoken information for a short period of time . . .
- concepts about print: knowledge of print conventions (e.g., left–right, front–back) and concepts (book cover, author, text)
- print knowledge: a combination of elements of AK, concepts about print, and early decoding
- reading readiness: usually a combination of AK, concepts of print, vocabulary, memory, and PA
- oral language: the ability to produce or comprehend spoken language, including vocabulary and grammar
- visual processing: the ability to match or discriminate visually presented symbols. (p. viii)

Each of these variables falls under one of the 11 domains of oral language, print knowledge, and phonological processing. The 10 early literacy modules created for the Blackboard classroom focus on the domains of oral language, print knowledge, and phonological processing.

Understanding early literacy and how it promotes later literacy achievement is vitally important for service members providing direct literacy instruction to students from birth to kindergarten entry. Having a clear sense of the developmental progression of literacy development can provide a roadmap for service members' work. The theoretical model of the simple view of reading involves two basic processes, learning to convert letters into recognizable words and understanding the meaning of those words (National Reading Panel, 2000). Service members help young children develop the skills necessary to decode and recognize words by providing direct instruction in phonological awareness and print knowledge. Similarly, building oral language skills in early childhood classrooms helps young children develop the skills necessary to comprehend language. If either skill is missing, students will not become skilled readers.

Scarborough (2001, as cited in Paulson and Moats, 2018) created the reading rope, an illustrative model that demonstrates how literacy subskills are interwoven and increasingly automatic as children become more fluent readers. Like the simple view of reading, the reading rope model also includes language comprehension and word recognition as the main strands that lead to skilled reading. This model offers service members a framework for understanding how the instruction they are providing in early literacy will directly benefit the students' later academic achievement. By providing a solid understanding of the simple view of reading and Scarborough's reading rope, service members should understand the building blocks of language and how these foundations provide for later reading and writing success.

Summary. Volunteerism can transform communities and address some of our country's most critical needs. The goal of the AmeriCorps Project BEAR program is to improve educational outcomes for Ohio's youngest students by providing direct literacy instruction to children from birth to kindergarten entry, thus increasing school readiness. Program directors must be well equipped to support volunteers in their service sites and understanding the recruitment, onboarding, training, and ongoing support needs of service members is necessary to achieve positive program outcomes. Each component of the service member experience must be well planned and methodically executed.

One of the most critical components of the service member experience is professional development, both the training that takes place prior to service and monthly trainings that occur throughout service. Providing high-quality professional development should have a positive impact on program outcomes. Professional development should articulate the objectives of the program, provide volunteers opportunities to observe in actual classrooms, include microteaching exercises, integrate videos of teaching strategies, provide opportunities to practice, link knowledge to practice, allow individuals to collaborate, provide instruction on assessments, and align to local standards. Volunteer organization program directors should consider available resources to determine best practices and protocols to put into place for program success. For example, if the program can collaborate with other volunteer organizations or nonprofits with a similar mission, they can cohost

professional development opportunities that are mutually beneficial. Finding ways to reduce costs and increase quality can enhance professional development offerings.

Research has shown adult learners engaged in experiential learning benefit from opportunities to reflect on their observations from the field. By providing professional development that is embedded in the service member experience, volunteers can make meaning quickly and promptly apply what they have learned in actual classrooms. Service members can also benefit from being placed in learning communities where they can grow and learn together, and these communities can serve as a professional support group. By considering the tenets of experiential learning, social learning theory, and adult learning theory, program directors can make informed decisions on the best structures to support the program and service members. Volunteerism is a valuable resource, and volunteers require adequate support to positively impact the communities they serve.

Definitions

The following list of definitions is included to provide a common understanding of the concepts related to volunteerism and early literacy that will be discussed throughout the executive summary and capstone project.

- **alphabet knowledge:** aware of the names and sounds associated with printed letters

- **AmeriCorps:** the Corporation for National and Community Service, an independent agency of the United States government that engages volunteers in service
- **early childhood:** the period of time from birth to about Age 8
- **early literacy:** foundational skills learned from birth to kindergarten entry that supports a child's later development in reading and writing
- **emergent literacy:** alternate term for early literacy
- **microteaching:** a short lesson demonstration through which a service member can practice a new strategy
- **onboarding:** the process by which a potential service member is enrolled in Project BEAR and becomes a member
- **oral language:** the ability to produce or comprehend spoken language, including vocabulary and grammar
- **phonological awareness:** the ability to detect, manipulate, or analyze the auditory aspects of spoken language, including syllables, initial sounds, and phonemes
- **phonological processing:** multiple functions of speech and language perception and production, such as perceiving, interpreting, storing, recalling, and generating the speech sound system of a language
- **retention:** continued participation as a service member that fulfills the contracted term of service

- **Serve Ohio:** the state of Ohio's commission on service and volunteerism created to empower local communities; administers AmeriCorps

Who Is the Capstone Meant to Impact?

The capstone project is meant to impact four distinct groups: Project BEAR service members, administrators of Project BEAR partner sites, classroom teachers of Project BEAR partner sites, and children enrolled in classrooms served by Project BEAR. Through the combined efforts of these stakeholders, the capstone project has the potential to change the educational outcomes for thousands of children annually, which could forever change the literacy development capacity of an entire region. By changing the way emergent literacy is taught through increasing teacher competency and providing critical, high-quality instructional support through Project BEAR, an increasing number of children will enter kindergarten on track for reading success. When more children have a strong foundation for literacy development, teachers will be able to implement the curriculum as designed for a targeted group of children rather than focusing on providing the foundation in early literacy.

Project BEAR service members should increase their teaching competence by engaging with the 10 early literacy modules to enhance their knowledge and understanding of emergent literacy development. School administrators, including principals, directors, assistant principals, curriculum coordinators, literacy specialists, literacy coaches, and teacher leaders partnering with Project BEAR, will have access to the literacy modules, allowing these stakeholders to develop a greater

understanding of content that should be taught in high-quality early childhood classrooms. Classroom teachers will have the opportunity to develop a greater understanding of the science of reading and implement research-validated instruction as modeled by service members in their classrooms. Though learning to read is not an innate process, reading failure can be prevented. “It is possible to teach most students how to read if we start early and follow the significant body of research showing which practices are most effective” (Moats, 2020, para. 4). This capstone will help inform those holding educational positions that can directly impact children’s literacy development, such as the School of Education at SSU, the Scioto County Educational Service Center, and school districts that partner with Project BEAR.

How Was the Capstone Project Implemented?

Project BEAR began in 2018 when an alarming trend was noticed throughout the region: Children in Scioto County elementary schools lacked foundational language and literacy skills. After reviewing some local data, the work began in earnest to help support families and school systems in southern Ohio create greater achievement strides in language and literacy skills. A local literacy plan was developed in February 2018 when the staff of SSU’s Children’s Learning Center (CLC) participated in Ohio’s Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy Grant Literacy Academy.

In June 2019, the CLC was awarded an AmeriCorps grant through the Serve Ohio Commission to start Project BEAR: Building Emerging and Achieving Readers (M. Cannon, personal communication, June 14, 2019). Project BEAR placed service

members in 37 classrooms in 18 early childhood programs in Scioto County, which served children birth to kindergarten entry. During the 2019–2020 school year, each Project BEAR service member was trained in Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) Early Childhood (EC). Service members provided direct literacy instruction to over 800 children, three to four times per week, focusing on oral language, phonological processing, alphabet knowledge, and print awareness.

In October 2019, two Ohio Department of Education Region 15 State Support Team members, Missy Marsh and Beth Rice, offered the keynote presentation at SSU's Fall Fabulous Friday Early Childhood Literacy Conference (Rice & Marsh, 2019). Over 100 local educators attended the conference to learn more about the science of reading. In February 2020, under the mentorship of Lucy Hart Paulson, team members Amanda Hedrick and Hayley Venturino became LETRS facilitators in an effort to create a sustainable model to continue to prepare AmeriCorps service members, cooperating teachers, and administrators (J. DePuy, personal communication, February 12, 2020).

Project BEAR was funded for a 2nd year in 2020 and expanded into Pike, Jackson, Hocking, Gallia, Vinton, and Meigs Counties through a partnership with Easter Seals of Central and Southeast Ohio (M. Cannon, personal communication, July 23, 2020). This partnership increased community outreach, improved family engagement activities, and increased access to high-quality children's literature through registration of children birth to Age 5 in the Ohio Governor's Imagination Library (n.d.). Then, in July 2020, the CLC was awarded a Comprehensive Literacy

Development subgrant from the ODE to develop model literacy classrooms at the CLC on the campus of SSU (ODE Literacy Team, personal communication, July 29, 2020).

Despite demonstrating impressive gains in language and literacy development of children served during the 1st program year and securing support for the 2nd year, it seemed clear that the continued expansion of Project BEAR would require more resources and support to provide effective professional development experiences to increase service member competency and retention rates (H. Venturino, personal communication, June 3, 2020). In August 2021, during Project BEAR's 3rd year, the program was moved from the CLC to the Office of Campus Partnerships and Center for Lifelong Learning through a reorganization process at SSU. Amanda Hedrick and Hayley Venturino remained serving in administrative positions overseeing Project BEAR.

Why Were This Capstone and Related Strategies Selected?

During the 2019–2020 school year, the Project BEAR coordinator observed classroom teachers implementing evidence-based early literacy practices and completed walk-throughs and look-fors in the classrooms at the SSU CLC. An essential component of Project BEAR preparation was for service members to observe and practice strategies taught in LETRS EC at the CLC before entering classrooms throughout southern Ohio to implement the strategies on their own. The coordinator would notify the classroom teacher a week prior that she would be coming to observe a strategy (e.g., explicit instruction in oral language through a

vocabulary lesson). The coordinator would record the lesson, provide immediate feedback, and discuss her observations with the service member by pointing out specific, targeted interventions they used or could have used when teaching children. As classroom coaching continued, service members demonstrated lessons and received feedback to understand how to improve their practice. After 6 weeks in the model classroom sites, service members were expected to be well prepared to enter partner sites to provide direct literacy instruction.

However, cooperating classroom teachers reported service members were not fully engaged in providing literacy instruction. Cooperating teachers submitted Project BEAR communication forms with the following statements:

- “I have a concern. Member is on her phone during class time.”
- “I have a question. Can the service member lead activities?”
- “I have a suggestion. Members need more training on how to engage students.”
- “I have a concern. Member sits all day and watches, isn’t active.”
- “I have a concern. Member is not prepared to teach lessons.”

During the 2020–2021 school year, the program’s 2nd year, many of the strategies and practices for service member training and preparation that were implemented during the 1st program year were no longer possible. Project BEAR had expanded from 14 members during the 1st year to 28 members during the 2nd year, making it more challenging to provide feedback and support to each service member.

The COVID-19 global pandemic restricted service members from meeting face to face, and group size and group assignment limitations made it difficult for service members to visit multiple classrooms to observe and practice skills. Therefore, the program needed a digital platform to implement this training element safely and create capacity to support more service members, administrators, and classroom teachers. The capstone product, a Blackboard classroom with an onboarding suite and 10 early literacy learning modules, was expected to increase service members' competence by providing accessible professional development and ongoing support, thus allowing the program to continue to grow.

When Was the Capstone Implemented?

The 1st year of program implementation for Project BEAR was 2019–2020. Partner teachers reported having more time to work with children in small groups and one on one due to participating in Project BEAR, and teachers felt more confident in providing targeted strategies to increase literacy development (C. Shaffer, A. Gambill, C. Partlow, personal communication, February 4, 2020). Table 4 shows the percentage of CLC students who demonstrated growth between the fall and spring reporting collection periods for the listed language and literacy skills, knowledge, and behaviors (SKB) of the Early Learning Assessment (ELA) tool in the 2018–2019 and 2019–2020 school years. The ELA is Ohio's comprehensive assessment tool for preschool children. Data from the 2018–2019 school year represents scores without Project BEAR members present in the classrooms, and the data from the 2019–2020 school year represents scores with Project BEAR members present in the classrooms.

Table 4*Early Literacy SKB Achievement Percentages for CLC Students*

Early literacy SKB	Academic year	
	2018–2019	2019–2020
Rhyming	49%	91%
Syllables, onsets and rimes, phonemes	49%	100%
Initial, final, medial sounds	40%	100%
Adding, deleting, substituting sounds	11%	0%
Purposes and situations	43%	96%
Word meanings	36%	87%
Word relationships	34%	78%

Although early literacy gains were noticeable with Project BEAR members present, other factors could have also contributed to the increased scores. For example, CLC classroom teachers did not receive training in LETRS EC prior to or during the 2018–2019 school year. Despite demonstrated growth among a modest number of students, the literacy team realized the need for more intentional instruction. Therefore, over the summer of 2019, the classroom teachers completed LETRS EC, and the data demonstrate substantial gains were made in all areas except adding, deleting, and substituting sounds. Upon further analysis, the classroom teachers reported that due to COVID-19, they were not able to cover this more advanced phonological processing skill. The CLC closed on March 18, 2020, and did not reopen until June 1, 2020, for the summer enrichment program. Preschool

students enrolled during Year 2 did not receive educational services for 2 months even though parents were invited to join remote programming opportunities offered by the school.

Table 5 shows the ELA data by age group. During Year 1, only 50% of the children at Age 5 demonstrated growth because they scored a 4 or 5 during the fall assessment window, which limited the ability to show growth during the spring administration window of the ELA. Regardless of the age group, greater gains occurred during Year 2 in all areas except adding, deleting, and substituting sounds, which is likely due to the early school closure due to the COVID-19 global pandemic.

The Blackboard classroom was developed during Spring 2021 and piloted during Summer 2021 with the third cohort of eight Project BEAR service members who committed to a 10-week service term of service from May through July 2021. Modifications were made to the Blackboard classroom during August 2021 before full implementation began in September 2021. The fourth cohort of Project BEAR service members completed the 10 early literacy modules in by October 2021 and the fifth cohort of Project BEAR service members completed the modules in November 2021. Fifteen service members were interviewed in November and December 2021 after agreeing to participate in this research study, Building Better Bears, using the informed consent form (see Appendix A). Each service member answered 10 questions that focused on recruitment, onboarding, training, and the overall member experience (see the interview guide in Appendix B).

Table 5*Early Literacy SKB Achievement Percentages for CLC Students by Age*

Early literacy SKB	2018–2019			2019–2020		
	Age 3	Age 4	Age 5	Age 3	Age 4	Age 5
Rhyming	37%	72%	50%	93%	83%	100%
Syllables, onsets and rimes, phonemes	37%	72%	50%	100%	100%	100%
Initial, final, medial sounds	19%	78%	50%	100%	100%	100%
Adding, deleting, substituting sounds	4%	17%	50%	0%	0%	0%
Purposes and situations	26%	67%	50%	93%	100%	100%
Word meanings	37%	33%	50%	87%	83%	100%
Word relationships	26%	44%	50%	87%	67%	50%

Note. Groupings were determined by the students' age as of September 30 of that school year.

For example, if a child's date of birth was October 5, 2014, their scores were included in the 3-year-old group for the 2018–2019 school year because a child born October 5, 2014 was 3 years old on September 30, 2018.

Capstone Project

The capstone project, Building Better Bears, is a Blackboard classroom that includes a recruitment video, onboarding suite, four state-required trainings for working with young children, and 10 early literacy modules. The recruitment video sought to answer the following questions:

- What is Project BEAR?
- Why is this work important?
- What do the data suggest?

- How is Project BEAR making a positive impact in the community?
- How can others make a difference?

The recruitment video serves as the landing page of the Project BEAR Blackboard classroom site (see Figure 3). The onboarding suite provides service members with resources to accurately collect and submit the documentation required to determine eligibility for service.

Figure 3

Landing Page of Blackboard Classroom



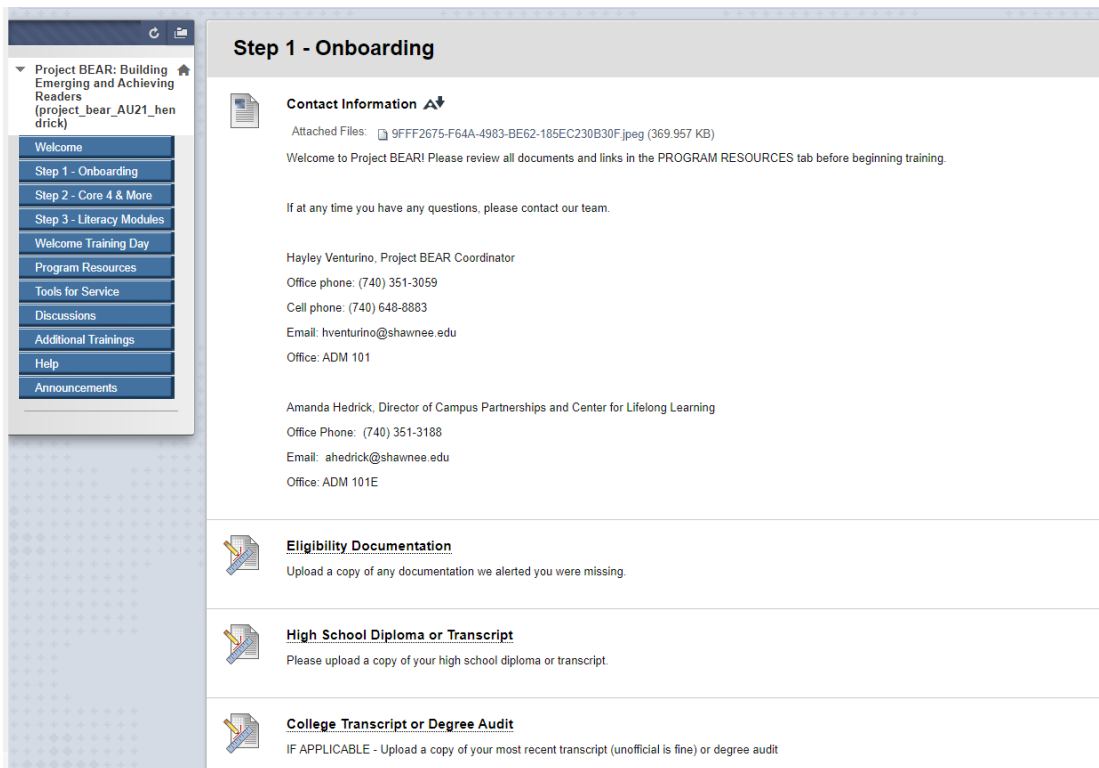
Note: Clicking on the Project Bear image plays the recruitment video.

When service members click on the *Step 1 – Onboarding* tab, the first item that appears is contact information for Project BEAR program staff to ensure potential service members feel supported throughout the process; they are encouraged to reach out for assistance as needed. The onboarding page also includes directions to

submit a high school diploma or transcript, a college transcript or degree audit, and an employee medical statement (see Figure 4). Additionally, step-by-step instructions on how to create an Ohio Child Care Resource and Referral Agency (OCCRRA) account to register for online trainings and request a background check are provided, along with instructions for completing fingerprinting, submitting to a nationwide search for registered sex offenders through the National Sex Offender Public Website, and enrolling in the AmeriCorps eGrants system.

Figure 4

Onboarding Tab of Blackboard Classroom



The next tab, *Step 2 – Core 4 and More*, is to be completed once service members are officially enrolled with AmeriCorps and constitute the beginning of

their required trainings (see Figure 5). As Project BEAR service members are placed in programs licensed by the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services or by the Ohio Department of Education, service members must abide by the rules and regulations set forth by these licensing agencies. Both agencies require the same trainings for any teaching team member that has direct contact with children.

Included in the Core 4 trainings are: Child Abuse Recognition and Prevention, First Aid, CPR, and Communicable Disease (Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, n.d.). These programs also require service members to complete Child Care Center Orientation, Ohio's Approach to Quality, and Ohio's Overview of Child Development. Once service members complete Step 2, they are eligible for a \$75 voucher to order AmeriCorps gear, an incentive that helps motivate them to complete these trainings.

The final step of service member training is *Step 3 – Literacy Modules* (see Figure 6). Literacy modules in the series focus on emergent literacy concepts with specific skills that should be incorporated in high-quality early childhood classrooms. The module includes the literacy concept, a written review of each concept, how the concept should be effectively implemented in an early childhood classroom, a video demonstrating implementation of the targeted concept, a journal prompt, a quiz referred to as a *check for understanding*, and an opportunity for reflection on the discussion board. Upon completion of the module, the service member receives feedback and reflects on guiding questions included at the end of each module. Table 6 outlines the key concepts and specific skills taught in each module.

Figure 5

Core 4 and More Tab of the Blackboard Classroom

Step 2 - Core 4 & More

Welcome Training

Be sure ALL steps in STEP 1 have been completed before moving on to this step.

Complete ALL trainings and assignments in this step BEFORE moving on to the modules in step 3.

The training schedule and in-person day agenda are attached.

How to Access OCCRRA Trainings

0:00 / 1:42

- Download video file: [Recording #1.mp4](#)

First Year Member OCCRRA Training List

1. CHILD CARE CENTER ORIENTATION TRAINING
2. ASD STRATEGIES IN ACTION: MANY FACES OF AUTISM
3. OHIO'S APPROACH TO QUALITY
4. OHIO'S OVERVIEW OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT
5. ODJFS CHILD ABUSE ONE-HOUR OVERVIEW

Second and Third Year OCCRRA Training List

1. NEONATAL ABSTINENCE SYNDROME
2. DIFFERENT YET ALIKE: TEACHING PRACTICES FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS_ONLINE

Figure 6

Literacy Modules Page of Blackboard Classroom

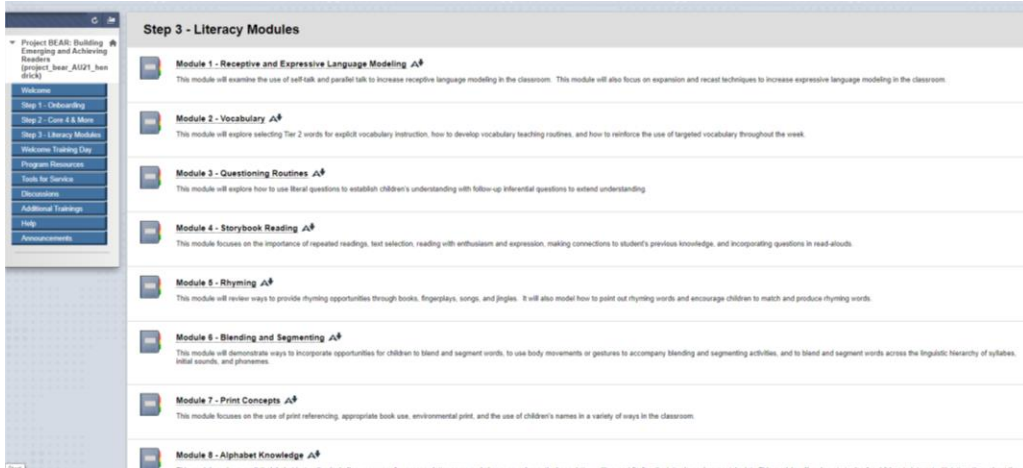


Table 6

Content of the 10 Early Literacy Modules

Module	Concept	Specific skills
1	Receptive and expressive Language modeling	Self-talk Parallel talk Expansion with vocabulary Expansion with syntax Recast Conversation turns
2	Vocabulary	Explicit vocabulary instruction Tier 2 words
3	Questioning	Literal to inferential Contextual to decontextual

Module	Concept	Specific skills
4	Storybook reading	Repeated reading plan Storybook selection Expression, pacing Characters and relationships Plot Retelling for comprehension
5	Rhyming	Sensitivity Matching Production
6	Blending and segmenting	Syllables Initial phoneme identification Final phoneme identification Phonemes
7	Print concepts	Print referencing Book knowledge Environmental print Printed names Print awareness
8	Alphabet knowledge	Explicit alphabet instruction Sequence of alphabet instruction Schedule of alphabet Alphabet song Letter play
9	Early writing	Print concepts/development Writing center Developmental phases Own name writing Handwriting Composition
10	Using early literacy assessment data	Oral language Phonological awareness Print knowledge

Each module includes Gagné’s nine events of instruction. For example, in Module 1, a quick video describing the importance of oral language engaged service

members by highlighting the importance of early literacy as the foundation necessary for all future learning. Next, the listed objectives allowed the service members the opportunity to organize their thoughts and understand key points. To encourage service members to build on previous knowledge, they completed a journal prompt to recall and make connections to previously covered content or to their own lived experiences. The next few activities present content through videos and research articles, and infographics outline clear steps on how service members can provide expressive and receptive language modeling experiences in the classroom. Once service members have an opportunity to practice their skills in the model classroom settings, they are asked to evaluate their performance. Service members also receive coaching feedback from Project BEAR staff members, literacy coaches, and/or cooperating teachers. To assess performance and understanding of the content, service members complete a check for understanding at the end of each module. The final component is a discussion board and a list of available resources. The next sections outline the key content of the 10 early literacy modules.

Module 1: Expressive and Receptive Language Modeling

Objectives. This module will examine the use of self-talk and parallel talk to increase receptive language modeling in the classroom. This module will also focus on expansion and recast techniques to increase expressive language modeling in the classroom.

Journal Prompt. Provide an example of self-talk that you have observed or have used in the classroom setting.

Content. Children learn language through their conversations with the meaningful adults in their lives. Every word makes a difference. Every word helps form brain connections that will make a difference in how they perform in school throughout their lives. Self-talk is defined as a strategy where an adult describes what he or she is doing while doing it. Parallel Talk is defined as a strategy where an adult describes what a child is doing. Expansion is defined as a language-stimulation strategy where an adult adds more information (vocabulary, grammar, or both) to the sentences the child says. Recast is defined as a language stimulation strategy where an adult repeats what a child inaccurately says with a correct model. Babies learn by imitation, so be sure to speak when completing daily tasks such as changing diapers, going for a walk, or completing errands. Infants soak up every syllable that is spoken, and hearing you talk is the best way to help their speech develop.

Check for Understanding. Expand the sentence, Baby cry. Recast the sentence, Baby boo-boo.

Discussion Prompt. How will you incorporate self-talk, parallel talk, recast and expansion into your daily classroom routines?

Module 2: Vocabulary

Objectives. This module will explore selecting Tier 2 words for explicit vocabulary instruction, how to develop vocabulary teaching routines, and how to reinforce the use of targeted vocabulary throughout the week.

Journal Prompt. Choose a book that you will read in your classroom or have recently read. Provide title and author of the book. List 10 to 15 Tier 2 words from that book.

Content. Tier 1 words are everyday words that are frequently used and familiar. They make up most of the words in everyday conversations. Examples include “we,” “you,” and “go.” Tier 2 words are high-utility words. These words are not as common in spoken conversation but can be used across settings and situations. Examples include designate, purpose, and occasion. Tier 3 words are highly specialized words rarely used in everyday conversations. Examples include photosynthesis, zoology, and magnitude. Tier 2 words should be selected for explicit vocabulary instruction. Beck et al. (2013, as cited in Paulson and Moats, 2018) included the following components in explicit vocabulary instruction:

- Say the word and provide a child-friendly definition or explanation using multisensory connections (e.g., a picture, a gesture, and the printed word).
- Have the children repeat the word.
- Provide other contexts for the word to reinforce its meaning.
- Have the children describe the word meaning to a shoulder buddy. (p. 78)

Exposure to rich vocabulary develops language, one of the building blocks of literacy.

Check for Understanding. Service members watch the video about Tier 2 words in *The Small, Small Pond* by Denise Fleming and answer the following

questions. What word was identified as a Tier 2 word in the video? How did the video define Tier 2 words?

Discussion Prompt. Describe your experience with explicit vocabulary instruction. Share your Tier 2 word, child-friendly definition, gesture, and other context for the word to reinforce its meaning. What strategies have you incorporated to reinforce vocabulary throughout the week?

Module 3: Questioning

Objectives. This module will explore how to use literal questions to establish childrens' understanding with follow-up inferential questions to extend understanding.

Journal Prompt. Create a series of questions using who, what, when, where, why, and how related to a book you have recently read or will read soon in your classroom. Label each question as literal or inferential.

Content. Asking good literal and inferential questions is a valuable strategy to facilitate language development. Literal questions seek a response that is obvious, often in the context, and may include labels, descriptions, and actions. These questions are often categorized as closed ended. Inferential questions require a response that is implied or not directly stated. These questions are more often categorized as open ended. Young children benefit more from literal talk and questioning in the preschool years (Paulson & Moats, 2018).

Check for Understanding. True or false: “Why do people drive cars?” is an example of an inferential question. True or false: “Which one is bigger, the cat or the dog?” is an example of an inferential question.

Discussion Prompt. How can you incorporate questioning routines in other learning centers? Choose a center and discuss.

Module 4: Storybook Reading

Objectives. This module focuses on the importance of repeated readings, text selection, reading with enthusiasm and expression, making connections to students’ previous knowledge, and incorporating questions in read-alouds.

Journal Prompt. What are the most important things that you look for when selecting a storybook? Do you have a preferred book that you tend to use when reading to children? If so, why did you choose this book?

Content. One of the best ways to expose young children to abstract and complex language is with storybook reading routines. Well-chosen children’s books with valuable vocabulary, concepts, and sentence complexity provide rich learning opportunities. Target books should be read at least three times, over a short period of time, to build children’s understanding, background knowledge, and ability to retell the story. After selecting a storybook, general steps for interactive storybook reading include preparing for the first, second, and third readings. Before the first read, preview a well-chosen book, select eight to 10 Tier 2 vocabulary words, and create child friendly definitions. Include a gesture and pictures illustrating the words in other contexts. The purpose of the first read is to help children gain an overall

understanding of the book. Ask literal questions to help children gain a basic understanding of the story. Take care not to interrupt the flow of the story. Practice out-loud thinking to show how you use language to make inferences.

During the second read, further children's understanding by pointing out things they may not know. Schedule the second read the day after the first read, if possible. Focus on selected vocabulary words. The purpose of the third read is to reinforce story comprehension. Reread the book a third time, the day after the second read, if possible, expanding on deepening what children know and make connections to their own experiences.

Check for Understanding. Describe the purpose of the first, second, and third read. True or false: Storybook selection is not important because children will enjoy the story regardless, even if the teacher is not intentional in planning learning outcomes. True or false: Children learn and retain new information at a higher level when adults ask questions and encourage the children to respond and expand their understandings, thoughts, and answers.

Discussion Prompt. Complete a read-aloud and share your self-evaluation. What strategies worked well? What growth areas were identified?

Module 5: Rhyming

Objectives. This module will review ways to provide rhyming opportunities through books, fingerplays, songs, and jingles. It will also model how to point out rhyming words and encourage children to match and produce rhyming words.

Journal Prompt. Think of one of your favorite nursery rhymes or songs from your childhood. List the words that rhyme.

Content. Rhyming is often one of the first phonological awareness skills children display, and they may be able to detect rhyme even when other phonological skills are too difficult. Children 2 to 3 years old participate in saying words in nursery rhymes, fingerplays, jingles, songs, and books that are read to them. Children 3 to 5 years old can detect and match words that rhyme. Children 4 to 5 years old can produce words that rhyme. Children 5 to 6 years old should be able to produce a string of words that rhyme.

Check for Understanding. True or false: The development of rhyme begins in children Ages 2 to 3. True or false: Nonsense words should not be used when working with preschool-age children.

Discussion Prompt. How will you incorporate rhyming into your daily classroom routines?

Module 6: Blending and Segmenting

Objectives. This module will demonstrate ways to incorporate opportunities for children to blend and segment words, to use body movements or gestures to accompany blending and segmenting activities, and to blend and segment words across the linguistic hierarchy of syllables, initial sounds, and phonemes.

Journal Prompt. How can you play with your name using blending and segmenting?

Content. Blending and segmenting are opposite skills, but they complement each other. Blending is the ability to combine or synthesize a sequence of isolated syllables or sounds to produce a recognizable word. Segmenting requires the ability to analyze the components of a word and pull them apart into syllables, initial sounds, and then individual speech sounds. There are many ways to embed blending and segmenting into everyday routines and activities, and to include specific activities focusing on these phonological skills. For syllables, children can segment and blend each other's names to the tune of a fun song or tap their arms for each syllable in their name. For initial sounds, call out the initial sounds of each child's name to dismiss children after group time. "Whose name begins with the /b/ sound?" Syllables are easier than sounds to identify in words. Start with syllable segmentation and blending first. Beginning sounds are easier to isolate than ending sounds. Medial sounds are the hardest. Start with initial sounds first.

Check for Understanding. Identify the type of phonological awareness task represented in this question: What is the first sound in book? Identify the type of phonological awareness task represented in this question: How many sounds are in grab?

Discussion Prompt. Describe your plan for introducing blending and segmenting. Where will you begin?

Module 7: Print Concepts

Objectives. This module focuses on the use of print referencing, appropriate book use, environmental print, and the use of children's names in a variety of ways in the classroom.

Journal Prompt. Describe your earliest experience with writing that you can recall. How did you learn to write your name?

Content. Print is everywhere in our lives, surrounding us with alphabetic symbols. Children begin to understand how print works long before they learn to read and write. Children recognize symbols of fast-food restaurants, street signs, and retail outlets. Multiple exposure to print in the early years help build the foundation children need for literacy acquisition and the motivation for learning to read and write. Print concepts include recognizing print in the environment, understanding that print carries meaning, knowing that print is used for many purposes, and experiencing print through writing (Paulson & Moats, 2018). With print everywhere in our world, there are many opportunities to intentionally guide young children's understanding. Early childhood classrooms should have a writing center that has an interesting variety of printed materials along with a wide range of writing tools and writing surfaces. Writing center items should include an alphabet chart posted at children's eye level, names of children with first letter uppercase and the remaining letters lowercase, variety of blank paper, envelopes, sticky notes, variety of writing tools, clipboards, dry erase boards and markers, chalkboards and chalk, and book binding materials.

Check for Understanding. List three effective ways to teach print concepts.

Discussion Prompt. How will you incorporate writing into every learning center?

Module 8: Alphabet Knowledge

Objectives. This module reviews explicit alphabet instruction including uppercase/lowercase letter name and shape, sound, mouth shape, letter writing, and finding the letter in environmental print. This module will review strategies for children to interact with letters throughout the day including opportunities to regularly sing the alphabet song.

Journal Prompt. Discuss some activities that you have observed or could incorporate into the classroom to engage children in alphabet instruction.

Content. Learning the alphabet is a key component of early literacy. Alphabet knowledge, by definition, is the understanding of letter forms, letter names, and corresponding sounds (NELP, 2008). This set of skills includes recognition, a child's ability to point to a letter when asked, production, a child's ability to name a letter and give the sound, and writing, a child's ability to write a letter when provided orally. Alphabet knowledge leads to the development of the alphabetic principle, which is the understanding that there is a systematic relationship between speech sounds and letters. Two important foundations of the alphabetic principle are letter knowledge and a basic level of phonemic awareness, or some sensitivity to speech sounds. The number of letter names children know as they enter kindergarten is the second-best predictor of reading achievement in the primary grades after phoneme

segmentation. The optimal benchmark for children entering kindergarten is 18 uppercase letters and 15 lowercase letters (Piasta et al., 2012). Letter-name knowledge facilitates letter-sound learning, and it aids in developing an understanding of the alphabetic principle. Young children tend to learn letter names before letter sounds; 3- to 4-year-old children are 11 times more likely to name a letter if it is in their own name, particularly the first letter (Jones et al., 2013).

Check for Understanding. Define alphabetic principle. What skills are necessary for comprehension in relation to alphabet knowledge?

Discussion Prompt. Describe your program's approach to teaching letters. How will you incorporate the six components of letter instruction?

Module 9: Early Writing

Objectives. This module will examine strategies to support writing development.

Journal Prompt. How does your program provide writing opportunities in the classroom?

Content. Along with learning about the concepts of print and the alphabet, young children also learn how print works in writing. When they see others pick up a writing utensil and write, they want to do the same. Much of their "writing" begins as exploratory play. Encouraging writing during the preschool years and praising children's attempts to write are common practices in early childhood classrooms. When adults model each stage of writing using a picture story/word story, children are encouraged to produce writing at their developmental level and not like a grown-

up (Paulson & Moats, 2018). Children feel more confident to explore writing and engage in the task. As children gain an understanding of how print works, they progress through well-defined literacy and writing phases. It is important to understand that these phases are not separate but distributed along a continuum. The phases begin with simple understandings and progress to conventional reading and writing.

Check for Understanding. When a child asks an adult how to spell a word, how should the adult respond? How does modeling a picture story/word story support this approach?

Discussion Prompt. Describe a writing prompt that you have used in the classroom following a repeated reading experience. What did you learn from implementing this strategy?

Module 10: Using Early Literacy Assessment Data

Objectives. This module will define the role of assessment in early childhood classrooms and discuss how assessment can help plan for future learning opportunities.

Journal Prompt. Describe your experience with assessments. How did you feel as a student completing assessments?

Content. As supported by developmentally appropriate practice, early childhood educators need to know as much as possible about the strengths, needs, and interests of the children in their care to plan effective and engaging instruction in a challenging yet achievable curriculum. Teachers assess children to identify what they

know and to support what they need to learn. Assessment data identifies children who are or are not learning at the appropriate rate. Different kinds of assessments provide different types of information and are linked to instruction and intervention.

Assessment is a means to improving instruction. Assessments can be standardized or nonstandardized, formative or summative, and include screenings, progress-monitoring, diagnostic, and outcome assessments.

Check for Understanding. In your own words, list the key aspects of the following assessment characteristics: standardized, nonstandardized, formative, and summative.

Discussion Prompt. How does the assessment data that you have collected inform your instruction?

Impact of the Capstone

The impact of the capstone is far-reaching for a region that has a large population of at-risk youth. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic experiences and events that range from abuse and neglect to living with an adult with a mental illness. Ohio is one of five states in the nation where as many as one in seven children have experienced three or more ACEs, a significantly higher ratio than the national average (Sacks & Murphey, 2018). ACEs are linked to alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, suicide, poor physical health, obesity, lower educational attainment, unemployment, and poverty. The number of children living in poverty in Scioto County is 33% compared to a national average of 13.5% (Children's Defense Fund, 2020). Children from low-income households are up to 2

years behind their higher-income peers when they enter kindergarten. About 30% of people accessing homelessness services are under age 18 and approximately 3,000 are under 1 year old (Ohio Housing Finance Agency, 2019). The average median household income for Scioto County is \$41,267 compared to a statewide median of \$56,155 and a nationwide median of \$61,937 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021-a).

The southern Ohio region is economically depressed and disadvantaged, but this is not the only challenge that children born in the region must overcome. America's opiate epidemic has severely impacted the area and many of the children served in the region are born drug addicted. A recent report from the Children's Defense Fund (2020) found that Scioto County had the highest birth rate of drug-addicted babies in the state. The study reported that for every 1,000 live births, 76 are born with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS), a condition caused by mothers who use drugs while pregnant (AP News, 2016). According to the National Institutes of Health (Sanlorenzo et al., 2018), this statistic is more than 10 times the national average of seven cases per 1,000 hospital births. Symptoms of NAS include low birth weight, seizures, excessive crying, and breathing problems (Stanford Children's Health, n.d.). Southern Ohio Medical Center, the region's health care facility, reported that 12–13% of babies test positive at birth for a foreign substance that is illegal or illegally obtained. Although there is not a lot of research available on the long-term effects of NAS, teachers have observed that children born drug-addicted have more difficulty focusing their attention and controlling their impulses (Sandtorv

et al., 2018) If children are not in the classroom learning due to disruptive behavior, they fall behind their peers.

Underachievement in literacy is a reality, and it will take an entire community to work together to make a difference to see progress. Providing model classrooms for literacy development can support local children, families, and classroom teachers who struggle to meet children's basic literacy needs. The staff of SSU CLC recognized that risk factors exist, but the teaching team agreed that these challenges to early literacy development can be overcome if children are provided the right environment and explicit instruction. Materials that are systematic, repetitive, and target the learning goals provide students with opportunities to develop the skills that they need. For example, the lessons from Heggerty Phonemic Awareness Curriculum account for the limited attention span of a 3- or 4-year-old (Heggerty & VanHekken, 2020). The lessons provide a systematic scope and sequence of skills with explicit modeling. The children are making meaningful gains regardless of the risk factors. This suggests that the root cause of the problem could be that teachers do not intentionally teach literacy skills.

The average LETRS EC pretest and posttest scores for classroom teachers, administrators, and Project BEAR service members highlight the impact of this course on concept mastery (see Table 7). This is the largest contributing factor to underachievement in literacy skills for the 2018–2019 school year. The teachers and administrators lacked knowledge about the science of reading, and therefore did not fully understand how to support language and literacy development. “As a recent

graduate with a degree in early childhood education, I was disappointed in my preparation. I did not learn any of the content in LETRS EC during my undergraduate experience” (J. Hileman, personal communication, November 17, 2020).

Table 7

Average LETRS EC Scores

Group	Pretest	Posttest
Classroom Teachers	57.5%	95%
Administrators	48.3%	93.5%
Project BEAR Members	35%	80%

During the 2019–2020 school year, the teachers understood the science of reading. They completed LETRS EC and began using the Heggerty Phonemic Awareness Curriculum. Classroom teachers also had the support of Project BEAR service members that could focus fully on early literacy instruction. Administrators and classroom teachers must build knowledge in the science of reading, understand the big ideas, and learn how to support language and literacy development from the ground up. Using resources such as the Sit Together and Read (STAR) program, dialogic readings, and phonological awareness and letter knowledge activities, teachers can support their children’s language and literacy development. Through the Project BEAR Blackboard classroom, service members and classroom teachers can

receive the professional development and classroom coaching support they need to improve early literacy outcomes.

Another impact of the capstone was improving service member participation in required trainings. The third cohort of Project BEAR volunteers began their term of service on May 10, 2021, and these nine service members piloted the first Project BEAR Blackboard classroom. The fourth cohort's service term began on September 8, 2021, and included 16 service members, and the fifth cohort's service term started November 10, 2021, and included 11 service members. These cohorts participated in the full implementation of the Project BEAR Blackboard classroom.

Figure 7 compares the participation rates during the pilot of the Blackboard classroom and the participation rates during the full implementation of the Blackboard classroom. Of the service members that piloted the Blackboard classroom, 44% were returning members that previously served at least one term in Project BEAR, which could have impacted participation rates as many had previously completed the onboarding process and training. Only 11.1% of service members that participated in the full implementation of the Blackboard classroom were returners.

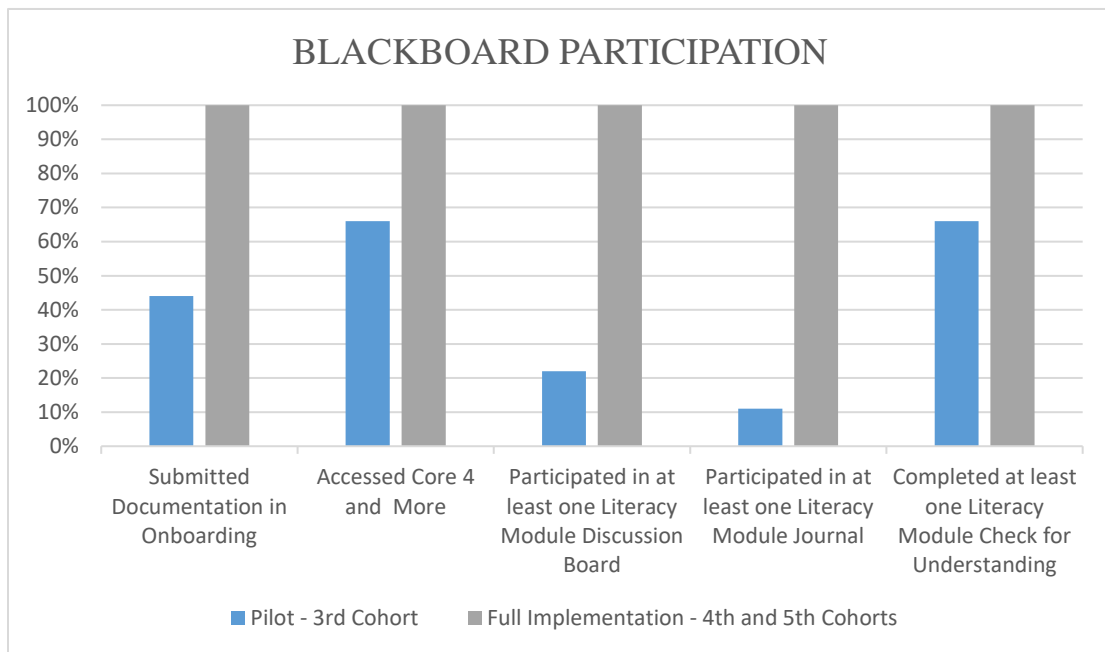
The Blackboard classroom was created to improve the recruitment, onboarding process, and training for service members, but it was also designed to improve service member retention. Of the service members who piloted the Project BEAR Blackboard classroom, 88.9% successfully completed their 10-week term of service. Of the service members who participated in the full implementation of the

Project BEAR Blackboard classroom, 88.9% were still serving as of March 2022.

Additionally, retention of service members has increased nearly 14%.

Figure 7

Participation Rate Comparison for the Blackboard Classroom



Project BEAR has been able to fill all service member slots over the last 3 years, but recruitment is more than just filling the slots. Recruitment is about attracting high-quality volunteers who have a heart for service and a dedication to the mission of helping children acquire language and literacy skills. The goal is to invite service members who want to see all children succeed and want to help write their story of a lifetime of academic success. Understanding service member motivation to serve can also help the program understand how to market and recruit future

members. During the 2020–2021 recruitment period, 53.3% of the 15 service members interviewed were recruited by current or former Project BEAR service members. Of the interviewed service members, 53.3% reported they heard about Project BEAR on social media and partner sites recruited another 26.7%. Although 40% of the interviewed service members indicated they chose to serve in Project BEAR to benefit young children, the most common reason to serve, chosen by 80% of respondents, was to gain experience and build their resume. This suggests the marketing campaign should focus more on the benefits to the service member and how this opportunity can create future career and employment pathways.

The next goal of the Blackboard classroom was to improve the onboarding process. Once a prospective service member decided they wanted to serve, 60% reported they had an easy onboarding experience. “My onboarding process was fairly easy and painless. I found all of the required paperwork very easy to fill out and really not bothersome” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 17, 2021). Some interviewees (40%) reported they had some challenges they had to overcome such as submitting paperwork for human resources electronically and locating documents including immunization records and their social security card. When asked what supports they received during the onboarding process, 93.3% responded indicating a Project BEAR staff member supported them throughout the process and assisted them whenever they had questions or concerns. “Any and all questions I had while onboarding to be a BEAR member were answered by Hayley and Amanda. Everything was answered thoroughly, and I felt my concerns were heard”

(Anonymous, personal communication, December 17, 2021). Several members referenced the checklists with deadlines they were provided as a helpful resource to keep them on track during the onboarding process. One area of improvement was identified: Service members suggested a formal notification process once all paperwork had been completed, successfully received, and reviewed.

Recruiting and onboarding service members is a critical first step in program success but building service member competency in early literacy concepts is necessary to achieve program outcomes. Service members must understand the science of reading and be equipped to deliver direct literacy instruction in early childhood classrooms. The 15 service members interviewed were asked if the 10 early literacy modules prepared them for service, and 100% responded affirmatively. Several shared further about how these modules impacted their training experience:

- “They gave me insight of what was to be expected of this service program and made me more confident in knowing what I was supposed to be doing while serving” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 17, 2021).
- “The modules gave me a foundation of what I was expected to do and what I would potentially see from the kids. It was kind of laying out a road map in a way” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 17, 2021).
- “The literacy modules are very beneficial in preparing members to be able to work with the children at our sites. They provide great strategies for all the

literacy skills needed to be completed at our site” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 17, 2021).

- “Because my skill set has been for 4th graders and beyond, the literacy modules helped me better understand the skill level the students that I will be serving for have. The quick tips they provided aided to my lack of preschool level knowledge” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 17, 2021).

Figure 8 shows the number of hours each service member interacted on the Project BEAR Blackboard classroom site, which varied from .26 hours to 109.38 hours and averaged 22.15 hours per active service member. Service members completed 239 or 91.9% of the check for understanding activities with 92.6% accuracy. They also completed 236 journal entries, or 90.8% of the total number of possible journal entries, and 211 discussion board posts. Discussion board posts were evenly distributed across early literacy key concepts as demonstrated in Figure 9.

Although service members demonstrated understanding of the content of each early literacy key concept as demonstrated in the Project BEAR Blackboard classroom by successfully completing checks for understanding, in practice some concepts were preferred by service members. When asked what strategies they felt best prepared to implement in the classroom, three key concepts emerged most often: print concepts (53.3%), vocabulary (46.7%), and alphabet knowledge (40%). Rhyming and expressive and receptive language modeling were next with 33.3%

each. Each key concept was mentioned at least once. One service member who reported stronger confidence implementing vocabulary lessons and using expressive and receptive language modeling techniques said they “love to talk and communicate” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 17, 2021). Another commented, “My teacher doesn’t always put me at a literacy center to work with the kids, so I often find ways to ask them colors, shapes, numbers, or even ask them questions to get to know their interests so I can use that another day” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 17, 2021). Knowing what topics members are confident in delivering effectively and which they might need more support to provide good literacy instruction is important for program leaders to understand.

Figure 8

Blackboard Course Activity per Service Member

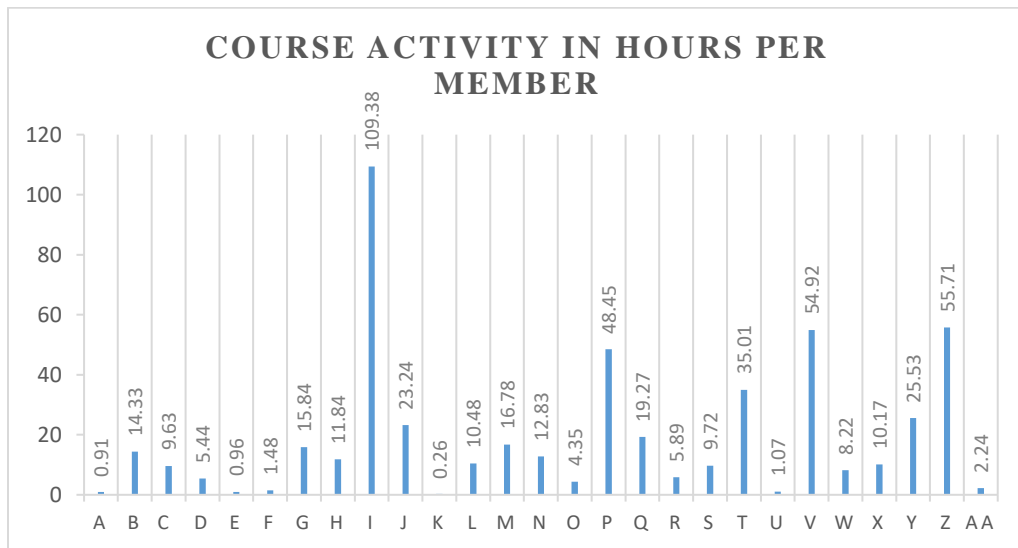
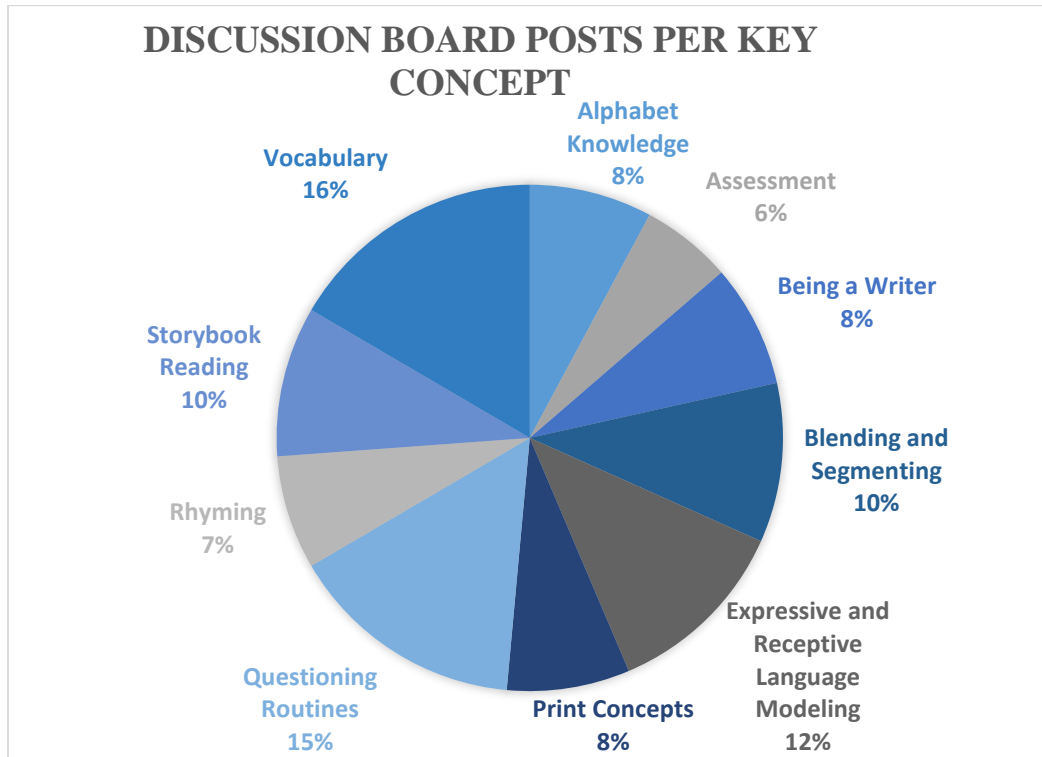


Figure 9

Discussion Board Posts per Key Concept



When asked what strategies members felt least prepared to implement, 60% of service members began discussing their student’s performance in the classroom to determine where they needed to improve their understanding of the key concepts and how they could effectively teach those early literacy concepts in the classroom. This suggests most members understand the importance of assessments and are using data to inform their instruction. One-third reported they felt least prepared to teach blending and segmenting. As identifying initial sounds in words at the end of preschool is one of the strongest predictive indicators of later literacy learning

(National Early Literacy Panel, 2008), service members must be well versed in strategies to build blending and segmenting skills. This suggests the blending and segmenting module needs to be enhanced.

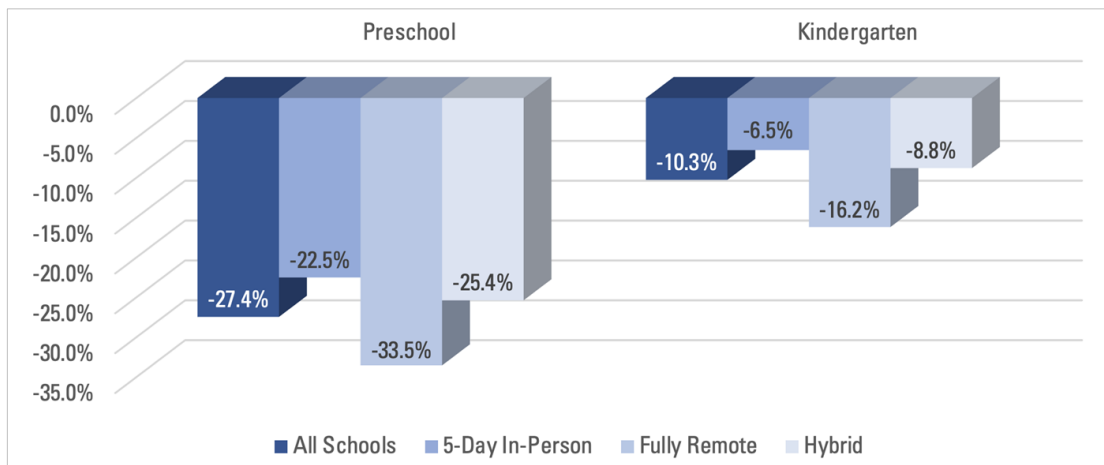
During this topic of discussion, another interesting theme surfaced. One-third of service members asked for training on modifying or adapting lessons. Service members reported several students in their classrooms are suspected of a developmental delay or are on an individualized education plan. “While I feel equipped using all literacy modules, my students have a difficult time understanding blending/ segmenting. Another way of implementing this would help me. Sometimes the modules seem at a greater level than my students. Modifications would be helpful” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 17, 2021). Providing resources and instruction on how to modify lessons will certainly enhance the Blackboard classroom and improve service member competency.

Fewer students have been served in early childhood classrooms over the last 2 years due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. As more students enter classroom settings with fewer background experiences and knowledge, the need for adaptations and modifications will likely increase. Enrollment decreases are more concentrated in preschool and kindergarten programs (see Figure 10). Between Fall 2019 and Fall 2020, enrollment in public preschools decreased by more than 27% (approximately 15,000 fewer students in Fall 2020), while enrollment in kindergarten decreased by over 10% (approximately 10,000 fewer students in Fall 2020). These decreases represent almost half of the total decrease in all grade levels. This reverses a 2-year

trend whereby public preschool and kindergarten grew by an average of 5% (or roughly 2,000 more students) and 2% (or roughly 700 more students), respectively. Enrollment decreases in preschool and kindergarten are especially pronounced in districts that began the school year fully remote (33.5% and 16.2%, respectively), compared to 5-day in-person and hybrid education delivery models (Ohio Department of Education, n.d.). The COVID-19 global pandemic has impacted educational opportunities for Ohio’s youngest students. Project BEAR can help support these learners and lessen the learning gaps.

Figure 10

Enrollment Decreases in Ohio Public Districts



Finally, the last goal of the capstone project was to understand the overall service member experience. To determine how to improve the program, service members were asked what experiences they enjoyed most and least during

recruitment, onboarding, and training. Two-thirds responded indicating what they enjoyed the most was making relationships and meeting new people. Perhaps this sentiment was amplified due to the pandemic. The second most common answer was the training and preparation for service, with 60% indicating this was the most enjoyable aspect. “Getting to learn more how development happens for younger children, getting to meet people in the community, and being part of our development of the future and the children's future is what I have appreciated the most about this experience” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 17, 2021).

Service members come from a variety of backgrounds, and several had limited experience in early childhood settings. They acquired the knowledge, skills, and behaviors to enter classroom settings and contribute. According to one service member, the best part has been “the opportunity to serve the communities and be able to give back to the community through literacy” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 17, 2021). “I think I enjoyed preparing myself for being placed at my site because once I felt more prepared and like I knew what I was doing, I got 10 times more excited to be there. Once I got acquainted with my site teacher and class, it has been extremely enjoyable” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 17, 2021). “Learning and growing in my future field of work. These trainings provide valuable and very applicable information” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 17, 2021). In addition to the many positive comments, there were several suggestions about how to strengthen the program.

Most service members (60%) interviewed did not enjoy completing all the trainings online through the Blackboard classroom, specifically the core four trainings that included Child Abuse Recognition and Prevention, First Aid, CPR, and Communicable Disease. Several service members requested the core four trainings be offered both in person and online. One service member stated, “Being alone for so much training was a little much, but I was grateful that I was able to train when it was best for my other commitments” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 17, 2021). Another commented, “I appreciate the hours being flexible and our meetings being flexible around people that can’t always drive to the Shawnee campus” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 17, 2021). Still others wanted to participate fully only, with someone sharing, “I prefer to have the trainings in person, including the blackboard trainings. I just learn better when I am actually listening to someone speak and being in the same room” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 17, 2021). Program directors will need to consider how to tailor programming to best meet the needs of all service members. About a quarter of service members stated their least favorite experience during recruitment, onboarding, and training was completing the paperwork. This feedback highlighted improvement areas for program staff to work on including offering in-person training options, working with human resources to improve the paperwork process, and including program staff in the electronic signature process so that they will receive a copy of all documents submitted by the service members for verification.

As the interviews were wrapping up, each service member was asked if there was anything else they would like to add to the conversation. Here are a few of their comments:

- “This program is so beneficial to the students being served. I hope the grant is renewed so they can continue making a difference in these children’s lives” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 17, 2021).
- “I’ve enjoyed serving through Project BEAR and I’m excited to continue serving. It’s a lot of fun working with students and teachers” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 17, 2021).
- “After experiencing teaching my students, I feel that I could be a younger age teacher. Before this, I thought I could never! I just wanted you to know it was/is enjoyable” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 17, 2021).
- “I feel as though I’m not doing enough or implementing enough activities to help build the skills the kids need. I am trying. It just doesn’t feel like enough” (Anonymous, personal communication, December 17, 2021).

The final comment stood out as an opportunity to provide positive feedback and support to this service member. Reviewing the classroom data could potentially highlight the successes that are occurring in the classroom, which may not be observed during daily interactions. The well-being of each service member must not be overlooked.

Limitations

The executive summary and associated capstone project, the Project BEAR Blackboard classroom, were implemented in the AmeriCorps program Project BEAR at SSU with 27 service members. Although the capstone may be an asset to other early childhood programs working to improve kindergarten readiness and build language and literacy skills in children birth to kindergarten entry, results will vary based on program characteristics.

The researcher brings credibility to the project. Before moving into leadership and administration, the researcher served as a preschool teacher working with students from Ages 3 to 5 for over 15 years. The researcher has served as an adjunct faculty member for the School of Education since 2001 with over 20 years of experience designing professional development for preservice and in-service teachers. However, it is important to note the researcher serves as the Director of Project BEAR. To minimize the threat of bias, interviews were conducted without the Project BEAR coordinator present who oversees day to day operations and has daily contact with service members. Although the researcher genuinely wants the program to succeed, the summary of the findings includes accolades from multiple sources and criticisms that will be addressed to improve the program, increasing the trustworthiness of these results.

Next Steps

The next steps of this project will be to address the growth areas as identified by the service members. The program director identified the need to adjust the

program's marketing campaign and edit the recruitment video to include more information on how Project BEAR can create future career opportunities and employment pathways. The program director will share the video on social media, the primary source of service member recruitment. Program staff will intentionally ask current and former Project BEAR members to recruit future members. Next, program staff will work with human resources staff to streamline the onboarding paperwork process and eliminate any glitches. The program staff will create a formal process to communicate with potential service members that all paperwork has been completed: received, processed, and reviewed for accuracy.

Service members also made recommendations for improving the Blackboard modules. The program director will refine the module on blending and segmenting paying more attention to a variety of strategies that can be scaffolded based on students' stages of development. The program will add training on adaptations and modifications for service members who work with students served in special education classrooms, currently on individualized education plans, or suspected of a developmental delay. The core four and more trainings will be offered online and in person, meeting the needs of all learners.

Given the findings demonstrated the new professional development modules were positively associated with service member recruitment, retention, and child performance increases, the project could be implemented statewide or even nationwide. The modules could also be provided to early-childhood programs to support classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators.

Offering the modules to the public raises an ethical and legal issue for consideration, the right to privacy. Included in the capstone project is a recruitment video, showcasing the service members' experiences. The footage collected includes video, audio, and photos of young children being served by Project BEAR at the SSU CLC. All students and classroom teachers participating agreed to waive their rights to privacy for their images to be used in the video. Parents who enroll their children at the CLC recognize it is a laboratory school that exists for the purposes of educating young children and the next generation of those who will educate them. The result is an environment that uses video, audio, photo, and web-based observation to fulfill assignments for university coursework in the College of Professional Studies and the College of Arts and Sciences.

University faculty, staff, and students enrolled in coursework are often required to periodically video and audio tape (via web-based cameras and other electronic devices) and/or photograph enrolled children as part of their course requirements. Therefore, a video, audio, photo release for a child attending the CLC is a condition of enrollment. Parents must agree to give permission for recording video, audio, and taking photographs of their child for the purposes of instruction and program support; give consent for the observation of their child, including the child's conversations over the internet, to those granted access as authorized users; if granted access to the webcam system, agree not to provide their sign-on identification or password to anyone else, including other family members; understand there are criminal and civil sanctions governing unauthorized interception of oral

communications and invasion of privacy and agree to abide by those laws and the policies of the CLC, protecting their child and the confidentiality of all children attending the CLC; and waive rights to privacy afforded their child under federal or state law to the extent of the webcam access while their child is enrolled at the CLC. Parents must also acknowledge other families with children in the CLC may observe and hear their child through the webcam access and agree not to record any images or audio signals they receive from the CLC webcam access. Parents must acknowledge they understand the policy and verify it has been reviewed with them by the CLC director. Copies of consent forms are secured and kept on file for all individuals appearing in the video.

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) allows educational agencies or institutions or state educational authorities to contract with education service providers to use student information to market, advertise, or develop services for: (a) traditional school-sanctioned commemorative activities, (b) services to improve student academic outcomes, (c) sharing educational opportunities offered by the educational agency or institution or state educational authority, or (d) activities with parental consent (Student Privacy Protection Act, 2015). As Project BEAR is categorized as a service intended to improve student academic outcomes, school districts have the right to share information such as early learning and kindergarten readiness assessment data, which is important to note considering Project BEAR success rates are based on student performance data.

Although districts are permitted to share data without parental consent, FERPA also requires information provided to be stored in a secure location without identifying personal student data. Project BEAR service members must keep personal information confidential requiring data collected to be coded so that individuals reviewing the data will not be able to connect the data to classroom teachers or school districts. Protecting confidentiality is an ethical concern because the data, once collected and analyzed, could suggest some children are not receiving proper instruction. Releasing findings to the public showing Districts X, Y, and Z and Classrooms 1, 2, and 3 failed to show growth in literacy gains could negatively impact program participation of Project BEAR. Identifying teachers who are proficient at early literacy instruction is not the goal; instead, the goal of Project BEAR is to increase literacy achievement for all students in all cooperating partner sites. Project BEAR shares data in aggregate form to protect individual districts, schools, classrooms, teachers, and children.

The final legal consideration is the use of the AmeriCorps, Serve Ohio, Project BEAR, and SSU logos in the recruitment video. Appropriate uses of the AmeriCorps logo include informational materials describing national service programs and other approved programmatic activities. The logo is the property of the Corporation for National and Community Service and may be used only in accordance with proper authorization. Therefore, expressed written consent is required. The Serve Ohio commission also requires consent for the use of its logo. The Project BEAR logo cannot appear without the AmeriCorps and Serve Ohio logos

because Project BEAR is funded by AmeriCorps and the Serve Ohio Commission. The SSU logo is the official signature of the university. Any materials created which include the SSU logo or represent the university must be approved by the marketing and communications office. Once the recruitment video is edited, permissions to use the logos will be secured before releasing the video to the public.

Reflections

Shawnee State University embarked on a journey to lead Appalachian literacy development by investing in an AmeriCorps program, Project BEAR. The goal of Project BEAR is to increase school readiness by evaluating students' early learning assessment scores and kindergarten readiness assessment scores to determine if they are on track for reading success when they enter kindergarten. To better prepare students for school, classroom teachers need additional supports in the classroom setting that can focus solely on literacy instruction. Project BEAR service members are that resource. However, for Project BEAR to be successful and achieve its goal, Project BEAR service members must be knowledgeable about how to put into practice high quality literacy instructional strategies that focus on phonological awareness, oral language, and print knowledge. Furthermore, Project BEAR program leaders must work to retain service members, providing high quality professional development, so service members are confident in their abilities to lead engaging, direct literacy instruction. This capstone project is intended to provide other AmeriCorps programs with a greater understanding of how professional development enhances the service member experience, so that investments made in service

members can help programs realize their goals, improving communities across the country.

Although the focus of the executive summary and capstone product were focused on the recruitment, onboarding, and training of Project BEAR service members through the Blackboard classroom, early student performance data suggested child outcomes were positively associated with the implementation of the 10 early literacy modules. District administrators and classroom teachers noticed increased service member competency as demonstrated in classroom settings and shared positive feedback. L. Harley (personal communication, December 1, 2021) wrote:

Project BEAR at Valley has been a smashing success! Both participants have been outstanding. We are absolutely proud and honored to work with them. They have truly become part of the classroom staff, and they are exceptional at their jobs. Thank you so much for sending such good people to Valley! They and you are much appreciated!

Increasing community confidence in Project BEAR will only lead to greater partnerships in the future and add another voice to the efforts of supporting Appalachian literacy development.

The pandemic has changed the perspectives of many educators; many are tired and overwhelmed. Project BEAR began less than 1 year before the start of the pandemic and, although many AmeriCorps programs ceased operations, Project

BEAR found a way to grow and continued serving the region's population of at-risk youth. Suzanna Arundhati Roy (as cited in Snow and Goldfield, 2021) stated:

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.

Project BEAR has identified the problem and has offered a solution through building an army of experts in early literacy who can change the future for children served. There were many challenges, but each brought opportunity. When schools closed, Project BEAR moved programming online. When students lacked internet access, service members made phone calls. When parents requested resources to use at home, service members created literacy kits, created how-to videos, and conducted virtual read-alouds. When service members were quarantined because of exposure, service members continued to build competency and completed additional early literacy trainings online. The pandemic forced Project BEAR staff to think and operate differently, and it forced the creation of a digital platform to operate a program that could not be operated face to face.

Project BEAR is in its infancy but growing in strength, size, and influence. What started out as a grant application in response to a grandmother's plea to help her

grandson read has turned into a regional movement. The capstone product will be made available to all community partner schools in Fall 2022, and the work will not stop. Program staff will work with teacher preparation programs to deliver this content before teachers enter service. The Blackboard classroom will continue to be refined and enhanced to help support the next generation of educators, children, and future Project BEAR members.

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Appendix A

BUILDING BETTER BEARS INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Project BEAR Service Member:

My name is Amanda Hedrick, a doctoral graduate student at Morehead State University in the Department of Foundational and Graduate Studies in Education. I am requesting your assistance with a research project I am conducting to improve the AmeriCorps program Project BEAR Service Member experience. Let me emphasize that you do not have to participate. If you do not wish to take part in the survey, you do not have to answer any of the questions. Completing this survey is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time.

You must be 18 years of age or older to participate. This study has been reviewed to determine that participants' rights are safeguarded and there appears to be minimal risk or discomfort associated with the completion of the survey. You may choose to discontinue your participation at any time. You may also skip any questions you do not wish to answer. Also, you need to understand that participating or not participating in the survey has no impact on your Project BEAR service. Your decision to volunteer to complete the survey cannot hurt or help your service in any way.

The answers you provide will be kept strictly confidential and all research subject responses (completed survey and digital recordings) will be stored in a locked file cabinet in ADM 101E, accessible only to the researcher. Please feel free to ask for help if something does not make sense to you or if you have any questions. If you experience any discomfort, you may contact the Student Health and Counseling Center at Shawnee State University at 740-351-4362. For questions or concerns regarding the study including IRB approval, you may contact the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at Morehead State University at 606-783-2356.

If you decide to volunteer, please be sure to **PRINT YOUR NAME** on the form and **SIGN** it to indicate your willingness to participate. That will be our indication that you understand the purpose of the survey and that you are willing to help.

NAME (please print): _____

Signature: _____

If you have any questions or concerns, you may contact the researcher: Amanda Hedrick, ADM 101E, 740-351-3188, amhedrick@moreheadstate.edu

Appendix B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Title: Building Better Bears: Improving the AmeriCorps Service Member Experience

Thanks: Thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed! It is appreciated.

Instructions: The interview should take about 30 minutes, and will be digitally recorded if you consent, so that I can transcribe later and not miss any information. I will be taking field notes during the conversation as well, so I can ask follow-up questions to important items you bring up.

Confidentiality: Everything will be kept confidential, and all responses in the interview will be shared only with my capstone chair, Dr. Daryl Privott, Associate Professor, Morehead State University. You, your cooperating school, and any other identity information discussed will not be identified by name in any published paper.

Consent: As outlined in the consent form that you signed, I remind you that at any time you wish to not answer any question, or feel you wish to end the interview, you may do so at your will.

Interviewer notes: Turn on digital recorder and test. Listen actively. Do not interrupt. Have a conversation. Smile and be clear in questions. Ask interviewees to elaborate, describe, be specific, and follow-up. Allow interviewees time to think and answer fully.

Purpose: The purpose of this interview is to discuss your experience during the recruitment, onboarding, and training as an AmeriCorps Project BEAR service

member. What has been your experience? How can we improve upon that experience?

Overarching Concept: The AmeriCorps Service member experience including recruitment, onboarding, building service member competency, and retention is important to the overall success of the program to improve child outcomes.

Questions:

Recruitment

1. How did you learn about Project BEAR?
2. What made you choose to serve in Project BEAR?

Onboarding

3. Once you decided to serve, did you experience any challenges that you had to overcome with the onboarding process?
4. What supports did you receive during onboarding?

Training

5. How did the 10 literacy modules prepare you for service?
6. Based on the literacy modules, what strategies do you feel best prepared to implement?
7. Based on the literacy modules, what strategies do you feel least prepared to implement?

Overall Member Experience

8. What experience have you enjoyed the most during recruitment, onboarding, and training?

9. What experience have you enjoyed the least during recruitment, onboarding, and training?

10. Is there anything else you would like to add to our conversation today?

Closing: Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me. I sincerely appreciate it! I will write up a summary of your answers as I recorded them and send it to you prior to any further analysis. If you think of anything you did not mention, please feel free to call or send a follow-up email. I look forward to speaking with you again given the opportunity. Thank you for your service. Have a great day!

VITA

AMANDA M. HEDRICK

EDUCATION

June, 2000	Bachelor of Science Ohio State University Columbus, Ohio
August, 2001	Master of Arts Morehead State University Morehead, Kentucky
Pending	Doctor of Education Morehead State University Morehead, Kentucky

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES

2021–Present	Director Campus Partnerships and Center for Lifelong Learning Shawnee State University Portsmouth, Ohio
2020–Present	LETRS National Facilitator Cambium Learning Dallas, Texas
2017–2020	Advisory Board Member Ohio Department of Education Columbus, Ohio
2015–2021	Director Children’s Learning Center Shawnee State University Portsmouth, Ohio
2015–Present	Trainer American Heart Association

	Portsmouth, Ohio
2001–Present	Adjunct Faculty Shawnee State University Portsmouth, Ohio
2012–2015	Head Teacher Shawnee State University Portsmouth, Ohio
2012–2014	Trainer ECQ-Net Columbus, Ohio
2002–2010	Consultant Corporation for Ohio Appalachian Development Portsmouth, Ohio
2000–2012	Teacher Shawnee State University Portsmouth, Ohio

HONORS

2020–2024	Comprehensive Literacy State Development Grant Awardee Ohio Department of Education Columbus, Ohio
2019–Present	Project BEAR Grant Awardee AmeriCorps Serve Ohio Columbus, Ohio

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