

The BRIDGE Framework: A Structured Approach to Mentorship in Teacher Preparation

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Abstract

Rural teacher preparation programs face persistent challenges in supporting pre-service educators with the confidence, instructional skills, and professional guidance needed for early literacy instruction. High turnover, instructional misalignment, and inconsistent mentorship structures in rural districts limit the effectiveness of field experiences. This qualitative study examined how a structured mentorship and co-teaching model shaped professional growth for 27 pre-service teachers and their mentor teachers during a semester-long K–2 literacy practicum. Data were collected from observations, focus groups, collaborative meetings, and instructional artifacts. Findings suggest that early relationship-building, scaffolded co-teaching, and clearly defined roles contributed to increased instructional clarity, reflective practice, and mentor leadership development. Four key themes emerged: early collaboration, co-teaching growth, reciprocal benefits, and leadership through reflection. These results informed a new conceptual framework, BRIDGE Framework, for structured mentorship in early literacy preparation.

Keywords: Teacher Preparation, Rural Education, Literacy Instruction, Mentorship, Co-Teaching, Pre-Service Teachers, BRIDGE Framework

1. Introduction

Across the United States, rural schools contend with unique and persistent barriers in teacher preparation and retention. Limited access to high-quality professional development, geographic isolation, and high turnover rates make it difficult to provide consistent, evidence-based instruction in critical subject areas like early literacy [1], [2]. According to recent data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), reading scores for fourth graders in rural districts declined between 2022 and 2024, continuing a trend that signals the urgent need for systemic support in literacy

education [3]. Compounding these challenges is the limited availability of mentorship structures that connect teacher preparation programs with local districts in intentional, sustained ways.

Research suggests that mentorship and co-teaching models are positively associated with the quality of teacher preparation when structured and sustained over time [4]. However, many mentorship programs lack coherence, especially when implemented in rural districts with limited resources and staff capacity. While experienced mentor teachers may offer support to novice and pre-service teachers, the absence of structured routines, shared expectations, and alignment between coursework and classroom practice often weakens the potential benefits of field experiences. These issues are especially pressing in rural areas, where high teacher attrition rates and staffing shortages necessitate a pipeline of confident, instructionally prepared new teachers [1], [2].

This study investigated the development and implementation of a structured mentorship and co-teaching model for pre-service teachers completing a K–2 literacy methods practicum in a rural district. The goal was to explore how intentional design elements including gradual release, mentor support, collaborative planning, and alignment with instructional materials shaped pre-service teacher development and mentor teacher practice, as perceived by participants. Data collection included classroom observations, surveys, focus groups, and analysis of student artifacts. The findings informed the eventual creation of a structured mentorship framework, which is introduced in the discussion.

The following research questions guided the study:

- i. How do mentor teachers perceive outcomes associated with collaborative meetings with pre-service teachers and administrators regarding the alignment of mentorship goals and expectations?
- ii. How do mentors perceive the effectiveness of training modules in preparing them to support pre-service teachers?

iii. How do pre-service teachers and mentors describe their experience with co-teaching and implementing strategies, specifically regarding their professional growth?

iv. To what extent, if any, is the mentorship model mutually beneficial for both pre-service teachers and mentor teachers?

2. Review of Literature

Reviewed literature examined research that informs structured, practice-based mentorship in teacher preparation, including challenges and strengths of rural education, where geographic isolation, staffing shortages, and limited professional learning hinder clinical support. Also reviewed were studies which assessed the role of mentorship in pre-service teacher development, emphasizing clear roles, structured support, and collaboration.

Accordingly, co-teaching is presented as a model for shared responsibility and learning, especially when paired with feedback and planning. Our review underscores how coaching cycles and reflective practices may foster growth, resilience, and continuous improvement. Together, reviewed studies provide valuable context regarding the structured mentorship model explored in this project, particularly for under-resourced rural settings.

2.1. Rural Teacher Preparation

Preparing effective teachers for rural contexts presents challenges such as staffing shortages, geographic isolation, and limited access to professional learning [1], [5]. Although rural schools serve nearly one in five students nationwide, they often receive less policy attention, which contributes to persistent inequities in access and achievement.

Turnover rates in rural districts are especially high, particularly in schools serving students in poverty. Ingersoll and Tran [1] found that these shortages are largely driven by working conditions such as limited autonomy and professional isolation rather than a lack of available teachers. In response, some rural districts have adopted strategies such as localized recruitment, fiscal stewardship, and structured mentorship to improve retention and instructional quality [6].

Effective rural preparation programs must address place and context directly through coursework and clinical experiences. Azano and Stewart [5] advocate for using place-conscious pedagogy and community-based fieldwork to help pre-service teachers build authentic connections with students and families. Programs that emphasize rural assets such as strong relationships and local engagement are better equipped to prepare teachers who can succeed and remain in rural

schools.

2.2. Mentorship in Teacher Education

Mentorship plays a critical role in helping pre-service teachers transition from theory to practice. Its success depends on clear structure, shared expectations, and reciprocal professional relationships. Ambrosetti and Dekkers [14] describe mentoring as a collaborative process in which both the mentor and mentee contribute to growth. Trust, mutual respect, and context-responsive practices help promote reflection, inquiry, and shared meaning-making.

Despite its potential benefits, mentorship is often inconsistently implemented. Many programs offer little training for mentors and do not include regular opportunities for reflection, planning, or feedback. These omissions are especially problematic in literacy education, where pre-service teachers benefit from explicit modeling and analysis of instructional decisions. Without clear support, mentors often feel unprepared, leading to varied and less effective experiences for teacher candidates [7], [8].

Recent studies emphasize the need for structured mentorship models. Hairon et al. [13] outline four essential principles that contribute to effective mentoring: structured-ness, relevance, applicability, and workability. When mentorship is supported by defined content, consistent routines, and intentional collaboration, it produces stronger outcomes for both mentors and mentees.

2.3. Co-Teaching with Pre-Service Teachers

Co-teaching has become an increasingly common model for clinical preparation. It promotes shared instructional responsibility and offers pre-service teachers scaffolded opportunities to practice teaching. In contrast to traditional models where candidates gradually assume control, co-teaching enables real-time collaboration and feedback [9], [10].

However, implementation in teacher preparation programs often falls short of its potential. Mentors frequently rely on "one teach, one assist" arrangements, even when more interactive models such as parallel or station teaching would better support student learning [10].

Obstacles such as limited planning time and inconsistent professional development reduce the effectiveness of co-teaching. When implemented with clear expectations and shared routines, co-teaching supports instructional modeling and builds mutual professional trust. Mentor teachers often report enhanced clarity and renewed engagement in their own practice, while pre-service teachers develop skills and confidence in a supportive environment [4].

2.4. Coaching and Reflective Practice

Instructional coaching and structured reflection are important components of effective clinical preparation. Real-Time Coaching, which offers immediate feedback during instruction, has been linked to improved teaching skills and deeper self-reflection among pre-service teachers [11]. Feedback is more impactful when paired with opportunities to reflect on instructional choices and refine practices through dialogue.

Karathanos-Aguilar and Ervin-Kassab [4] found that co-teaching residencies that included inquiry cycles helped mentor teachers develop greater awareness of their instructional decisions. Mentors also modeled reflective practice, which helped shape professional habits among their pre-service partners. This reciprocal learning supported collaborative routines such as data analysis, lesson study, and problem solving.

In addition to instructional reflection, the development of professional dispositions such as perseverance and self-efficacy is essential for long-term teacher growth. Keesey et al. [12] reported that programs that explicitly taught growth mindset and GRIT principles helped pre-service teachers manage challenges and stay focused on student learning. These findings suggest that coaching, feedback, and reflection are not just techniques but tools for building lasting professional identity.

3. Methods

Our study utilized a qualitative design to examine the development and implementation of a structured mentorship model within a rural teacher preparation partnership.

3.1. Design

The design incorporated qualitative and quantitative data sources collected throughout a semester-long K–2 literacy methods course. The mentorship model emerged during the study and was refined iteratively based on participant feedback and observed outcomes.

3.2. Participants

Participants included 27 pre-service teachers enrolled in a literacy methods course at a regional public university, as well as their 27 mentor teachers from partner elementary schools. Eight school administrators also participated in the study.

All participants engaged in a 14-week field placement designed to integrate mentorship, co-teaching, and coaching routines. Mentor teachers were selected based on experience, willingness to mentor, and administrative recommendation.

3.3. Data Collection

Multiple data sources were collected to ensure triangulation and to explore both the process and impact of the mentorship model under study. Triangulation in this research involved comparing insights across stakeholder groups (pre-service teachers, mentor teachers, and administrators) and across data types (observations, surveys, focus groups, and artifacts). Each source was strategically selected to align with one or more of the study's four research questions.

Classroom observations were conducted to examine the implementation of co-teaching models and to document pre-service teacher engagement and instructional development (RQ3, RQ4). Structured field notes were recorded using a co-teaching observation template aligned to engagement indicators and common instructional routines. Observations were conducted by researchers who were not involved in field supervision to minimize bias and maintain neutrality in data collection.

Collaborative meetings between mentor teachers and school administrators were observed to document the alignment of mentorship goals and program expectations (RQ1). These meetings were recorded through field notes and focused on shared vision, communication patterns, and coordination between field and program structures.

Surveys were administered to mentor teachers to gather feedback on the usefulness of training modules, the implementation of co-teaching strategies, and overall perceptions of the mentorship approach (RQ2, RQ4). Although survey data were collected, they were excluded from formal data analysis.

Focus groups were conducted with pre-service teachers, mentor teachers, and school administrators to capture a range of experiences and perspectives related to the mentorship model (RQ2, RQ3). Pre-service teachers participated in a mid-semester focus group, while mentor teachers and administrators met toward the end of the semester. Mentor teachers were grouped by teaching site, and administrators participated in a single group session.

Pre-service teacher artifacts were collected to better understand candidate growth over time and the structure of the mentorship experience (RQ3, RQ4). These included guided observation templates, lesson plans, annotated teacher guides, and written reflections aligned with each phase of the gradual release model. Artifact data were collected for context but were excluded from formal data analysis.

The study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board, and all participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. Participation in the research component was voluntary and did not influence course evaluations, grades, or employment. To protect confidentiality, all collected data were

anonymized, securely stored, and used only for research and program development purposes.

3.4. Data Analysis

The analysis followed an iterative thematic approach grounded in the principles of qualitative research. Initial coding began with *in vivo* methods to preserve participant voice and surface meaningful phrases across data sets. These *in vivo* codes were then refined through axial coding to identify relationships among concepts and to develop broader thematic categories. Throughout the process, the research team engaged in ongoing analytic conversations, regularly debriefing, co-coding transcripts, and reviewing each other's interpretations to strengthen consistency and deepen understanding. This collaborative approach not only enhanced intercoder reliability but also fostered shared meaning-making around how mentor and pre-service teacher experiences were represented in the data.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, themes were triangulated across multiple data sources, including focus group transcripts, mentor reflections, classroom observations, and annotated lesson plans. While the full analysis is still ongoing, the themes presented here represent strong, recurring patterns that emerged across stakeholder groups and contexts. These preliminary findings offer insight into the structure, implementation, and perceived impact of the mentorship model, while laying the groundwork for further analysis and refinement in future phases of the study.

4. Findings

The findings that follow are preliminary themes that have emerged from the ongoing analysis. Drawn from a range of qualitative sources including focus groups, mentor interviews, and pre-service teacher reflections, these themes highlight shared experiences and recurring patterns that characterize the mentorship model's implementation. These findings are organized around four central themes: (1) early collaboration and shared expectations, (2) co-teaching implementation and growth, (3) reciprocal professional benefits, and (4) leadership development and reflective practice. Together, these themes illuminate both the strengths and limitations of the model in preparing pre-service teachers for reading instruction while also supporting the professional growth of mentor teachers.

4.1. Early Collaboration and Shared Expectations

Mentors and pre-service teachers consistently referenced the importance of beginning the practicum experience with clear communication, mutual

expectations, and a structured entry point. Participants highlighted that early collaboration helped reduce anxiety and foster a sense of team cohesion. As one mentor noted, "This is the first time I've ever had a practicum come in on day one and know exactly what lesson we were on, and she had it printed out and we already had it kind of looked at it together and had it annotated". Mentors attributed this clarity to the centralized meeting held at the Board of Education, which many described as instrumental in laying the foundation for effective co-planning. One teacher commented, "Just being able to meet them in person before the bell rings... and you guys explicitly going over it . . . black and white (no gray) was helpful for me". Despite these successes, participants also expressed a need for more logistical support in carving out dedicated time to plan together. As one mentor reflected, "Anytime we met, we had to meet at seven in the morning right before [school] because we didn't have any time to meet". While early collaboration was clearly beneficial, the data revealed that structural time constraints still limited its potential impact.

4.2. Co-teaching implementation and growth

The co-teaching structure was repeatedly described as a critical factor in shaping pre-service teacher growth and instructional confidence. Across focus groups, pre-service teachers emphasized how the gradual release model helped scaffold their transition from observer to lead teacher. One participant explained, "This practicum was actually realizing this is what I want to do because that last practicum, I was just in the back of the class watching her all day". Another shared, "It gave me peace of mind... in my last practicum I just jumped in alone, but this one was like a guide". Mentors similarly valued the structure, noting that the model allowed them to share responsibility incrementally. One teacher described how she started by modeling a slide during a knowledge lesson, then had her practicum student teach the next slide, gradually building toward more independence. The knowledge component of the curriculum emerged as a preferred entry point, both for its routine structure and its accessibility for co-teaching. A mentor noted, "Knowledge was easier to release... [student] felt more comfortable in Knowledge". Together, these findings suggest that a clearly structured co-teaching model fosters professional identity development and enables practical application of instructional strategies in a supportive, real-time setting.

4.3. Reciprocal Professional Benefits

While much of the focus naturally centered on pre-service teacher learning, mentors also reported meaningful professional growth as a result of their

participation in the mentorship model. Several described the process as one that reinvigorated their own instructional clarity and reflective practice. One mentor shared, “It made me dive deep”, referencing how the act of modeling annotations and planning with a practicum student led to more intentional instructional moves. Another noted that “team teaching was so impactful” and emphasized the benefit of working as a collective instructional unit, rather than in isolation. This sense of reciprocity was also reflected in comments about accountability and preparedness: “More of a ‘team’ helps with accountability, more organized, and more prepared students”. Although the pre-service teachers were the primary beneficiaries of coaching and support, the mentors’ voices make clear that their own learning and reflection were enhanced through the collaborative planning, observation, and instructional dialogue embedded within the mentorship framework.

4.4. Leadership Development and Reflective Practice

Though less frequently voiced than other themes, some participants alluded to increased leadership capacity and reflective growth as outcomes of the mentorship experience. Mentor teachers described how working alongside pre-service teachers prompted them to slow down, name their instructional decisions, and reflect on their routines with greater intentionality. One mentor noted, “This really guides you on what to do with them. It really guides them on what to look for, and it’s really digging into our curriculum”, indicating that her own instructional planning was sharpened through the co-teaching process. Similarly, another teacher explained that modeling teacher moves and sequencing questions helped her reconsider how she builds student understanding, particularly during knowledge lessons. Pre-service teachers also began articulating professional judgments during lessons, describing moments when they needed to adjust in real time, reread a section, or scaffold a student response. These moments of reflection illustrate how shared responsibility within the co-teaching model can cultivate leadership dispositions and a growing sense of professional agency among both novice and experienced educators.

This study explored the implementation of a structured mentorship model designed to strengthen rural teacher preparation in early literacy instruction. Findings from participant focus groups and mentor reflections revealed that intentional routines such as relationship-building meetings, scaffolded co-teaching, mentor training phases, and curriculum-aligned planning practices played a key role in supporting the development of both mentor and pre-service teachers. Specifically, the mentorship model was perceived to foster strong relational trust, ease pre-service teacher anxiety, and promote clarity through early collaboration

and shared expectations. As one mentor reflected, meeting together before the start of practicum made expectations “black and white,” helping everyone feel “more on the same page.”

The co-teaching structure emerged as especially impactful. The gradual release of instructional responsibility helped pre-service teachers build confidence, apply instructional strategies in real time, and develop a sense of teaching identity. One participant explained, “This practicum was actually realizing this is what I want to do,” highlighting the importance of authentic teaching experiences as a foundation for professional growth. In turn, mentor teachers reported renewed reflection on their own instructional practice and classroom routines, with one noting, “It made me dive deep.” This reciprocity reinforced the notion that mentoring is not a unidirectional act but a shared professional learning opportunity.

The mentorship model surfaced persistent challenges common in rural placements including limited time for collaborative planning and the unpredictable realities of school environments. While early planning meetings were praised, many mentors and candidates noted the difficulty of consistently carving out time to co-plan during the school day. Others described moments when unexpected disruptions, such as emergency drills or IEP meetings, forced them to adapt quickly.

In response to these findings, the research team developed a new conceptual model of mentorship in teacher preparation. The framework, introduced in the following section, emphasizes working from a shared vision, phased implementation, alignment with district tools and methods coursework, and shared professional growth. It offers a replicable model for educator preparation programs seeking to improve the quality and consistency of literacy instruction, positioning field experiences not as an add-on, but as the central lever for teacher development in early reading instruction.

5. The BRIDGE Framework

The Spears-Braisted BRIDGE Framework (Building Reflective, Intentional, and Dynamic Guided Experiences) is a structured mentorship model designed to enrich the field experience for pre-service teachers while simultaneously supporting mentor teachers. Developed through iterative feedback from stakeholders in a rural K–2 literacy field experience, the BRIDGE Framework offers a sequenced, relationship-based approach to mentorship that bridges the gap between university coursework and authentic classroom practice. It aligns with research on practice-based teacher education, co-teaching, and instructional coaching, offering a developmental path for pre-service teachers and mentors alike [16].

The framework is organized around five core components: shared vision, coursework alignment,

relationship building, gradual release of responsibility, and coaching cycles. These components are not isolated phases but interconnected strategies that evolve and deepen throughout the field experience. The following sections provide a detailed explanation of each component, grounded in both the literature and the lived experience of participants in the study.

5.1. Shared Vision

The foundation of the BRIDGE Framework is the co-construction of a shared vision for literacy instruction and pre-service teacher readiness. This shared vision is developed collaboratively by district leaders, university faculty, school administrators, mentor teachers, and other university or district partners (education consultants, non-profit organizations, etc.) at the outset of the field experience. Its purpose is to ensure alignment of expectations, instructional goals, and definitions of effective teaching practice across all stakeholders. Rather than relying on assumptions or isolated planning, the shared vision process initiates open dialogue about what successful teacher preparation should look like in the local context.

District and university partners begin this process by identifying common priorities for early literacy instruction, drawing from both research-based frameworks and district-specific tools such as high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) and observation rubrics. These priorities are then translated into a teacher readiness profile, which articulates what a well-prepared pre-service teachers should know, be able to do, and demonstrate by the end of the placement. The profile is organized into three domains: knowledge (e.g., foundational literacy, the science of reading), skills (e.g., classroom management, collaboration, use of district tools), and dispositions (e.g., adaptability, growth mindset, and resilience).

Establishing this vision is not a one-time event but an ongoing process of program implementation and reflection. Structured meetings and digital collaboration tools are used throughout the semester to revisit goals, address challenges, and refine supports. Mentor teachers and pre-service teachers engage in regular check-ins to ensure continued alignment with the shared vision. This dynamic process reflects the Interactive Model of Program Planning [17], which emphasizes ongoing negotiation and responsiveness to participant needs. Built on a foundation of transparency, alignment, and mutual ownership of goals, the shared vision component lays the groundwork for an intentional, cohesive field experience—and, ultimately, a more prepared teacher.

5.2. Coursework Alignment

Another essential component of the BRIDGE Framework is the alignment between universities

coursework and field-based practice. Pre-service teachers experience a disconnection between what they are learning in their methods courses and what they are asked to do in classrooms [15]. The BRIDGE Framework addresses this challenge by embedding district-aligned tools and expectations into both the coursework and field experience. Throughout the semester, pre-service teachers engage with planning protocols, lesson templates, and observation rubrics that are used by practicing teachers in the partner district. These tools are not reserved for the field alone; they are introduced and practiced in methods courses so that pre-service teachers encounter them as part of an integrated instructional approach. Assignments such as lesson plans, annotated teacher guides, and self-reflections use the same structures and language that pre-service teachers will later encounter in their practicum classrooms and eventually as certified teachers.

Furthermore, mentor teachers are given the opportunity to engage with these same tools, supporting their ability to provide effective coaching and feedback while also increasing their own familiarity with instructional materials and practices used across the district. This reciprocal exposure fosters consistency, shared language, and a deeper instructional partnership between mentors and candidates.

This deliberate coordination ensures that what pre-service teachers learn in theory is directly applicable in practice. It also fosters authentic engagement, as pre-service teachers see the relevance of their coursework and understand how it translates into real-world instruction. Importantly, the structure of the BRIDGE Framework is generalizable, allowing it to be adapted to other districts or contexts using different instructional materials. The emphasis is on coherence, not uniformity. By strengthening the connection between course content and classroom application, the framework enhances instructional clarity, encourages deeper learning, and reduces the sense of disorientation that often accompanies clinical placements.

5.3. Relationship Building

Strong professional relationships are at the heart of effective mentorship [13], [14]. In the BRIDGE Framework, relationship building is not treated as an incidental or informal process—it is deliberately structured as the first phase of the field experience and is continuously reinforced throughout. Mentor teachers and pre-service teachers begin their collaboration with a relationship-building meeting early in the semester. This session is designed to foster mutual understanding, establish trust, and clarify expectations before formal instructional work begins.

During this meeting, participants engage in structured activities such as “All About Us” Bingo and conversation cards to facilitate authentic connection.

These activities allow mentors and mentees to share their goals, teaching philosophies, and prior experiences in a non-evaluative environment. Mentors also introduce their classroom routines, student needs, and instructional approaches, helping pre-service teachers contextualize their upcoming responsibilities. School administrators also participate in these sessions to reinforce the collaborative nature of the field experience and to position pre-service teachers as valued contributors within the school community.

This early investment in relationship building has been shown to influence mentorship success [14]. When trust and open communication are established from the outset, mentor-mentee pairs are more likely to engage in collaborative planning, reciprocal feedback, and shared instructional decision-making. Throughout the semester, the BRIDGE Framework encourages ongoing relational practices such as protected co-planning time, shared reflection prompts, and routine check-ins. These strategies foster a team-based dynamic in which both mentor and pre-service teachers feel empowered to contribute, question, and grow.

The intentionality of this component addresses a key weakness in many mentorship models, where relational development is assumed rather than supported. By embedding relationship building into the structure of the field experience, the BRIDGE Framework ensures that mentorship is not only about instructional growth but also about connection, respect, and mutual accountability.

5.4. Gradual Release of Responsibility

At the center of the BRIDGE Framework's instructional design is a structured, four-phase model that gradually transfers responsibility from mentor teacher to pre-service teacher. Rather than relying on informal progression or one-size-fits-all timelines, the framework provides a clearly scaffolded sequence: Relationship Building, Guided Observation, Co-Planning, and Co-Teaching. Each phase is designed to align with the pre-service teacher's growing confidence and instructional readiness, while ensuring that mentor support remains developmentally appropriate and responsive [13].

The Relationship Building phase, as discussed, focuses on establishing rapport and shared expectations. Once this foundation is laid, pre-service teachers enter the Guided Observation phase. In this stage, they are encouraged to observe with intention, using structured tools to document classroom routines, instructional decisions, and student engagement. They are not passive observers; instead, they are guided to notice and reflect on the subtleties of effective teaching, such as pacing, questioning strategies, and differentiation [16].

The third phase, Co-Planning, marks a shift from observation to participation. Mentor teachers and pre-

service teachers collaborate on lesson preparation using district-aligned templates and planning prompts. Importantly, mentors are encouraged to verbalize their decision-making processes—explaining not just what they do, but why they do it. This modeling makes invisible teacher thinking visible, allowing pre-service teachers to internalize reasoning behind instructional moves that might otherwise go unnoticed [13] [14].

Finally, in the Co-Teaching phase, pre-service teachers begin taking the lead in instruction through structured models such as One Teach, One Support; Parallel Teaching; and Station Teaching [9] [10]. Most often, they start in the support role within the One Teach, One Support model—providing assistance, observing instructional moves, and building confidence in a low-risk setting. As the semester progresses, and as pre-service teachers gain experience through collaborative planning, modeling, and feedback from their mentors, they gradually transition into lead teaching roles. This transition is scaffolded through strategic use of co-teaching models: parallel teaching offers opportunities for simultaneous instruction in smaller groups, station teaching supports differentiated delivery, and team teaching encourages fluid, collaborative ownership of the lesson. Mentor teachers remain active participants throughout this process, offering feedback, facilitating transitions, and modeling instructional strategies as needed. This intentional sequencing allows pre-service teachers to lead instruction authentically while still benefiting from the guidance and support of their mentor.

To support this gradual release across all four phases, mentors have access to training materials that align with each stage of the framework. These resources include curated articles on effective communication and feedback strategies, detailed guidance for using instructional rubrics, and phase-specific reflection prompts [7], [8]. In addition, guided activities foster meaningful mentor-mentee collaboration, helping both participants clarify expectations, engage in joint planning, and reflect on their instructional practices. These materials promote consistency and developmental support, while also respecting mentor autonomy and varied experience levels.

Throughout all four phases, the gradual release model is flexible and adaptive. This clarity and structure ensure that both parties feel supported, not overwhelmed, and that instructional handoff occurs in a way that promotes confidence, competence, and student-centered practice [11], [12].

5.5. Coaching Cycles

Embedded coaching cycles are a defining feature of the BRIDGE Framework, offering consistent opportunities for instructional feedback, goal setting, and professional reflection. Rather than reserving feedback for sporadic observations or end-of-semester

evaluations, the framework integrates coaching as an ongoing, collaborative process that supports both pre-service teachers and their mentors [11]. While mentor teachers are the primary facilitators of coaching cycles, the structure is further supported by university field supervisors, who provide additional observations, guide reflection assignments, and conduct formal evaluations aligned with program expectations. Each coaching cycle includes three core components: a pre-conference, an observation, and a post-conference, all tied to shared goals and anchored in district-aligned tools.

The pre-conference initiates the cycle by fostering clarity and shared intention. During this meeting, the mentor teacher and pre-service teacher review an upcoming lesson plan together. They identify key objectives, anticipate instructional challenges, and agree upon a specific area of focus for the observation—such as pacing, questioning, or student engagement. This step ensures that both participants are working toward a common target and that feedback will be rooted in actionable evidence [13].

The observation itself is conducted in the context of co-teaching or lead teaching, depending on the phase of the field experience. The mentor uses structured observation tools, often based on familiar district rubrics such as the Instructional Practice Guide (IPG), to record evidence related to the agreed-upon focus area. This not only reinforces alignment with district expectations but also helps pre-service teachers become fluent in the evaluative language and standards used in professional practice.

In the post-conference, mentor and pre-service teacher engage in a reflective dialogue guided by evidence from the observation. The emphasis is on affirming strengths, identifying areas for growth, and developing specific action steps. Rather than focusing solely on performance, the conversation centers on professional learning—how the pre-service teacher can use the experience to refine instructional decisions, try new strategies, and deepen their understanding of teaching and learning [11] [12].

These coaching cycles are mutually beneficial. Pre-service teachers receive regular, targeted feedback that fosters growth and confidence. Mentor teachers, in turn, sharpen their skills in observation, analysis, and instructional coaching. Many mentors report that participating in these cycles enhances their own teaching practice by prompting them to reflect more deliberately on their instructional choices [4]. The framework provides sentence stems, sample reflection questions, and scheduling templates to support mentors in conducting effective conferences, regardless of prior coaching experience.

By normalizing and structuring feedback throughout the practicum, the coaching cycles embedded in the BRIDGE Framework move mentorship beyond informal advice or occasional praise. They establish a rhythm of

reflection and refinement that supports sustained instructional development, setting the stage for professional habits that extend into pre-service teachers' first years of teaching and beyond (Figure 1).

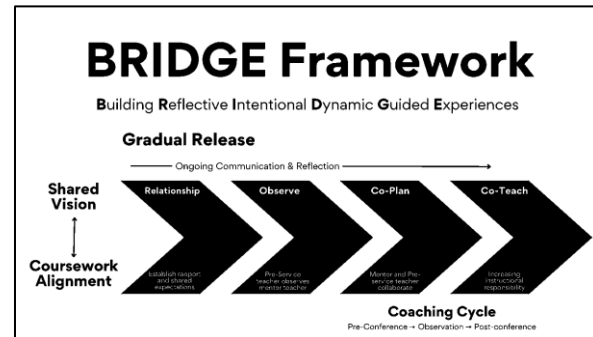


Figure 1. Visualizing the Framework

Although the BRIDGE Framework is grounded in research and lived practice, its strength lies in its clarity and usability. It is intentionally designed to be both conceptual and actionable. The visual model begins with two foundational components—Shared Vision and Coursework Alignment—which are intentionally established at the outset of the practicum. These elements are not afterthoughts; they serve as the essential infrastructure upon which all phases of the practicum are built. Shared Vision brings together university faculty, district leaders, mentor teachers, and pre-service teachers to define expectations for high-quality instruction and readiness. Coursework Alignment ensures that tools, strategies, and language introduced in methods courses are reinforced in the field, creating a coherent and connected learning experience.

Following this foundation, the framework moves into four horizontally sequenced phases: Relationship Building, Guided Observation, Co-Planning, and Co-Teaching. These phases represent a gradual release of instructional responsibility, with each stage scaffolding the pre-service teacher's development while maintaining appropriate support from the mentor teacher.

Embedded within Phases 3 and 4 (Co-Planning and Co-Teaching) is the Coaching Cycle, which includes a pre-conference, observation, and post-conference. This cycle provides structured opportunities for feedback, instructional refinement, and professional dialogue. During these phases, planning and instruction are the central focus, and the coaching cycle supports both mentor and pre-service teachers in developing clarity, confidence, and instructional competence.

Across all phases, communication and reflection are critical. Ongoing dialogue among stakeholders—including pre-service teachers, mentor teachers, field supervisors, administrators, and district leaders—is essential for maintaining alignment and responsiveness. Reflection, particularly among mentor teachers, pre-

service teachers, and field supervisors, helps ensure that feedback loops are meaningful, context-sensitive, and growth-oriented.

This visual representation is shared during orientation meetings and embedded in digital practicum guides, offering all participants a clear roadmap for the experience. It replaces ambiguity with structure and transparency, allowing pre-service teachers to track their developmental progress and enabling mentors to anticipate and adapt their support.

In practice, this visualization is not a static chart but a living guide. Stakeholders are encouraged to annotate, adapt, and reflect on the framework in real time, using it as a shared touchstone for conversation and planning. Its simplicity allows for cross-role communication and helps maintain coherence across schools, mentors, and faculty supervisors. By visualizing the framework, programs can more effectively foster the clarity, alignment, and shared ownership that are essential for impactful mentorship.

5.6. Tools for Implementation

To support the successful rollout of the BRIDGE Framework, a range of practical tools and templates has been developed in collaboration with district leaders, university faculty, and other partners. These resources are designed to embed the framework's core components into the daily routines of the practicum, reducing the cognitive and logistical load on both mentors and pre-service teachers.

Among the most widely used tools are the planning templates that guide pre-service teachers through lesson development while prompting reflection on alignment, differentiation, and engagement. These templates are modeled after district resources but adapted to be user-friendly for pre-service teachers.

Reflection prompts are another key resource. Structured by phase, these prompts are designed to help pre-service teachers process what they observe, plan more intentionally, and engage in deeper self-assessment after teaching. Prompts might include questions such as “What instructional moves did your mentor make that were not part of the written plan?” or “How did you respond to student misconceptions?”

To facilitate consistent coaching, the framework includes observation forms aligned to local rubrics like the Instructional Practice Guide (IPG) or the Aspiring Teacher Rubric. These forms prompt mentors to record evidence of instructional behaviors and to frame feedback using specific language. Mentors also receive sentence stem banks for use in post-conference conversations—these include affirmations, clarifying questions, and growth-oriented language that models professional dialogue.

Finally, the BRIDGE Framework is supported by digital access tools, such as shared folders or learning

management system modules, where mentors and pre-service teachers can access resources, log feedback, and communicate with university supervisors. These tools create continuity and transparency across settings, allowing faculty to monitor progress and provide support as needed.

Collectively, these implementation tools do more than streamline logistics—they operationalize the values of the BRIDGE Framework: clarity, intentionality, alignment, and shared growth. By placing these tools directly in the hands of educators, the framework becomes not just a model, but a lived structure that shapes the daily experience of teacher preparation.

5.7. Adapting the Framework for Contexts Beyond Rural Literacy

Although the BRIDGE (Building Reflective, Intentional, Dynamic, Guided Experiences) Framework was developed in response to the challenges of rural teacher preparation and early literacy instruction, its core components—shared vision, coursework alignment, relationship building, gradual release, and coaching cycles—address universal needs in high-quality clinical preparation. These elements are not bound to a particular grade level, subject area, or setting, but instead offer a flexible, modular structure that can be adapted to suit a wide range of teacher preparation models.

Rather than prescribing a single approach, the framework supports customization while preserving its essential focus on reflective practice, intentional and dynamic design, and guided experiences—all foundational to the BRIDGE model. Tools and routines within each phase can be tailored to fit institutional priorities, district partnerships, or content-specific goals without compromising coherence.

The BRIDGE Framework does not promote replication by formula, but by principle. Its strength lies in its adaptability—offering a clear, research-informed pathway that programs can modify to meet their unique needs while maintaining a shared commitment to reflective, aligned, and student-centered clinical experiences.

6. Final Reflections and Next Steps

The BRIDGE Framework emerged from a clear and urgent need: to improve the coherence, intentionality, and impact of mentorship in rural teacher preparation, particularly in early literacy [1]. But in responding to that need, the framework also surfaced broader truths about the nature of effective teacher development. Pre-service teachers grow when they are embedded in relationships grounded in trust [14]. They thrive when coursework and classroom practice feel aligned and mutually reinforced [15]. They build confidence through scaffolded responsibility and specific, supportive feedback [13],

[16]. And they benefit from structured routines that help make the invisible work of teaching visible, actionable, and replicable [4].

This framework does not promise to solve all the systemic challenges facing teacher preparation—especially in high-need or under-resourced settings—but it offers a model that is both principled and practical. It elevates the role of mentor teachers as instructional leaders and partners in preparation. It centers fieldwork not as a shadow of real teaching, but as a rich site of authentic learning. And it bridges the longstanding divide between preparation and practice by providing a shared structure, language, and trajectory for growth.

As programs continue to adapt to new standards, technologies, and policy expectations, the BRIDGE Framework can serve as a flexible anchor. Its components can be revised, expanded, or deepened over time, but its core remains: build relationships, design with purpose, release responsibility intentionally, and reflect together. These are the foundations not only of effective mentorship, but of the teaching profession itself.

Future research will be necessary to assess the long-term outcomes of pre-service teachers prepared under the BRIDGE Framework—especially in terms of teacher retention, instructional effectiveness, and student achievement. Program leaders may also consider examining how implementation fidelity and stakeholder investment shape outcomes across different sites. In the short term, the framework provides a clear, practical path for developing confident, well-supported teachers who are ready to meet the demands of today’s classrooms.

7. References

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