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Relationships, Learning, and Motivation for One Virtual Literacy Camp during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Caitlin Spears and Heather D. Young

The world-wide pandemic of 2020 caused by the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) resulted in a lifestyle change for most American citizens, most notably in the ways individuals participated in the workforce and in education. While the first known case of COVID-19 was reported in the United States on January 22, 2020 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020), the nationwide declaration of the two-week initiative to “Stop the Spread” was not announced by President Trump until March 16, 2020 (The White House, 2020). Consequently, most universities and schools moved to virtual learning soon after, including the Tier I Research institution in the Southeastern United States where this research took place. The shift to virtual learning has remained largely intact at this university through the Spring 2021 semester, resulting in the need for university-sponsored events, clubs, and camps to also shift to a virtual format.

The focus of this article, a university literacy camp established in Summer 2016, was redesigned during the summer of 2020 to fit the virtual format suggested by university officials (Office of Teacher Education, personal communication, August 2020). The Fall 2020 session was the first literacy camp that had been completed through virtual means using Zoom technology. The shift from an in-person camp setting to an online camp setting created an opportunity for research in investigating students’ attitudes towards literacy, literacy learning, and participation in the newly formatted virtual literacy camp.

Theoretical Framework

The importance of developing 21st century skills, including teamwork, collaboration, intellectual openness, knowledge, and creativity (Pellegrino & Hilton, 2013) is framed through the lens of Maria Montessori’s approach to learning through non-traditional methods of education, bringing meaning to the students’ realm of understanding (Lillard, 2016). John Dewey’s 1902 publication of *The Child and the Curriculum* laid the foundation for education pioneers like Montessori to “abandon the notion of subject-matter as something fixed and ready-made in itself...realize that the child and the curriculum are simply two limits which define a single process” (p. 9).

Further, constructivist principles laid out by Lev Vygotsky in both his sociocultural theory and model of the Zone of Proximal Development (1978) laid the foundation for how this study should be completed. As researchers and literacy clinic directors, we frame this study and what happens in the literacy camps with the belief that students should be met in their current position of understanding.

Abraham Maslow proposed through his 1943 model of *The Hierarchy of Needs* that for a student to reach self-actualization and the highest levels of learning, he or she must first have several levels of physical and emotional security met. Meeting these needs were foremost in the design of the literacy camp, as students had to achieve a sense of trust and belonging first with their tutor before learning could occur (Maslow, 1943). Motivation to learn comes secondary to the first levels of Maslow’s hierarchy; and thus, social-emotional principles including social

awareness and relationship skills (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020) were implemented by camp tutors to promote higher levels of student success.

Review of Literature

The purpose of this review of literature is to explore existing research in the field of elementary literacy learning, as well as other applicable literature that relates to student success when learning literacy concepts, and more specifically, a university-run literacy clinic program. Additionally, literature focusing on elementary student learning in the virtual setting will be considered. This review will focus first on trends for student achievement in literacy learning and the related implications, followed by a shift into trends in virtual learning and the ways students are impacted by the reduction in face-to-face instruction.

Social-Emotional Learning. Social-emotional learning (SEL) has become an integral part of learning in classrooms throughout the world (Weissberg et al, 2003; Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013; Yang et al., 2018), resulting in several foundational studies that describe the impact SEL has on K-12 students. Social-emotional learning can be defined as “the process through which [students] understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL, 2020).

A 2011 meta-analysis conducted by Durlak et al. investigated the effects of SEL instruction across multiple disciplines, including attitude, behavior, and academic performance. The analysis included 213 SEL programs and spanned 270,034 kindergarten through twelfth-grade students. Six outcomes were measured as a result of SEL program implementation: “social and emotional skills, attitudes towards self and others, positive social behaviors, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance” (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 410).

Researchers found that “SEL programs yielded significant positive effects on targeted social-emotional competencies and attitudes about self, others, and school. They also enhanced students' behavioral adjustment in the form of increased prosocial behaviors and reduced conduct and internalizing problems, and improved academic performance on achievement tests and grades” (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 417). Connection to school and to subject matter can be the difference between a student succeeding and mastering material or falling behind and divesting from his/her studies, as highlighted by the SEL participants that grew 11 percentile points in achievement measures while their counterparts in the control group did not (Durlak et al, 2011).

Newer research, including a 2018 study completed by authors Yang et al., continues to point to the need for social-emotional strategies across all grade levels, which supports authors Low and colleagues in their assertion that students benefit from SEL programming (Low et al., 2015). Rooted in their understanding of CASEL's five competencies, the researchers employed 25,896 students throughout the elementary, middle, and high school levels in grades 4-12 to determine how students' behavioral and emotional engagement is related to teacher-student and student-student relationships, as well as instruction of SEL competencies. Students completed the “Delaware Student Engagement Scale-Student (DSES-S), the Teaching of Social and Emotional Competencies (TSEC) subscale of the Delaware Techniques Scale-Student (DTS-S), and the

Teacher-Student Relationships and Student-Student Relationships subscales of the 2014 Delaware School Climate Scale-Student (DSCS-S-2014)” (Yang et al., 2018, p. 50). Each scale was scored and analyzed to determine causal relationships between factors listed above. Results indicate that while all factors correlated significantly with emotional engagement and cognitive-behavioral engagement for students, only the school level had significant correlation with cognitive-behavioral engagement (Yang et al., 2018). The need for strong connection with both teachers and peers was made evident in these findings. CASEL (2020) recognizes that the basis for meaningful learning comes from relationships, citing relationship skills specifically in their fourth competency, a prerequisite for students to master responsible decision making.

Motivation. Reading motivation is multi-dimensional and can be both intrinsic and extrinsic (Wigfield, 1997); it demonstrates self-efficacy and one’s belief in his/herself to accomplish a given task with autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2009; Schunk & Pajares, 2009). Authors Unrau and Schlackman conducted a study in 2006 to find distinctions between the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and how each type of motivation related to student reading achievement at the middle school level for students in sixth through eighth grades. The longitudinal study spanned two school years to answer four research questions; however, the question “To what extent does intrinsic and extrinsic motivation relate to the reading achievement of students in middle school?” (p. 85) relates most for the purposes of this review. Students were tested using the Motivation for Reading Questionnaire (MRQ) to assess reading motivation and the Gate-MacGinitie reading test to measure reading achievement. Students were tested in “cohorts” for the MRQ: once in the fall of the 6th grade and once in the fall of 7th grade for cohort one (6-7 cohort); once in the fall of 7th grade and once in the fall of 8th grade for cohort two (7-8 cohort). All students took the Gate-MacGinitie reading test in the fall of the second year. Data analysis showed that reading motivation and achievement are positively related specifically for Asian students. Additionally, results showed that there is an overall decline in motivation to read throughout the middle school years (Unrau & Schlackman, 2006).

Motivation to learn should also be considered when teaching students who have low reading comprehension skills, as demonstrated in Sideridis’ 2006 study of 587 fourth-grade students in Crete, Greece, all of whom met selection criteria by displaying difficulty in reading comprehension. Researchers questioned participants to determine if there is correlation between motivational and cognitive characteristics within a student that would affect learning and achievement (Sideridis et al., 2006).

Students were tested one-by-one for two 40-minute sessions over a three-week period to determine whether reading comprehension difficulties were related to the factors listed in research question one. Findings indicated that “cognitive deficits were mostly responsible for reading comprehension difficulties; a few motivational and psychopathological variables were predictive of group membership when combined with cognitive variables” (Sideridis et al., 2006, p. 170). This points to the fact that motivation to read is not adversely connected with reading comprehension; in fact, it is cognitive challenges that lead mostly to reading comprehension deficits.

Virtual Learning. New literature is still emerging related to virtual learning in the elementary setting due to the COVID-19 pandemic; however, a thorough review of research was still

conducted for this section. Walker & Venker Weidenbenner's 2019 qualitative study about empathy development in children through virtual network capacities found that students can develop empathy through technology; however, an adult (teacher, parent, etc.) must be involved to mediate the learning. Their work showcases the importance of human interaction when developing social-emotional skills, as "it is only through human interaction that the child learns to use speech or language...as a tool to develop its other psychological processes, including abstract thinking skills, emotional regulation, and prosocial behaviors" (Walker & Venker Weidenbenner, 2019, p. 127). The findings in this paper mirror teachings of Vygotsky, whose work served as a large piece of the theoretical framework for the present study. Vygotsky believed in a continuous passing of information from object to child and vice versa through the passing of another individual, in this case, an adult facilitator (Vygotsky, 1978).

A team of researchers in Indonesia studied effective classroom management in the online environment because of the COVID-19 pandemic, examining rules, routines, relationship[s], motivation, and discipline (Lathifah et al., 2020). The study found that students "prefer to study with a caring teacher...the teachers have to maintain the class session...understanding the humor that comes from the students" (Lathifah et al., 2020, p. 3265-3266).

Regarding engagement and motivation, the researchers found that younger grade students needed more assistance to guide their studies, requiring teachers to interact with them through live lessons on Google Classroom and through additional communication with the parents using WhatsApp. Though these and other challenges were faced, the researchers asserted that with additional time invested and adjustments in the daily operations, effective management can occur in the virtual setting (Lathifah et al., 2020).

A 2021 study conducted by Alves & Romig focused on upper elementary students facing difficulties in reading due to an existing learning disability. The researchers hypothesized that "virtual instruction may be useful for students who...need extra practice on a skill" (Alves & Romig, 2021, p. 96), which includes those students with learning disabilities.

Findings showed that when the model presented by Alves & Romig was implemented through virtual means, teachers were able to offer instruction in several crucial areas of reading. While some parents of student participants in the literacy clinic reported learning disabilities, others reported a general need to practice and improve specific skills under the reading umbrella. The virtual setting was utilized to aid in strengthening reading and other literacy skills.

Methods

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine 26 kindergarten through sixth grade students' attitudes towards literacy, literacy learning, and participation in a university-designed literacy camp that was led by both graduate and undergraduate elementary pre-service teacher candidates in the final year of their teacher education program. This research defines literacy learning as a social activity in which interpersonal behaviors are the "basis for new conceptual understandings in cognition and communication" (Wilkinson & Silliman, 2014, p. 237). Further, literacy learning is an integrated approach to acquiring language and reading skills, through both written and oral language, within a given setting (Wilkinson & Silliman, 2014).

This study examined the research question, "How do kindergarten through sixth grade students' attitudes evolve from the beginning to the end of their participation in a virtual university literacy camp?" The researchers investigated this question through conducting individual interviews with K-6 student participants. The interview question, *What is the best part about literacy camp?*, was asked to each participant at both the beginning and end of camp.

Setting

This university literacy clinic was established in Summer 2016. The clinic was a physical space on the university campus, with K-6 students and university interns participating in camp sessions in person for various lengths of time per term depending on the session type. Camp sessions were held three times per year, during the summer, fall, and spring semesters. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic during the Spring 2020 semester required camp directors to suspend camp mid-way through the term.

Clinic personnel decided to move the camp fully virtual in concordance with university policy beginning with the Fall 2020 semester. Students who were previously unable to be served due to the physical location restraints were able to attend camp virtually. Attendance rates proved higher beginning with the Fall 2020 term than in previous terms as students did not have to physically report to the university campus.

The studied university literacy camp was held via Zoom once a week for 12 weeks. Each student was placed in a virtual breakout room with their tutors for one hour. Kindergarten through sixth grade students were assigned to two university pre-service teacher tutors.

The Literacy Camp structure was determined prior to the beginning of camp so that all tutors followed a set schedule. Weeks one and two were set aside for participant pre-assessments. These were completed and analyzed to determine a specific area of intervention appropriate for each participant. Weeks three through ten were designated as intervention periods where tutors worked with participants for an hour in their determined areas of literacy focus.

Post-assessments in the area of intervention were completed and analyzed during week 11. Parents were invited to attend the week 12 session; conferences were conducted, and progress reports were presented during this final session.

Participants

Participants for this study included 26 students in grades kindergarten through sixth. The grade breakdown is shown in Table 1. There were seven female participants and 19 male participants. Nine of the 26 participants had attended literacy camp before, though this was every participant's first-time attending camp in the virtual format.

The majority of students who participated in this study attended school face-to-face in a school building (n=21). Three students attended school virtually through their given school districts, and two participants were homeschooled.

Table 1
Participant Grade Levels

Participant Grade Level	N
Kindergarten	2
First Grade	7
Second Grade	4
Third Grade	4
Fourth Grade	3
Fifth Grade	5
Sixth Grade	1

In order to better understand the learning needs and personalities of the camp participants, families were asked to answer the following two questions when enrolling their students in Literacy Camp: *Why do you want your child to attend this camp?* and *How do you think this camp will help your child?* Most parents enrolled their children in camp to specifically bolster literacy components, while a couple of them enrolled their children for more general reasons such as building confidence or to help their child find enjoyment in reading. The ways they envisioned camp helping their child were much the same with most responses coming in the area of providing additional support outside of school. To provide more background information on the participants, the frequency of themes with select responses are offered in Table 2.

Data Collection and Analysis

Marshall and Rossman (2015) report that when a survey is deployed as the primary means of data collection, beliefs and attitudes of individuals may be specifically collected and discerned through self-reporting. The research team for this study consisted of the director of the literacy clinic and a doctoral candidate who serves as the graduate assistant for the literacy clinic; the team has a combined total of 28 years of experience working with elementary teachers and students. Due to the age of the participants and the setting where the data were to be collected, the research team chose to individually interview the participants to ensure that administration was consistent and to further reduce outside bias (i.e., from camp tutors and participant parents/guardians). During the interview, the researchers asked student participants, *“What is the best part about literacy camp?”* Following the interview, participant responses were thematically analyzed.

Table 2
Parent Responses for Enrollment in Literacy Camp

Question	Theme of Response	Frequency	Select Responses
Why do you want your child to attend this camp?	Reading	9	“Help him read” “Grow in reading”
	Literacy (general)	6	“Increase ability in literacy”
	Writing	5	“Needs extra practice with writing”
	Comprehension	5	“Improve her comprehension” “Help with reading comprehension”
	Reading fun	2	“Make reading fun” “Enjoy reading more”
	Spelling	1	
	Fluency	1	
	Confidence	1	“Increase confidence and ability in literacy”
How do you think this camp will help your child?	Extra support / reinforce / practice	7	“Practice with someone she won’t argue with (me)” “Additional reader community to cement teaching”
	Previous Experience	4	“My son attended and his results were great” “It helps her every year”
	Reading	2	
	Increase to Grade Level	1	
	Move toward grade level	1	
	One-on-one learning	1	
	Ready for next grade	1	
	Confidence	1	
	Writing	1	
	Literacy (general)	1	“Enhance literacy skills”
	Comprehension	1	

The interview was given as a pre-assessment during the regularly scheduled literacy camp hour on October 5, 2020, and given as a post-assessment on December 7, 2020, during individually scheduled five-minute Zoom sessions with one of the two researchers. The interviews were individually completed with all program participants with a parental consent rate of 87% (n=26). The responses from the interviews were collected and recorded using an Excel spreadsheet. Pre- and post-interviews were correlated using a random number code. The participant names were redacted to maintain participant confidentiality after the interview responses had been matched.

Data from the interview question were analyzed inductively through a process that began with open coding, or the process in which data is coded for categories of information (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Peer debriefing was used in order to more positively influence legitimacy and assure the findings were grounded within the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For open coding, each member of the research team read through the interview responses from both pre- and post-interviews, noting potential understandings using *in vivo* codes (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Following this process with each interview and a discussion of initial understandings, the researchers returned to the compiled list of quotes and noted 12 open codes (see Table 3: Data Analysis Coding Examples) as they emerged and were confirmed among data excerpts. The following examples were chosen to illuminate the researchers' process of data analysis.

Once finished with the open coding process, the researchers collaborated to determine themes as they read through each open code, independently grouped the codes into categories, and then discussed their understandings of them. This process allowed the researchers to take 12 open codes and reduce them into three themes, constructs of the open codes that furthered a more complete understanding of them.

Additionally, the researchers noted which data excerpts appeared in the pre-interview and which data excerpts appeared in the post-interview. Frequencies of pre- and post-interview data were calculated for each theme.

Table 3
Data Analysis Coding Examples

Question	Theme	Open Code	Select Participant Response
What is the best part about literacy camp?	Relationships	Relationships with teachers	“You get to hang out with your teachers.” “Spending time with my favorite tutors.” “Getting to meet new teachers.”
		Quarantine	“With quarantine you can actually have someone to talk to.” “You can talk to people because mostly I don’t get to because we are in quarantine.”
		Personal Connection	“I let people know how I feel, what I like, and I get to know what they like.” “Getting to see other people on camera and seeing other people I haven’t met and it really fun.”
		Comprehension	“Get to learn about topic and central ideas.”

	Literacy Learning	Reading Books	“Reading books...she read a book to me, and that was my favorite part.” “Reading books because they were all good.”
		Phonics and Phonemic Awareness	“We watch these videos, and one time we did this vowel guy - watch out for Bossy R!” “At the end we put a different sound on there, and some of them make no sense.”

Results

The open codes and themes as they emerged from the dataset are reported in Table 4. The participant responses to the interview question used in this study can be used to directly answer the research question: "How do kindergarten through sixth grade students' attitudes evolve from the beginning to the end of their participation in a virtual university literacy camp?" Using the codes and themes that emerged (see Table 4) as well as the frequency with which participants commented inside each theme (see Table 5), allowed the researchers to gain a clearer picture of the importance of various components of literacy camp with this group of kindergarten through sixth grade students. The researchers identified three themes: *learning*, *literacy learning*, and *relationships* (see Table 4).

Table 4
Themes and Open Codes from the Interview Question, "What is the best thing about literacy camp?"

Theme	Open Code
Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● General Learning ● Learning Games
Literacy Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Learning Literacy ● Reading Books ● Listening to Books ● Phonics and Phonemic Awareness ● Spelling ● Comprehension ● Writing / Drawing
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Relationships with Teachers ● Personal Connection ● Quarantine / Virtual Challenge

Table 5
Frequency of Participant Response within Each
Theme for Pre- and Post-Interviews

Theme	Frequency on Pre-Interview	Frequency on Post-Interview
Learning	7	9
Literacy Learning	13	9
Relationships	10	10

Literacy Learning, derived from seven open codes, was the theme occurring most frequently across the pre- and post-interview data. When the pre-interview was administered at the start of literacy camp, participants reported that the best part of literacy camp was “learning how to read,” “when [my teacher] read a book to me,” “listening to books,” “learning new things like how to read and spell,” and “getting to learn about topic and central ideas.” The post-interview responses in the theme of *literacy learning* were a bit more specific yet similar in that participants enjoyed when “we watch these videos and one time we did this vowel guy - watch out for Bossy R,” “drawing things I do outside,” and “reading books because they were all good.” Many of these comments mirrored what parents described as their reasons for enrolling their students in camp; namely, parents hoped to see literacy growth in specific areas including comprehension, decoding, and improved spelling skills.

Relationships emerged as the second most frequent theme among the pre- and post-interview administrations, appearing a total of 20 times in the data. Examples of participant responses from the pre-interview were “hanging out with my tutors,” “amazing nice teachers,” and “I let people know how I feel, what I like, and I get to know what they like.” The post-interview responses were again similar with comments such as “my teachers are kind,” “seeing all the teachers and them teaching me new stuff,” and “meeting new friends” listed as the best things about literacy camp. A new open code, *Quarantine / Virtual challenge* emerged in the post-interview data under the theme of *Relationships*. During the post-interview only, participants mentioned the best part of literacy camp was “with quarantine you can actually have someone to talk to,” “that you can talk to people because mostly I don’t get to because we are in quarantine,” and “before [camp] was snacks and people but now I’m unsure [about the best part] because it’s virtual and we can’t really do those things.”

Many of the data excerpts sorted into the theme of *Literacy Learning* mentioned learning activities that were collaborative in nature. Participants indicated the best parts of literacy camp were when “*she* read a book to me,” “*they* read a book to me,” “*we* put a different sound on there...,” and “*we* watch videos” [emphasis made by researchers]. The reference to these collaborative activities or learning experiences done with their teachers could be co-coded within the theme of *Relationships*.

General *Learning* emerged from the data as the final theme. At the beginning of camp, participants responded to the prompt with comments such as “I get to learn new stuff,” “play fun games,” and “play ‘would you rather.’” The post-interview, administered at the conclusion of literacy camp, brought generally the same responses from participants in that they enjoyed “learning new things” and “I got to learn a lot.”

Discussion

The results of this study revealed three significant themes: relationships and learning, specifically literacy learning. Existing literature points to the value of social-emotional learning in general and in literacy learning settings (Durlak et al., 2011; Bierman et al., 2011; Yang et al., 2018), the importance of which is also apparent in this study. Students commented prolifically about the relationships they have with their tutors (pre-service teachers); many remarks coded as learning had implications of these relationships as well. Students who said things such as “when [my teacher] read a book to me” indicated through these responses (that were coded as learning) that the process of reading and/or learning was synonymous with the camp tutor.

Two students, both of whom are learning virtually during their regular school day, discussed how they enjoyed conversing with their tutors, citing the fact that their interactions with others have been limited due to quarantine. One of these students did not provide a relationship-themed answer during the pre-assessment, instead stating that having “two minutes to draw” was the best part about literacy camp. However, he changed his answer drastically in the post-assessment, saying “that you can talk to people because mostly I don't get to because we're in quarantine.” Both of these participants showed academic gains throughout the semester, but more pointedly was their increase in excitement when attending weekly lessons. They both showed an uptick in motivation as the weeks went on, which was easily noticed and reported by their tutors, as well as camp directors. Consistent with findings from Lathifah et al.'s 2020 study, these participants had tutors who were invested in them and showed support to them throughout the camp semester. Their answers in the post-assessment demonstrated the value they felt in relationships with their camp tutors due to the isolated nature of their current setting. In the new virtual camp structure, tutors were asked to spend the first five minutes of each camp session focusing on relationship building to ensure a strong connection with their students.

Mirroring these feelings, one student reported that she enjoyed “getting to see other people on camera and seeing other people I haven't met and it's really fun.” While she attends school in-person, she had reported several times during camp that her family is in quarantine (other than when she attends school) because of some health issues two of her family members face. Empathy development is showcased in Walker & Venker Weidenbenner's 2019 study, which points out that “adults can be particularly conscious (and conscientious) about employing and influencing their social networks to respond empathically to each other's issues, to societal issues and disasters, and by taking advantage of such opportunities to help young technology users develop a moral compass” (p. 124). Tutors talked with this student each week about what she was experiencing in her home life which allowed them to build connections and rapport with her, further developing her sense of joy when interacting with adults and others.

Conversely, one student, who has participated in every literacy camp that has been offered since its inception in 2016, showed her discomfort with the absence of face-to-face instruction, reporting in the post-assessment that “before it was snacks and people, but now I’m unsure because it’s virtual and we can’t really do those things.” This student attends school face-to-face. The ability to build relationships with others, including tutors, was cut short in her opinion as she could not have in-person interactions. This particular student struggled to remain present when in camp sessions and arrived late several times throughout the semester. Unrau & Schlackman’s (2006) findings point to the fact that motivation to read declines in the middle school years, which is where this student is in her academic journey. The fact that her agency was already declining because of virtual learning methods, coupled with the fact that her motivation to succeed in her literacy lessons was also falling, altered her experience in a likely negative way.

Most of the students who attended this literacy camp struggle with reading comprehension and/or other areas related to literacy learning, putting them at higher risk for a decline in motivation to learn and/or read (Sideridis et al., 2006). Parent input is provided when students are enrolled in camp, and many parents cited literacy deficits as the reason for enrolling their student in the program. Parents who did not cite literacy deficits often reported that their student(s) needed additional work in one or more literacy areas to strengthen understanding of concepts (see Tables 3 and 4). It should be noted that there was overlap between answers provided by parents and children in their interview responses; notably, that both parents and children hoped to see literacy improvement through participation in literacy camp. Students who are experiencing isolation and distance learning already are at risk; this coupled with low literacy achievement places students in danger of losing self-agency when it comes to motivation to read and learn. Tutors were encouraged to employ SEL skills and to focus on building relationships with their students first and foremost to mitigate these negative effects. The feedback the researchers received from students was indicative of their desire to connect with their tutors, and in many cases, a simple desire to have basic connection with another human in a period of social distancing due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Limitations

The researchers want to acknowledge the limitations that should be considered when reviewing the work of this study. First, the time that passed between the pre- and post-assessment is a factor in the types of responses provided by the participants. There were nine weeks in between the administration of the pre-assessment and post-assessment and 10 total sessions of literacy camp instruction. Further, two of these sessions focused solely on pre-assessments, thus leaving the students with eight hours of targeted intervention.

The setting in which the pre- and post-interviews were given is another limitation. During the pre-interview, literacy camp tutors were present in the Zoom breakout rooms. Due to the virtual setting of camp, parents were present in some cases during the post-assessments, as this assessment was given outside of the camp hour. Six students did not arrive during their regularly scheduled time; and therefore, one of the researchers held make-up interview sessions individually with those participants.

The number of participants and the ability to generalize these results to other settings is a limitation to this study. This study was conducted with 26 participants in a virtual, university-directed literacy camp. Results are not necessarily indicative of large-scale outcomes that may present themselves in another setting or with more participants.

Finally, it should be noted that there was no control group for this research project. It may be difficult to assert that these children would have responded to face-to-face teaching in the same or different ways that they did to virtual teaching.

Implications for Practice and Directions for Future Research

It is widely accepted that students' literacy achievement is positively correlated with high motivation to learn; additionally, it is known that students are more motivated to learn when a relationship has been forged with the individual offering instruction (CASEL, 2020; Durlak et al., 2011; Maslow, 1943). The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020 created new challenges for both students and educators with the shift from face-to-face instruction to virtual schooling. Students who attended the literacy camp session in the fall 2020 semester attended virtually, which was a first for both new and existing students, as well as the literacy clinic faculty and tutors (pre-service teacher candidates).

The students participating in this clinic are typically enrolled by parents due to a perceived or known struggle in one or more areas of literacy. These children are already at risk of low motivation to learn due to their existing deficits (Sideridis et al., 2006), thus creating the need for camp leaders and tutors to mitigate these effects as much as possible. This study found that students placed exceptional emphasis on the importance of their relationships with their literacy camp tutors, specifically citing COVID-19 and quarantine as reasons why in some cases. Students who discussed learning as the best part of camp still included information about how their learning was present or enhanced by the relationship formed with their tutors.

It is paramount to the success of future literacy camp sessions, both at this institution and others, that a focus be placed foremost on relationship building followed by literacy learning. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) makes clear the impact that relationships have on learning: no true learning can occur until a foundation of trust and security is formed between teacher and student. It is unknown how long this pandemic state will last; and thus, the education system should be prepared to instruct students through virtual means into the upcoming school year and beyond. The success of students in a clinic setting or otherwise will depend on the quality of relationships and social-emotional supports provided in the given situation.

Because there is no set timeline for virtual instruction, future research in this area is necessary. This study demonstrated the importance of relationships in the virtual setting; more specifically, the study found that the relationships in the literacy clinic setting are paramount to a student's perception of a positive learning experience. While the virtual setting was necessary at the onset of the pandemic, researchers found that virtual means allow clinics to offer their services to a vast range of students, as physical location is not a restraint. The surface of education has been changed because of the global pandemic, allowing clinic personnel to learn different ways to best serve students and their families through the literacy clinic. Thus, the researchers recommend

this study to be replicated in a larger virtual setting with additional participants. The length of time between the pre- and post-assessments could be both shortened and extended to determine how quickly meaningful relationships can be formed to support strong instruction. Lastly, because the virtual setting on a national and world-wide educational scale is still emerging, research related to literacy learning in general, and its correlation to relationships and motivation to learn, should be continued.

Conclusions

Relationships and the quality of social-emotional supports in a literacy clinic setting are prerequisites to student motivation and success. While new research is materializing daily about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on students and education as a whole, the data from this study indicated that in a small-scale, virtual literacy clinic setting, K-6 students placed primary importance on their relationships with their tutors when asked the question, “What is the best part about literacy camp?” Foundational literature, including work from Maslow (1943) and Vygotsky (1978) indicate that relationships, social interaction, and a safe environment allow students to reach higher levels of achievement. The theoretical framework of this study was rooted in the belief that it is our duty as educators to meet students where they are in their educational journeys, which in this case, was a virtual learning setting. Though these students were at higher risk for losing their motivation to read and learn due to pre-existing academic status, it was shown that strong and trusting relationships could help to alleviate motivational concerns. Literacy clinic tutors dedicated time each week to building relationships with their K-6 students. Camp participants were positively affected by these efforts, as seen when the interview data collected related to relationships. Relationships are an essential part of education and often must precede all else for learning to be successful.

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