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A Glimpse Behind the Curtain: The Detailed Structure of The May Literacy Center, a University-based Literacy Clinic

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Keywords

Litercy Clinics, Literacy Labs, Reading Tutroing, Literacy Tutoring, Teacher Candidates, Tutoring Structures, Teacher Education, Literacy Intevention

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Abstract

Literacy centers have existed in the United States since the 1920s and have seen many changes over their vast and essential history. Initially, clinics focused on remediation with a deficit view that positioned struggling readers as lazy and unmotivated. Over time, clinics shifted to a medical model, which also held a deficit view that involved pathologizing, testing, and diagnosing to "fix what was wrong" with the struggling reader. Today, university-based reading clinics focus on research-based literacy practices providing opportunities for undergraduate teacher candidates and graduate students to support struggling readers. Research on literacy clinics primarily focus on funding, student demographics, assessment, instructional materials used, and family involvement. There is little documentation about tutorial session logistics. Therefore, this manuscript provides a detailed description of the structure for the May Literacy Center, a university-based literacy clinic.

Key Words: Literacy clinics, literacy labs, reading tutoring, literacy tutoring, teacher candidates, tutoring structures, teacher education, literacy innovation.

Introduction

The available research on literacy clinics typically focuses on founding and funding, student demographics, tutorial session logistics, assessment and instructional materials used, and family involvement (Irvin & Lynch-Brown, 1988; Pletcher et al., 2019). Pletcher et al. (2019) expand this conversation to provide a glimpse into the day-to-day functions of ten literacy clinics; however, what happens when tutors (most often preservice teachers in a teacher

preparation program) work with children is still relatively opaque. Since there is little research available about university-based tutorial session logistics, many directors of such clinics are left to navigate this space without organizational expectations or guidance on what research-based best practices look like when tutors work one-on-one with children. This article aims to share how one school of education leverages a university-based literacy clinic to provide teacher candidates with the opportunity to develop and use community resources to meet specific individualized learning goals while building family and community relationships.

Bond and Fay (1950) first claimed that children who attended their university-based literacy clinic made four times the expected literacy growth equating to several years of reading achievement. At first, literacy clinic program structures seem ripe for research studies on tutors' impact on the children they work with. However, it is essential to acknowledge that children attending university-based literacy clinics also attend schools where they get daily literacy instruction. Regardless of the context, the issue is that measurable literacy interventions are more rigorous and frequent than just once a week, which is the typical structure provided by university-based literacy clinics (Coyne, 2013). For instance, as part of the literacy intervention, Reading Recovery, teachers meet individually with children 30 minutes per day for 12 to 20 weeks (Reading Recovery Council, 2002). Therefore, if our literacy clinic used the pre-and post-literacy assessment data to report our impact on children's literacy development, this would be hugely problematic due to the above-mentioned issues. In other words, we would be taking undue credit for results that we may have had little to do with

So perhaps a conversation about "the effectiveness of various approaches to reading intervention on both tutees and developing educators" (Pletcher et al., 2019, p. 18), need to first center on the overall all structure of what happens during literacy clinic tutoring sessions and how this supports the development of effective literacy educators who ground their instruction in individualized student interests and learning goals based on assessment data. Therefore, we intend to begin that conversation in the remainder of this article which will: (a) Provide a detailed account of the May Literacy Center and how it supports the development of effective

literacy educators; and (b) discuss our next steps for research we can conduct on the development of literacy educators within the context of literacy clinics.

The May Literacy Center

The May Literacy Center (MLC) is an endowment-funded university-based clinic housed in the college of education building at Salisbury University (SU). The MLC has provided literacy tutoring to local K-8th grade school children on the Eastern Shore of Maryland for over 20 years. The MLC has a children's library and two teacher resource rooms housing materials such as iPads, literacy manipulatives, decodable texts, and leveled reading materials. This dedicated site also has three small one-on-one tutoring rooms and three high-capacity classrooms for teacher candidates to work with children.

Two programs provide one on one tutoring at the MLC. First, graduate students practicing teachers earning a master's degree as a reading specialist complete their practicum. Second, undergraduate teacher candidates earning their bachelor's degree in early, elementary, or dual certification also provide tutoring one-on-one during the semester before entering into full-time student internships. Under the direction of a university course instructor, undergraduate teacher candidates develop customized literacy programs to help meet children's specific and individualized literacy learning goals while building family and community relationships.

Theoretical Perspective

Each teacher candidate places the K-8th grade student at the hub of their teaching and reflection cycle, applying different learning theories, teaching, and reflecting on developing a student-centered experience. In other words, at the core of the MLC's programs is the child and reflecting on what it means to be a child.

Student Demographics

Each semester at least 50 percent of the children and families served by the MLC are English Language Learners (ELLs). More than 90 percent come from socioeconomically disadvantaged homes and qualify for free and reduced meals (FARM) at district schools. To meet the unique needs of these diverse families, the MLC has a partnership with the local school district. Our flyer and application are distributed in Spanish, Haitian-Creole (the two largest ELL

populations in the local school district), and English. Many partner schools help with parent communication (Flores et al., in press). Now that we have described the overall structure and individuals we serve at the MLC. Next, we will discuss our program's design.

Details and Description of Tutoring Course

Currently, the MLC supports and enhances our community's literary experiences of early childhood and elementary learners by providing one-on-one year-round tutoring through the Salisbury University College of Education Department of Early and Elementary Education. This tutoring program is part of the early and elementary literacy course sequence required for initial educator certification through a Maryland-approved educator preparation program. The literacy assessment and intervention course provide teacher candidates with the introduction and application of formal and informal literacy assessment tools used in collaboration with knowledge about the child gained from conferences with families and caregivers to make appropriate culturally responsive student-centered instructional decisions. It also provides teacher candidates with the clinical field experience of faculty-supervised one-on-one tutoring. The course content includes information and practices in administering research-based strategies to support instructional decisions for early literacy, phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and writing.

The one-on-one tutoring course occurs during the senior block semester directly before the full-time internship and after candidates have completed two foundational literacy methods courses. The courses provide a rich foundation of theory and research-based practices, but without substantial application, even though field-based classroom experiences are required. This lack of significant application is attributed to the fact that the teacher candidates must align their lesson plans and teaching practices to the required curriculum of the school district. In addition, there is much variation regarding the number of hands-on teaching opportunities the teacher candidates experience in these settings.

To provide more diverse opportunities for literacy practices within foundational literacy course work, faculty use research-based methods to guide teacher candidates through simulated experiences such as analyzing videos of content-specific classroom interactions and micro-

teaching demonstrations for peer feedback (Practice-Based Teacher Education, 2019). However, the teacher candidates still experience tension between research-based university coursework and mandated field-based classroom curricula and pacing guides (Allington & Pearson, 2011; Cavendish et at., 2021). Ultimately, the current political climate of high-stakes testing and teacher accountability has decreased pedagogical freedom in traditional classrooms, impacting teacher candidates who are "guests" in those classrooms. Therefore, the context of the tutoring course is essential for teacher candidates to apply research-based literacy assessment and teaching practices based on a student's strengths and needs.

The MLC provides a unique, open, and student-centered context for developing teacher candidates outside of the confines of the aforementioned political climate. During instruction, the teacher candidates engage in formal and informal conversations with the child and family caregivers, administer assessments, plan individualized lessons, and provide a summarized report to the family/caregivers. The candidate also learns about the child's interests, strengths, and learning goals. Teaching one child over the semester, candidates first assess students using reading interest surveys, Words Their Way (Bear et al., 2021), Qualitative Reading Inventory-7 (Leslie & Caldwell, 2021), and 6+ 1 traits of writing assessments (Culham, 2003), and other informal literacy assessments. Then, the teacher candidate designs individualized learning goals based on assessment data. Finally, they develop individualized lesson plans using MLC resources.

These resources available through the MLC include children's and young adult books, phonics and comprehension games, puppets, and Ipads. Specifically, teacher candidates are coached to use a balanced literacy approach by engaging students in their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) within and across the areas of reading, writing, listening speaking, and word study to meet the identified learning goals (Tompkins, 2015). Therefore, the teacher candidates are required to negotiate and evaluate how best to leverage the tools and resources to encourage literacy development through strategic student learning goals without the support of a generalized scripted curriculum commonly mandated in a traditional classroom context (Allington & Pearson, 2011; Cavendish et at., 2021).

Building Family and Community Relationships

Another significant contribution to the teacher candidates' professional growth afforded by the tutoring course and the MLC's unique, open, and student-centered context is the opportunity to practice building family and community relationships. The Maryland State Board of Education (2019) and other accreditation institutions advocate for and require evidence of teacher candidates' knowledge and ability to collaborate with the broad educational community, including parents, businesses, and social service agencies. To illustrate, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) *Initial Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation* (2010) states that successful teacher candidates know about, understand, and value the importance and complex characteristics of children's families and communities. They use this understanding to create respectful, reciprocal relationships that support and empower families and involve all families in their children's development and learning (p. 1).

The issues we face regarding family engagement in internship settings mirror scripted curricula and are often based on the school district regulations and mentor teachers' comfort levels. For example, certain school districts did not allow some teacher candidates to communicate with families directly. In contrast, others could participate in parent-teacher conferences as passive observers. Therefore, the MLC held great potential for teaching candidates to build relationships with families and the community. The early childhood and elementary education department designed a course assignment named *Inquiry into Building Family and Community Relationships.* This semester-long inquiry allows teacher candidates to practice and demonstrate their capacity to build a family and community relationships through observation, documentation, and assessment to support young children and families.

The *Inquiry into Building Family and Community Relationships* is a semester-long investigation for all candidates completing the tutoring course. This inquiry provides these future teachers with opportunities to develop the essential knowledge and core skills of communication and involvement with family and community and how this impacts young children's literacy learning and development. Specifically, data from this inquiry documents two things: (a)

candidates' knowledge and understanding of diverse family and community characteristics, and (b) ability to develop respectful, reciprocal relationships with families that involve communities in children's learning and development. Students complete four sections of what our department calls the signature assessment. The sections are:

1. *Family and Child Communication Log:* Teacher candidates log all informal communications with the child and family member/caregiver). This communication log demonstrates how the candidate gathers and develops an understanding of the child, family, and community's diverse characteristics and the cultural and linguistic strengths/resources that all children and families possess.
2. *Family Conference Analysis and Reflection.* The teacher candidate conducts, analyzes, and reflects upon a family/caregiver conference. The conference takes place during the second week of tutoring. It provides opportunities for candidates to demonstrate how to conduct a family conference that elicits feedback that can inform their teaching practice.
3. *Using Conference Information:* The candidate demonstrates the application of informal (log) and formal (conference) communication with caregivers toward student learning and assessment. To accomplish this, the candidate submits and discusses two exemplary literacy lesson plans taught during the semester that demonstrates how they utilized information gained from the family/caregivers to provide individualized instruction.
4. *Summative Tutoring Report:* The teacher candidate writes a summative report of the tutoring experience. This report demonstrates the candidate's knowledge and ability to involve families and communities in the child's overall literacy development and includes an overview of the instructional experience, literacy tips for families to try at home, and community resources or supports for the child and family. A hard copy of this report is shared directly with family/caregivers on the last day of tutoring.

In summary, the Early and Elementary Education Department leverages the unique, open, student-centered structure of the MLC context to enhance the teacher preparation program through this diverse field placement experience beyond the traditional classroom. Community resources such as the MLC provide teacher candidates with three essential opportunities. First, it allows the candidates to develop and enact research-based teaching practices with a balanced literacy approach without hindering the mandated curriculum. Second, the candidates can practice building family and community relationships through direct, actively engaged informal and formal communication with those families. Third, teacher candidates learn to become reflective practitioners following a literacy coaching model (Flores & Sigman, 2020) to discuss different aspects of their literacy pedagogy. These skills prove essential to support and enhance the literary experiences of K-8 learners in our community and the overall pedagogical competence of the teacher candidates. Now that we have described the macrostructure of the MLCs, we will discuss the microstructure and what happens during tutoring sessions.

Other Structural Nuances

To begin the semester, we spend the first four weeks surveying the National Reading Panels (2000) pillars of literacy, practicing the Words Their Way (Bear et al., 2021), Qualitative Reading Inventory-7 (Leslie & Caldwell, 2021), and 6+ 1 traits of writing assessments (Culham, 2003). In small groups, teacher candidates use audio recordings of QRI assessments, hard copies of word lists, spelling inventories, and writing samples to analyze the reading, word work, and writing data. As part of this process, teacher candidates generate an assessment report that asks for the following information:

- Insert Purpose of Assessment. Purpose: (Explain why you gave this assessment. What are you evaluating and why?)
- Insert Post Assessment: Data Gathered (Compile your data and present it in a table or appropriate format here.)
- Performance Assessment Data: (Analyze your data. What is it telling you about what your student can and cannot do?)

- Instructional Modification. What it Means Instructionally: (Using the results of your data analysis, how will this guide or shape the instruction you provide the student? Explain.)

Once the assessment report is written, the teacher candidates write practice lesson plans based on that data. These successive approximations help the teacher candidates assess the students during the first week of tutoring.

Once the tutoring sessions begin, teacher candidates also administer an interest inventory, an Attitude Towards Reading survey, and, if warranted, letter and letter-sound identification and concepts about print assessments. After assessing, teacher candidates teach personalized literacy lesson plans based on the initial needs of the children. It is important to note that lesson plans are due before teaching so that course instructors can give detailed feedback, giving the teacher candidates time to address any necessary changes. During the eight-week tutoring sessions, we follow the following structure:

- 5:00-5:30 pm, the course instructor models a literacy mini-lesson.
- 5:30-6:00 pm, set up for tutoring by gathering and organizing teaching materials.
- 6:00-7:15 pm, teacher candidates teach, and course instructors observe, co-teaches with a candidate, and provide support as needed.
- 7:15-8:30 pm, teacher candidates fill out weekly reflections, discuss feedback from course instructors, and plan for the following week's instruction.

After tutoring, we use the remainder of the academic semester to reflect on their practice and what they learned about themselves as literacy educators.

Next Steps in Research

As the discussion about how university-based literacy clinics can best provide opportunities for teacher candidates to develop their literacy pedagogy, literacy teacher identity, and perceptions of self and student learning, we plan to utilize video reflection as part of the learning process. These video reflections promise to provide insights and evidence about how future teachers construct themselves as literacy educators when working one-on-one with students. Since novice teachers often feel underprepared to teach literacy (Kosnik & Beck, 2008;

Moats, 2014; Turner, Applegate, & Applegate, 2011), I hope that if teacher preparation programs better understand teacher candidate literacy teacher identity development through video reflection while working in literacy clinics, they can account for and foster identity growth in these formative settings.

This study seeks to examine the literacy coaching moves made by teacher educators and the impact that video-mediated reflection has on teacher candidate literacy content knowledge and pedagogy and literacy teacher identity and agency. We hypothesize that this study will positively impact teacher candidates' literacy content knowledge, pedagogical practices, and literacy teacher identity and agency. In addition, exposure to video reflection may influence teacher candidates' literacy teaching practices, and better prepare them to serve the diverse needs of students.

Conclusion

Pletcher (2019) states that although research has been conducted on "various aspects of reading clinic structure, less research emphasis has been placed on the connection between the tutoring done by university students in reading clinics and their growth as literacy educators" (p. 18). Unfortunately, this is true of our clinic too. As we have shown, we have what we *believe* is a robust program based on what we *feel* our teacher candidates and children need, but we do not have data to prove if what we do works. To move towards obtaining valid and reliable data specific to the MLC structure and research, the next iteration of teacher candidates serving as tutors will video record their teaching events, watch those videos, and reflect on their literacy pedagogy using Gelfuso's (2016) framework for facilitating reflective conversations. Gelfuso (2017) posits that video reflection positively impacts the literacy practices of future teachers and helps them become more reflective and responsive educators (Flores & Sigman, 2020; Gefuso & Dennis, 2015; Gefluso, 2016, 2017). Therefore, between the current MLC structures and the innovations using video reflection, we intend to have more definitive answers on our program's impact on future literacy teachers. We hope that the detailed description of the MLC structures helps inspire the much-needed robust conversations about other literacy clinics' practices around

the country. We believe that, at a minimum, other literacy clinics can get a glimpse into our structures to help impact the work they do with teacher candidates and children.

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