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Reflection Matters:

Preparing Effective Teachers for 21 Century Classrooms

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Abstract

The current study examined thirty-four teacher candidates' field reflections, written during their tutoring literacy experiences in their preparation programs for evidence of their developing reflective thinking skills and teaching skills. A qualitative approach was utilized for data collection and analysis. Results indicated four major themes in the teacher candidates' developing reflective thinking skills and teaching skills, including focus on apprehension, confidence, rapport, and humor. Implications resulting from this study for future research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: Tutoring literacy, teacher preparation, reflection, qualitative research, humor

Reflection Matters:

Preparing Effective Teachers for 21 Century Classrooms

A call to be a reflective decision maker is not new in the field of teacher education. The relevance of reflection was first articulated in the classic and influential writings of Dewey (1933), who regarded reflection as an essential part of any teaching practice, and who emphasized that any reflection on teaching should involve "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 7). Since Dewey's time, many writers in the field have discussed the importance of reflection (Bolin, 1988; Pultorak, 1993; Kolb, 1984; Schon, 1983; Tinker Sachs & Kong, 1998), especially for pre-service teachers, because as Leahy and Corcoran (1996) explained, "Preservice teachers need to understand philosophic orientations underlining their own perspective and that of others, so that they will be better able to make decisions about educating" (p. 104).

Neither is the call to be a reflective decision maker without criticism. One such criticism is the lack of a common definition of reflection across studies or a consensual model for it (Kreber, 2005; Tinker Sachs & Kong, 1998). Based on the most recent systematic review of the 15 most cited researchers who studied reflection and published during the period from 2008 to 2012, Nguyen, Fernandez, Karsenti, and Charlin (2014) confirmed the lack of a consensual definition and model for reflection, indicating that "The lack of a common explicit understanding of reflection has undoubtedly impeded the development of practical methods to analyse, teach and assess it" (p. 1177). Others have noted that despite the increasing number of studies

exploring reflection, the available body of evidence in support of its efficacy remains primarily theoretical (Kreber, 2005). In addition, Mälkki (2012) argued that "Although the enhancement of one's practice is undoubtedly a possible result of reflection, it is far from being a self-evident or automatic one" (p.34). Similarly, without a meaningful context and structured supports, more reflective tasks and activities will not automatically translate into a successful reflection for pre-service teachers (Boud & Walker, 1998; Gelfuso, Dennis, & Parker, 2015). Still others contend that even if present, the reflection may not be "connected to practice" (Kaasila & Lauriala, 2012, p. 77). Yet "this connection" is "essential for better understanding the breadth and depth of pre-service teachers' reflection processes" (Kaasila & Lauriala, 2012, p. 77).

Despite the criticism, reflection has been and continues to be considered a key component in teacher preparation programs and a prerequisite skill in the process of becoming an effective teacher (Brookfield, 2006; Kreber & Castleden, 2009; Messmann & Mulder, 2015). Numerous studies have examined the diverse content, format, and levels of reflection among teachers and pre-service teachers (Bruster & Peterson, 2013; Kreber 2005, 2006; Lin & Lucey, 2010; Mälkki, 2012; Schön, 1983; Tinker Sachs & Kong, 1998; Waring, 2014).

What is new is the urgency for teachers to become proficient reflective practitioners in this age of increased accountability and high expectations for student performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2010) as well as in the era of increased expectations for teaching performance (DeLuca & Bellara, 2013). Ongoing reflection is an important component of being an effective teacher. Nieto (2003) expresses so eloquently that "[e]xcellent teachers do not emerge full blown at graduation…Instead, teachers are always in the process of 'becoming.' Given the dynamics of their work, they need to continuously rediscover who they are and what

they stand for…through deep reflection about their craft" (pp. 395-396). Teachers are always considering the effectiveness of their teaching before, during, and after teaching. Considering the effectiveness of one's teaching is called being a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1987). As a result of this reflection, teachers may change, revise, and/or modify their methods of instruction based on the needs of their students. In order for teachers to become proficient reflective practitioners, their reflective training must begin during their teacher education programs. Teacher candidates must learn how to be reflective and teacher educators must learn how to effectively teach this important skill.

Being reflective is a complex, dynamic, and developmental process (Roblin & Margalef, 2013). Expert teachers are developmentally more advanced in their reflective practices than novice teachers or teacher candidates (Kaasila & Lauriala, 2012). Risko, Vukelich, and Roskos (2002) propose different kinds of reflection as well as different levels of reflection that are noted throughout the research literature. They explain that these reflections occur before teaching (anticipatory), during teaching (contemporaneous), and after teaching (retrospective), as well as range from being very low-level (technically accurate or factual) to a very advanced level (critiquing or critical). They also state that the literature is very "thin" on describing how teacher educators guide or teach the teacher candidates to be reflective decision makers (p. 135).

Examining the teacher candidates' reflections is an opportunity for teacher educators to consider how we can better help and support these developing educators. We can examine the teacher candidates' hopes, concerns, questions, and insecurities. We can likewise provide immediate feedback and maximize their problem solving solutions. What are teacher candidates thinking? Is this thinking helping them to be reflective decision makers? What do reflections

reveal about the teacher candidates' dispositions and effectiveness in providing high quality literacy instruction to their students? As teacher educators, what do we need to do to bring them to the next reflective level?

Field-based experiences, combined with writing reflective journal entries, are effective sources of data for understanding teacher candidates' reflective thinking skills and developing teaching skills (Bruster and Peterson, 2013; Fry, Klages, & Venneman, 2013). Pavlovich (2007) reports that systematic analysis of the teacher candidates' reflective journal entries from field experiences can provide rich data for determining teacher candidates' knowledge, skills, values, problem solving skills, and the justifications for their actions, thus revealing insights into their reflective thinking skills and their developing teaching dispositions. In the current study, we examine the teacher candidates' field reflections written during their tutoring literacy experiences in their preparation programs for evidence of their developing reflective thinking skills and teaching skills. This research is greatly needed in light of the call for greater reflexivity and the initiation of Teacher Performance Assessment for educators, edTPA (Conrad & Stone, 2015; DeLuca & Bellara, 2013). Teacher educators can use the information presented here to better understand how to help their teacher candidates become reflective decision makers by examining their current reflective thinking skills as well as developing teaching skills.

Methodology

Setting and Participants

This study was conducted at a regional university with NCATE accredited programs that lead to certification in early childhood and special education. The participants were purposively identified for the study (Creswell, 2009). Participants included thirty four undergraduate teacher

candidates (n = 34) enrolled in the three credit hour literacy course *Literacy Assessment and Applications*, which included a 20-hour (two hours per week) field experience component. The natural setting for the data collection was the field experience, which involved ten weeks of face-to-face interactions and one-on-one tutoring with a struggling, reluctant reader and writer in grades kindergarten through fifth grade.

The protocols for collecting and recording the data included teacher candidates' completing and submitting electronic reflective journal entries on their tutoring literacy experiences. Open-ended questions were provided by the course instructor to facilitate the teacher candidates' reflective thinking and to evoke responses that were rich and explanatory in nature. As researchers, we wanted to know what they were thinking as well as to have them critically examine their own reflective process at the end of the semester. There were 383 journal entries in our data set. These journal prompts occurred prior to tutoring, during tutoring, and after tutoring.

The teacher candidates volunteered to participate in this study. All participants were White (*n* = 24) or African American (*n* = 10) females. This was a senior-level undergraduate course, so participants were generally in their early twenties. All of the teacher candidates completed study consent forms, and the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The names presented here are changed to maintain the anonymity of the teacher candidates in the program and their students as tutees.

Data Collection and Analysis

A qualitative approach (Creswell, 2009) was utilized to increase understanding of the reflective skills among the teacher candidates during their tutoring literacy experiences. Data

were collected during the 2011 fall semester. The teacher candidates' electronic journal field reflections written during their tutoring literacy experiences served as the data source and as evidence of their skills of reflection and teacher dispositions.

A two-step process of analysis was incorporated for data analysis (Stake, 1995). The first step of the data analysis involved reading the entirety of the teacher candidates' field reflections to develop a coding schema that cut across all of the data and represented the teacher candidates' experiences during the literacy tutoring. In the second step, the developed coding schema was used to further sort and examine the collected data. Within this step, themes within each code were identified. NVivo 10 qualitative computer software and a hand coding system were used to code the data. Two independent researchers participated in the coding process. An 89% inter-rater reliability was obtained, ensuring the rigor and trustworthiness of the coded data. According to the research (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013; Creswell, 2009), an inter-rater consistency in coding of 80% is an indicator of good qualitative reliability. The developed codes and themes formed the skeleton of the results section.

Furthermore, following the qualitative tradition, many direct quotes were provided so that the data could speak for themselves, to give the reader a sense of "being there" (Stake, 1995), and to ensure "thickness" of the data (Denzin, 1989), that is, rich detail and social context on how teacher candidates construct their own meaning of their tutoring experiences. The teacher candidates' sample original journal entries are presented below. No entry was altered (that is, grammatically changed) so that the integrity of the response could be preserved. Each teacher candidate's journal entry was given an identification number (EC#).

Finally, we subscribe to the views of context-specific theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and interpretive inquiry (Creswell, 2009), which propose that data collection and analysis should not be separated from the researcher continuously making sense of and drawing interpretations from the data (that is, working back and forth between the data and the emerging theory). Hence, consistent efforts were made to frame our interpretation of the findings by referencing the relevant literature in the results that we present in this article. The interpretive lenses we gleaned from the literature, especially Risko, Vukelich and Roskos's (2002) categorizations of reflections, have been used in the discussion section of this article to obtain the larger picture and meaning of the collected data.

Results

The results of the analysis of the teacher candidates' reflective journal entries, collected during literacy tutoring experiences in their preparation programs, revealed rich information about their developing reflective thinking skills and teacher dispositions. Four major themes (and several subthemes) were established: a focus on *apprehension*, a focus on *confidence*, a focus on *rapport*, and a focus on *incorporating humor* (See Table 1, *Teacher Candidates' Reflections: Major Themes*). We discuss these major themes in the following sections.

Table 1

Teacher Candidates' Reflections: Major Themes

Major Themes	Sources	References
Focus on Apprehension	26	143
Focus on Confidence	25	140

Focus on Rapport	22	67
Focus on Humor	16	33
Total	89	383

N.B.: *Sources* refers to the total number of teacher candidates' entries in their reflective journals in which the theme was identified; *References* refers to the number of times the theme was discussed in the identified candidates' reflective journal entries.

Focus on Apprehension

For most of the teacher candidates, the literacy tutoring experience was one of their first acts of teaching. Within this context, it was not surprising to find out that the construct of *apprehension* emerged as one of the major themes in the teacher candidates' reflective journal entries written during their tutoring literacy experiences. That is, the tutoring provided an avenue for expressing a wide range of emotions, vulnerabilities, and concerns when these teachers engaged in their daily literacy tutoring sessions, as well new lessons learned about the act of teaching.

Emotions and vulnerabilities related to the tutoring experience. Corcoran and Leahy (2003) suggest that teacher candidates tend to "suffer from a sense of vulnerability" (p. 31) when they are in the initial stage of the developmental continuum of their careers as teachers. In fact, drawing on the findings of Steffy and Wolfe (1997), they pointed out that the teacher candidates, as novice teachers, tend to be "hesitant, unsure, and lacking confidence in their own abilities" (p. 31). The experiences of teacher candidates during their literacy tutoring experiences in this study have not been any different in this respect. They displayed a wide range of emotions and vulnerabilities when engaged in their daily tutoring sessions. For instance, many teacher

candidates felt nervous about their tutoring experience as expressed by the following teacher candidate: "Thus far, I am feeling very nervous about tutoring. The child that I'm working with is extremely intelligent and presumably gifted. I have assessed this student over and over yet I'm having trouble determining goals for him" (EC 22).

Still other emotions and vulnerabilities of teacher candidates included their feelings of being overwhelmed: "When I began tutoring Mary this semester I remember feeling very overwhelmed. I remember going home and calling my mom and crying because I felt so stressed and unqualified to give her the help that she needed" (EC 27); as well as frightened:

> Starting with my first reflection of tutoring I was very nervous about the prospect of working one on one in reading and writing with a special needs student. I am not a special ed major, just a regular early childhood education major; and not that working with a child with a learning disability would never occur in my profession, but I was scared at working so closely with one so soon. (EC 19)

Concerns about the allocated time and delivery pace of instruction. Issues associated with allocated time, the amount of time dedicated for instruction/tutoring, emerged as another concern within the apprehension theme. That is, many of the teacher candidates reported that they felt time-pressed when engaged in the tutoring activities. One teacher candidate described the challenges that were related to this struggle in the following way: "I sincerely want to help my study buddy, but I feel rushed and out of sorts during our study time" (EC 1).

Related to the allocated time concerns, issues with delivering literacy instruction at a desired pace to optimize instructional time and student learning were further recurrent topics highlighted by teacher candidates. According to the research, "The desired pace is neither so

slow that students get bored nor so quick that they can't keep up" (Archer & Hughes, 2011, p. 3). The following teacher candidate confided her individual struggles with arriving at the desired pace: "Every study session I seemed to notice that my main problem was timeliness. I had a problem with completing tasks too early and/or completing tasks too late, during almost every study session" (EC 18).

Concerns about student deficits in the literacy skills. For some teacher candidates, deficits in the literacy skills of their target students were another area of concern discussed in detail in their journal entries. Specifically, they articulated how students' low level abilities in reading and/or writing impacted their student learning and at the same time challenged their tutoring instruction. For instance, the following teacher candidate clearly understood the impact of careless errors on the students' reading fluency, resulting in challenges for the literacy instructor when she wrote:

> I am still concerned about the way he misses words due to careless errors in his readings. He will get a word wrong because he says Liz instead of Lizzie. I have been trying to get him to follow along with his finger and that seems to help. Soon after he starts reading though, his finger goes off and he forgets to follow with his finger. This causes me to interupt his reading to remind him because he starts missing words again. (EC 8)

However, in many cases, the teacher candidates not only recognized the gap between student current reading and writing abilities and their literacy instructional goals, but also discussed their concerned efforts to close this gap. For instance, the following teacher candidate expressed concerns related to vocabulary and grammar skills of the target student and suggested the relevant teaching strategies to address these skill deficits:

> The one main thing that still concerns me is the kinds of words she uses in her writing. The first journal entry I ever read from her had the word "singed" in it for "sang". That is why we taught her about verb tenses. For her letter to Santa she wrote "cause (cuz)" for "because". Does she write based on what she hears everyday? Jamie and I use proper grammar around her. I had to teach her that the word she used was not "because". "Cause (cawz)" is a noun that is something happens that makes something else happen. Like "the cause of the damage....." (EC 24)

What this excerpt illustrates as well is that some teacher candidates experienced a dilemma about 'the nonstandardness' of the code their students speak" (Delpit, 1995, p. 49). More specifically, some teacher candidates in this study began to notice that their students' intuitive use of language might differ from the standard language of their individual instruction. Within this context, they acknowledged the importance of their students' intuitive use of their language in spontaneous oral communication and saw no need for corrections of such language, as evident in this representative comment, "I think it is ok if people talk a certain way or mess up while talking" (EC 24). However they postulated an adherence to a ruled-based reading instruction and Standard English in the context of written communication as demonstrated in this excerpt: "When writing we should go back and look for grammatical errors before we turn the paper in for a grade or send the letter to a friend" (EC 24). Consequently, teacher candidates in this study followed Delpit's (1995) recommendation that "Teachers need to support the language that students bring to school, provide them input from an additional code, and give them the opportunity to use the new code [Standard English] in a nonthreatening, real communicative context" (p. 53). In this study, teacher candidates involved their students with practicing

Standard English in a nonthreatening way through authentic writing activities such as exchanging the pen-pal letters. Inevitably, teacher candidates noted that when students are exposed to diverse forms of language, not only their motivation increases, but also their linguistic competence grows. The identified above teacher candidate explained,

> I am glad we did the pen-pal letters especially with a cheerleader (something Jocelyn wants to be when she is older). She was thrilled every time when her pen-pal wrote back. She was very motivated to write a response because she was able to talk about something that interested her. She was able to ask her own questions and have a conversation with someone. (EC 24)

Lessons learned (aha moments). Feiman-Nemser's (2001) research suggested that "New teachers have two jobs—they have to teach and they have to learn to teach. No matter how good a teacher candidate program may be, there are some things that can only be learned on the job" (p. 1026). Teacher candidates' comments in this study were consistent with this research as their reflections revealed many lessons learned (aha moments) on the job that helped them to decrease their apprehension and increase their understanding of teaching literacy skills and, at the same time, allowed them to form new ideas for their future teaching practice. More specifically, most of the lessons learned (aha moments) involved teacher candidates' critically questioning their previous assumptions and preconceptions about their students' literacy skills and abilities, as evident in the following teacher candidate's journal entry: "I automatically assumed that he would be able to generate rhyming words, but I was somewhat wrong. The student was able to come up with some rhyming words with my assistance" (EC 13). This teacher candidate further explained how this "aha moment" helped her to reformulate her

teaching practice: "I am learning day by day to not 'assume'. I do not mean that I have lowered my expectations; rather I have decided to think about strategies to use IF the student does not have prior knowledge" (EC 13).

Teacher candidates also increased their understanding of the concept of adaptations and learned how to adapt their lesson plans and activities to match their particular students' interests and needs in the area of literacy. For instance, the following teacher candidate explained below how she learned to develop materials specifically tailored to her student based on her student's disability:

> I was unaware of the fact that my study buddy had a serve [severe] vision disability, which makes it difficult for her to read fine print. When planning my lessons I had to make sure that I made the text large enough for her to read. Making accommodations to my study buddy's needs showed how important it is to preplan and make adjustments to ensure that your students aren't being deprived of their education, due to lack of planning and insufficient resources. (EC 18)

Actually, many teacher candidates demonstrated the transfer of their new knowledge to their immediate teaching practice, and, in these cases, they felt compelled to use it with other students. The above teacher candidate continued, "I am definitely seeing that all students have the ability to learn, and I enjoy the challenge of trying to find the best way to help all students. These are just a few of the ways this tutoring experience is helping me develop as a future educator" (EC 27). Indeed, this application of the newly gained knowledge and insights beyond the literacy tutoring sessions to their professional development in the future was especially

enlightening. The following teacher candidate has become even more acutely aware of this very transfer when she wrote her final journal entry:

> I say this was a wonderful experience because I did not get what I was expecting. I was suprised by getting a student like I did and I think it helped me learn how to deal with the unexpected because he suprised me daily with his reading. This has helped me become a teacher who can think on my feet a little more and made me a better teacher all around. I think this was a truely great learning experience that all pre-service teachers should have to go through. (EC 8)

Smith and Place (2011) refer to these aha moments as experiences of disequilibration, where teacher candidates engage in disrupting their previous assumptions and other preconceptions, allowing them to create a framework for new understanding and learning. It is important for teacher candidates to experience tensions and uncertainty as these experiences only will prepare them for an ability to problem solve when the discrepancy between prior thinking and reality emerge. Teaching is contextualized with highly individualized knowledge gained through observation and teaching experiences (Feiman-Nemser, 2001) and teacher candidates in this study learned through their individual aha moments first-hand the value of this statement.

Focus on Confidence

Worthy and Prater's (1998) study indicated the positive influence of tutoring on the teacher candidates' *confidence* in reading instruction due to being able to apply what they learned in the course during their work with the tutee. Similarly, the teacher candidates in this study considered an opportunity to connect coursework theory into practice the best part of the literacy tutoring experience.

Seeing the positive. As tutoring progressed, many teacher candidates began to feel confident in their fledgling abilities and their emerging sense of self-efficacy. As a result, their journals included more and more entries with statements expressing more positive views on their teaching abilities and illuminating their individual strengths. The following teacher candidate commented about her strengths as a tutor, "My thinking about this experience became more positive as time went by. I began to become more confident with myself, my student, and what we were doing together" (EC 4). Similarly, another teacher candidate commented about her tutoring abilities, "I am beginning to feel more and more comfortable as a teacher. Every day it gets easier to understand how your students learns and works and this is important so you can choose your teaching methods to their needs (EC 28)."

Personal growth. Malone, Jones, and Stallings (2002), in their research on the impact of service learning tutoring on prospective teachers, found that tutoring had a transformative power on their prospective teachers. They considered transformation as a perspective and defined it broadly as "a process in which a student substantially modifies his/her self-perceptions and perspectives on various issues" (p. 62). Based on the analysis of the teacher candidates' journal entries, we too found out that literacy tutoring was a transformative experience. The tutoring has transformed teacher candidates in many different ways. For instance, they often reported self-growth and increased confidence as a result of tutoring literacy experience: "Over the semester I feel that I progressed as a teacher. I feel that in the beginning I was scared and unsure. As the semester went on, I began to build confidence about helping Jacob" (EC 7).

Some teacher candidates also commented how tutoring not only helped them to grow in general, but also forced them to examine more closely their beliefs about themselves (self-

identity) and how this examination, in turn, functioned as an incentive for a change in their own beliefs, as evident in this journal entry:

> Overall, I am thankful for this experience and not only did I learn about how to help struggling readers and writers improve, but I learned about myself as a teacher. I learned to always have a positive attitude and give praise when needed. I learned that it is important to keep students engaged and interested in lessons in order for them to have the desire to learn. I learned that I can make an impact on students in everything I do. (EC 26)

Furthermore, some teacher candidates noted that the tutoring actually provided opportunities for a mutual learning and a mutual growth on the part of the tutor and the tutee, and thus they acknowledged the reciprocal nature of a teaching act and a learning process. The following excerpt provides an example of such realization:

> After reviewing all my weekly journal entries I noticed the growth within my study buddy. Every week, he would use the strategies and tool that I taught him to become a better reader. The more my confident my study buddy became in his reading, the more confident I became with my teaching. (EC 23)

As a result, many of the teacher candidates began purposefully to shape their literacy instruction in ways that connected more directly with their students. This teacher candidate commented, "I am learning more and more about my student, which allows me to help her in more ways based on her personality and needs" (EC 30). Thus teacher candidates began to see learning in a broader context and engaged in what Malone, Jones, and Stallings (2002) refer to

as "a more holistic view of learning," where "intellectual, emotional, and social development" are not perceived as "separate events" (p. 70).

Accomplishments. The teacher candidates also reported gains in their students' performance, both academically and socially. They also indicated their students' improvement in their behavior and motivation, among other things. As a result, the teacher candidates, as tutors, felt a sense of accomplishment and personal satisfaction. The following excerpt demonstrates these points:

> This was our last and final week. I had to do the post testing with Lamont to see how far he had come from when we first started. He improved which is a plus and makes me feel good to know that I helped a child with something that needed to helped and I have done a nice job. (EC 11)

As the semester progressed, teacher candidates began to gradually shift their focus from their own performance to the student performance and learning. The following teacher candidate indicated how tutoring impacted positively the student as well when she commented:

> It was a rewarding feeling when I saw Cathy improve and catch on to new ideas. I loved seeing her challenge herself in order to excel and I could tell when she was giving her 100% effort. I found that encouragement is a wonderful tool to use in order to make students feel accomplished. When I made a big deal out of improvements, I noticed Cathy's confidence boosted. (EC 26)

These types of transformations in the teacher candidates are the emerging evidence of professional development as educators are becoming more reflective teacher practitioners. Malone, Jones, and Stallings (2002) explained when "teachers develop professionally, the focus

of their attention shifts from concerns about their own performance to concerns about students' learning" (p. 72).

Theory to practice and increased knowledge of teaching. In addition, teacher candidates in this study reported that literacy tutoring provided them with many opportunities to connect theory to practice and increase their knowledge of teaching. More specifically, as the semester progressed, teacher candidates became more skilled instructors, their lesson plans incorporated more topics and themes from across the curriculum, and the course concepts were more often infused into their literacy instruction and their reflective journals. The following teacher candidate illustrated these points when she wrote:

> Prior knowledge was very important in tutoring. Having three prior literature classes and one during tutoring gave you the knowledge to tutor, but tutoring let you implement this knowledge. It is one thing to learn, study, and be assessed over different literacy skills and ideas but having the chance to put them into use helps to really know them. Now that I have had the time to spend tutoring, I feel very comfortable teaching reading and writing. The entire literacy program is vital to being an effective English language arts teacher. (EC 28)

What was even more evident was that some of the teacher candidates had already begun to transfer their newly gained skills and strategies to work with other children and saw them applicable outside the tutoring environment:

> Overall this was a great experience. I definitely have learned many new things from the strategies we learned in class to the experiences I had with my study buddy. Even though this semester has been tough for me, I feel that I have learned more this semester than any

> other. I also feel more prepared for teaching in the future. I was able to use these strategies and experiences from this semester to help my little brother (3rd grade) with his reading. I used many comprehension strategies along with recognizing frequency word strategies. I definitely see how the things we have been taught in this course will help us as teachers to assist our students in the best way possible. (EC 20)

Having more control. Teacher candidates also discussed in their journal entries that they became more effective in their classroom management skills. Specifically, they indicated that literacy tutoring helped them to learn how to have more control over the learning environment, how to use classroom management strategies that would counteract the students' disruptive behaviors, or to increase their students' attention and on-task engagement. One teacher candidate commented about her improved time management, "I have a better understanding of what is expected of me. Also, I have a better understanding of time management (EC 18). " Another teacher candidate commented about her more effective classroom management skills in this way,

> I am learning that I can be in control if I just redirect his attention to something else. Usually, if I notice him starting to get upset, I will ask him a question or tell him to look at a picture in the book and explain what is going on (EC 21).

Lack of confidence. While most of them became more confident and perceived themselves as more effective teachers, it was apparent that some of them continued to remain skeptical. This teacher candidate explained her lack of confidence in these words, "I am always a little nervous when I work with children. I am most nervous that the work I am doing with my student will not be effective (EC 4)." Another teacher candidate expressed her lack of confidence in this way,

> I still have a big concern that this child is looking to me to teach them how to read and write correctly. I feel that I still do not know what I am doing and I am hoping that that does not reflect when I am with my student. I wish i knew more of what to do with my student (EC 7).

These kinds of the teacher candidates' comments only confirmed that their conceptual and developmental change may be an incremental and highly individualized process, which is well documented in the professional literature. In his study of teacher candidates, Wilke (2008) discussed that for some teacher candidates, developmental changes "may be slow"; however, they are "necessary conditions in the process that leads to a complex perspective and way of thinking" (p. 24).

Focus on Rapport

Developing *rapport* with the student was another recurrent theme that was highlighted by teacher candidates in this study. More precisely, many teacher candidates indicated that developing positive relationships and emotional connections with the student were their individual strengths as developing teachers. One teacher candidate wrote: "I believe one of my strengths as a teacher is that I enjoy interacting with students. I make it a point to develop a positive relationship with the students I work with" (EC 13).

Getting to know the student. Similarly, teacher candidates went out of their way to get to know their students in order to create and nurture positive relationships with them. That is, they began to notice the link between building positive relationships and student motivation to do work and their academic achievement, as evident in this excerpt:

> I felt that my strength as a teacher was that, I am able to really get to know each of my students as an individual. I try to get a feel for what strategies work with each one. With my study buddy, I learned that in order to get him to write in more details I had to spark conversations to get his thoughts flowing. (EC 9)

These perspectives are consistent with the research on teacher candidates conducted by Smith and Place (2011), who noted the same connections in their tutoring environments. They argued, "Coming to know their students as individuals provided the teacher candidates the opportunity to connect the course content in a situated way to their buddy's skills and proclivities, promoting engagement. When this connection was successful, the emotional bond between the teacher candidate and the student was strengthened" (pp. 311-312).

Affection/attachment. Hughes (2011) indicated that when a teacher created a warm and supportive environment, it ensured a sense of security in a student, resulting in a warm and affectionate teacher-student relationship and engaged student participation in the learning activities in the classroom. Consistent with this finding, the teacher candidates in this study reported that they developed very warm and affectionate relationships with their students, especially as the literacy tutoring experience was concluding:

> This week was very bitter sweet. I was happy to be done with post testing and lesson plans but I am upset about leaving my study buddy. I have enjoyed watching him develop in his reading and writing. (EC 12)

Importantly, some teacher candidates expressed their interest in extending that affectionate relationship with the student beyond the tutoring environment. This teacher candidate reflected on this point in her journal entry:

> Brian and I built such a bond and I was so sad to hear that he moved but ten times happier when I saw him at his new school! This experience was so fantastic! I loved every minute of it! I think I may go in a check in on Brian every once in a while just to make sure he is doing okay! This study buddy experience was incredible! (EC 7)

Relate to the student/to each other/empathy. Consistent with Smith and Place's (2011) findings, for some teacher candidates a significant conceptual change seemed to happen when they got to know their students more closely. They became more sensitive to and were able to better understand their students' individual needs as they were able to personally relate to their experiences. Additionally, rather than focusing on the students' deficits in their literacy skills, like tutors in Smith and Place's (2011) study, many of them became better at modifying their teaching strategies and literacy instructional pedagogy in order to better address their students' needs. Examples of such modifications are teaching a concept in multiple ways to increase student comprehension or encouraging students to use self-correction to promote more independent learning:

> I believe that one of my strengths as a teacher is that I have been the struggling student. I was behind in certain areas in school. I know what it feels like to be the student that is not the smartest but does want to learn. I feel like that helps me with be able to understand where struggling students come from. I believe that if teachers would have taught me in multiple ways then maybe I would have been able to grasp a certain concept that I did not. I believe that teaching struggling students different ways to look at something or solve a problem will help them succeed. (EC 14)

Opening up, student trust, mutual growth. Teacher candidates also believed that they

had had an impact on their students as tutees. They felt that they instilled openness and trust in their students, which supported mutual growth. One teacher candidate commented about her impact on her students in these words, "I see myself as a teacher who connects with my students in a way that makes them feel comfortable to open up and be willing to learn (EC 8)." Another teacher argued,

> I am most proud of the relationship that we have developed during this tutoring session. My study buddy (and her mother) has trusted me to help her become a more successful reader. I am so thankful for this opportunity (EC 18).

Challenges with developing rapport. While most of the teacher candidates had no difficulty with developing a strong personal relationship with their tutees, few experienced challenges with establishing such relationships. Upon closer analysis of these cases, we noted that the issues with establishing appropriate classroom management procedures early on might have been the cause of these challenges, as evident in this excerpt:

> Throughout the tutoring sessions, my study buddy became very comfortable with our relationship, almost too comfortable. She wanted to talk constantly about things that didn't consist with our lessons, she tried to talk me out of doing work, and expected to get her behavior sticker for the day. I loved how close we have gotten, but felt like she didn't take me or our sessions seriously anymore. (EC 30)

Fortunately, none of these behaviors are atypical for developing teachers. In effect, research (Pellegrino, 2010) suggests that classroom management issues continue to be one of the most challenging aspects of becoming effective teachers.

Focus on Humor

Instructional humor research (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Liu, 2011) suggests that regardless of how we define humor, when used appropriately, it has a substantial impact on student learning and academic achievement; therefore, it needs to be incorporated into the classroom. Robinson (1983), in fact, has gone so far as to argue that what is "learned with laughter is learned well" (p. 121). Using positive affect theory and emotional response theory (Martin, 2007) explained the mechanism for the link between instructional humor and learning. That is, positive emotions triggered by the instructional humor enhance learning. Consequently, the student develops a more positive approach towards education, which, in turn, acts as a motivator for learning and results in increased academic achievement.

Humor as a teaching tool/instructional humor. The notion that *humor* can be used as an effective teaching tool was quite evident among the teacher candidates, particularly with regard to how humor can increase student motivation, foster academic progress, and develop a positive learning environment. These three excerpts illustrate such use of humor in the teacher candidates' instruction:

> I [A] specific time when I have used humor is when I have given an example of something that happened to me that was funny and embarrassing, but it pertained to my lesson. The students loved that it was funny and it had to do with my life. I believe that the students will remember the story and why it was told for more than a day. It is possible to have humor and structure in the classroom. I believe in using humor as a teaching tool. (EC 14)

> Susan loves to laugh so we often use humor in our lessons. For example, the other day I was introducing the book "Tricking Tracy" to her. I asked her if she knew what "tricking" meant and we went back and forth giving examples. I told her she had a bug on her head then I said "I am just tricking you!" She then told me I had a nose on my forehead then told me she was only tricking. I knew these examples would lead up to her understanding of "tricking" and would help her relate to the story. (EC 26)

> Personally, I consider humor a very important part of teaching. I'm not saying being humorous all the time is the way to go, but humor is a way to lighten the mood and make teaching fun. The best teachers I have had in my life always used humor as a tool to become closer with students and to create a more fun learning environment. Humor for children is great. It gets them engaged initially and keeps them engaged throughout the lesson. (EC 28)

Interestingly, for this particular teacher candidate, humor appeared to be also the platform consciously chosen to engage into reflective teaching, leading to her professional growth as a teacher. She explained this point when she wrote in her journal entry:

> Humor is also a great self-evaluation tool. Reflection is a major part in teaching. It takes a great teacher to be able to look at a lesson they did yesterday, laugh about it, and just say, "Hey, maybe that lesson wasn't the greatest, what can I do to change it." To me being able to laugh about something helps you grow into a better teacher. (EC 28)

Types of humor: Having fun and sarcasm. Several teacher candidates were cognizant about the type of humor that was valuable for their individual students and the essence of their

responsibilities related to the use of such humor in their literacy teaching practice. Within this context, some of them recommended the use of more situational type of humor, which they labeled as, "having fun," while others opted for a more sophisticated form of humor, known as sarcasm:

> From my experience this week, I learned a few things. The first thing I learned is that it is important to have fun while learning. Including fun activities is a great way to help students engaged in their learning. (EC 28)

> I have been able to make Adam laugh more now than I use to. I have found that sarcasm is a good technique to use to humor him. (EC 12)

Accommodating student's humor preferences/subjectivity. What is funny to one person may not seem at all humorous to another (Martin, 2007). Admittedly, teacher candidates were aware of the very subjective nature of humor when they recognized that their own preferences and tastes for humor may not necessarily correspond to those of their individual students. As a result, they disclosed that they were willing to accommodate to students' humor preferences. For instance, the following teacher candidate provided an explanation of the student's preference for an anecdotal type of humor:

> My student has a great personality and a really good sense of humor. When we are doing think alouds and making connections she loves to tell her stories that she thinks is funny/entertaining. This form of humor is not something that I could use as a tool for forming my lesson, but it is something that I should embrace and expect to occur during each lesson. (EC 15)

Another teacher candidate noted that while a "bathroom type of humor" may not be her thing, she acknowledged its motivational value for her student's learning, because this type of humor led her student to riotous laughter and improved this student's reading expression and his reading fluency as well:

> I took some advice that we were given in class and ran with it. I found a book titled "George Brown Class Clown and the Super Burb". It's a little crde[crude], but very funny! i brought it in last week for David and I to read for fun after we finished up with assessments. He laughed more than ever, and read with more expression than ever. He had to since George Brown had a super burp. It was much more difficult for me to read this book than it was for David. Maybe it's because I'm a girl! However, I did get to experience first hand how beneficial these types of books can be. (EC 4)

Challenges with humor incorporation. Only two teacher candidates reported that they experienced challenges with the incorporation of humor in the classroom. The sources of these challenges varied. One teacher candidate attributed the challenges with the incorporation of humor in the classroom to the lack of humor orientation on the part of the student. She explained, "No humor was displayed through the lesson; she was very serious about finishing her song" (EC 15). While the other teacher candidate admitted that she had difficulties with identifying the appropriate humor-based activities that would be appealing to the student and consequently match her student's individual humor preferences. She wrote in her journal entry, "I am worried that the activities I am doing are not really fun and that he is only being nice and saying that he likes them" (EC 12).

Given the fact that "as with several other communication skills, humorous communication behaviors can be improved with training and practice" (Banas et al., 2011, p. 138), we are confident that these teacher candidates will prevail in dealing with their initial challenges with the incorporation of humor as they acquire more opportunities to apply humor in varied educational settings.

Discussion

Teacher candidates' reflections revealed many things regarding their hopes, concerns, vulnerabilities, levels of confidence, as well as their lessons learned (aha moments), and the reasons for their actions, thus revealing insights into their reflective thinking skills and developing teacher dispositions (Pavlovich, 2007). Consistent with Risko, Vukelich, and Roskos's (2002) research, at the beginning of the literacy tutoring experience, teacher candidates' reflections were egocentric or self-absorbed and focused on technical or factual accuracy in their teaching. Please refer to Figure 1 for a visual representation of teacher candidates' shifts in the focus of reflections.

However, as the semester progressed, the focus on egocentric concerns shifted to concerns about their students' learning and to the reflective process of forming their ideas on how to best support their students' learning, address their individual learning challenges in reading and writing, and at the same time maintain rapport with their students, all of which are consistent with Malone, Jones, and Stallings's (2002) findings.

Alternatively, using Giovannelli's (2003) understanding of a reflective disposition toward teaching, teacher candidates in this study began to shift away from perceiving their teacher role

as a knowledge transmitter to that of a facilitator of student learning and also as someone who recognizes the complexity of the teaching profession. More specifically, the teacher

Figure 1. Teacher Candidates' Shifts in the Focus of Reflections

EGOCENTRIC OR SELF-FOCUSED REFLECTIONS
Reflections focused primarily on emotions, vulnerabilities, and concerns about individual performance as a tutor (technical or factual accuracy of teaching, student deficit oriented approach)
Emotions and vulnerabilities related to the tutoring *Concerns about allocated time and delivery pace of instruction* *Concerns about student deficits in the literacy skills*

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF TEACHING REFLECTIONS
Reflections moved from egocentric or self-focused focus to critical analysis of teaching ("classroom situation") and their assumptions about students and their learning (lesson learned "aha moments")
Questioning their own assumptions about their students' literacy skills and abilities *Noticing the difference between student home language and the standard language* *Increased understanding of the need for adaptations* *Forming new ideas about teaching as a result of lesson learned "aha moments" (transfer of new knowledge to their immediate teaching practice)*

STUDENT-CENTERED REFLECTIONS	
Reflections focused primarily on how to best support their students' learning, address their individual learning needs as a result of increased confidence, self-efficacy, and personal growth	Reflections focused primarily on how to best support their students' learning, address their individual learning needs through maintaining a positive rapport with their students
Seeing the positive *Personal growth* *Accomplishments (focus on student performance and learning)* *Theory to practice and increased knowledge of teaching* *Having more control (classroom management)*	*Getting to know the student* *Affection/attachment* *Relate to the student/ to each other/empathy* *Opening up, student trust, mutual growth*

candidates used their lessons learned (aha moments) and the newly made connections between the content learned in the college classrooms (theory) and their emerging understanding of the act of teaching in the field (practice) to move beyond their "self"-focused concerns and functioning and to concentrate on the teaching experiences that supported their reflective actions with "evidence of concern for students," as discussed in their reflections about their students and through "critical examination of the[ir] classroom situation" (Bruster & Peterson, 2013, p. 176) and of their own teaching. They also began to initiate a problem-solving process to find sound solutions to address the needs of their students, demonstrating thereby the ability "to look beyond 'self' to the well-being of the students in the classroom" (Bruster & Peterson, 2013, p. 176). In other words, teacher candidates' "reflection was connected with a professional motivation to 'move on' and 'do better' within practice in order to learn from experience and critically examine 'self'" (Bulman, Lathlean, & Gobbi, 2012, p. 12).

We note that for most of the teacher candidates in this study, the literacy tutoring experience was a novel teaching experience. Research suggests however that "there is good reason to believe that pre-service teachers' reflections will broaden and deepen towards the end of their teacher education programme, especially while working on their master's thesis in education" (Kaasila & Lauriala, 2012, p. 86). This was true for the teacher candidates in this study, as they discussed, toward the end of the tutoring experience, the shifts that they had observed in their own teaching and in their reflective process about these changes as well. The focus on the changes in the reflective process in the teacher candidates' journal entries also echoes Roblin and Margalef's (2013) conception of reflection as a developmental process. To illustrate such a shift, the teacher candidates were initially apprehensive about the unknown (or

new to them) tutoring teaching experience. They felt overwhelmed, unqualified, nervous, and frustrated. They felt vulnerable and lacked confidence in their teaching competence. Slowly the teacher candidates' confidence in themselves and their teaching abilities began to grow. They began to feel accomplished as they saw the positive results of their teaching. They also were able to make the connections between the theory that they were learning in their literacy courses and their teaching practice. Having these teacher candidates complete weekly reflective journal entries allowed them to explore their perceived thoughts, concerns, and assumptions, and to change their teaching practices as a result of a greater understanding of themselves, their students' needs, and of effective literacy teaching practices. As such, their reflective process has similarities with Schon's (1987) conceptualization of a reflective practitioner as one who evaluates the effectiveness of one's teaching and as a result of this reflective evaluation, makes changes to improve one's teaching practice to address the needs of the learners.

What was a unique finding in this study, in comparison to the previous research on teacher candidates and their reflective skills (for example, Fry et al., 2013; Smith & Place 2011) and thus is a meaningful contribution to the field of teacher preparation, was the acknowledgment of incorporating humor as a powerful tool for promoting individual reflection, teacher growth, and teacher effectiveness. More specifically, the discourse on humor that emerged in these teacher candidates' journal entries validated the positive value of humor for increasing student motivation and learning. Even more importantly, however, it encouraged the processes of self-reflection, critical analysis among the teacher candidates in this study, and provided an impetus for a meaningful change in their classrooms, if needed. As one of our teacher candidates remarked, "Humor is also a great self-evaluation tool. Reflection is a major

part in teaching. It takes a great teacher to be able to look at a lesson they did yesterday, laugh about it, and just say, "Hey, maybe that lesson wasn't the greatest, what can I do to change it" (EC 28). As such, the discourse on humor that emerged in teacher candidates' journal entries contributes to our understanding of humor as "both content and process in the classroom" (Davies, 2015, p. 375). This kind of optimism and legitimacy for humor in the classroom is supported by newly implemented Common Core State Standards (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2010), which now explicitly call for the use of alternative media and genres, including such forms of humor as comics and graphic novels in the curriculum.

In addition, the findings from the current study may offer insight into the research on teacher retention and resiliency. This research, as reviewed by Yost (2006), suggests that "critical reflection is a viable tool to help teachers cope with problems that occur in the classroom setting…" (p. 6) and that a propensity for sense of humor is one of the "five primary factors responsible for teachers remaining in the field despite the challenges they face" (pp. 59-60). Through integration of self-reflection and humor, teacher candidates, like those in the current study, may be in a better position to negotiate the challenges they experience as novice teachers in their teaching, and as a result they may improve their resiliency and retention. Especially since the disposition toward the use of humor in the classroom for promoting "meaningful inquiry and reflective dialogue" has been acknowledged in Fisher and Many's (2014, p. 55) research on teachers. According to this research, teachers reported strategies such as humor and reflection critical for mutually positive interactions and self-reflective life-long learning as evidenced in this excerpt: "all of us (second graders, teachers, and teacher educators

alike) should have a bit of humor and 'remember that's okay to make mistakes and to talk about our biases and our issues and that we're all still learning" (Fisher & Many, 2014, p. 55).

Limitations of the study

One limitation of this study is the length of time in which the data were collected. This study was completed in one semester over a ten week period of time. It would be interesting to complete a longitudinal study and collect data over several semesters to compare the reflective journal entries submitted by the teacher candidates regarding their literacy tutoring experiences from their first year to their student teaching experience. This might yield rich data regarding if and how their reflective practice developed over time.

Another limitation is the age/grade levels of the children being tutored. This study was completed with children in kindergarten through fifth grade. The apprehensions, concerns, and lack of teaching competencies of the teacher candidates may be different depending on the age/grade level of the tutees. Future research should be completed involving teacher candidates' reflections concerning literacy tutoring middle and high school students.

Future Implications

Risko, Vukelich, and Roskos (2002) found that "[t]oo many researchers concluded that developing deep levels of reflection is difficult for prospective teachers and generated few clues as to why this may be so and what can be done to better support their reflective development" (p. 137). Our research may help us to consider how we can better prepare our teacher candidates to become reflective practitioners though the application of reflective journal entries during their literacy tutoring experiences.

Current national efforts are moving teacher education into an age of reflective practice through the teacher performance assessment (TPA) (DeLuca & Bellara, 2013). This national initiative is in direct response to the perceived decline in education, in student performance, and in teacher preparation programs in the United States. There is a demand for more rigorous accountability in teacher preparation programs (Liu, & Milman, 2013, p. 125). With this teacher performance assessment, the teacher candidates are required to critically reflect on the effectiveness of their teaching. Future research will need to explore the TPA model of reflective practice to see if this practice helps teacher candidates to move into the more advanced levels of reflection. Research will also need to be completed comparing advanced level of reflection with teacher quality and student performance. Will TPAs bring the results which we are seeking?

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