

Persisting in the Age of COVID-19: School-University Partnership to Promote Equity-Oriented Teaching and Learning

Susan Y. Leonard, *University of Georgia*

Gayle Andrews, *University of Georgia*

Allie Loder, *East Jackson Middle School*

Taera OConnor, *East Jackson Middle School*

Brooke Wilson, *East Jackson Middle School*

Abstract

The authors describe collaborative efforts between novice teachers and their former university teacher educators who partnered to design and enact equity-oriented teaching and learning experiences for teacher candidates and young adolescents despite limitations, barriers, and disruptions generated by COVID-19. Observations and feedback from students, teachers, and leaders speak to mutual benefits that the partnership generated. Authors will describe their collaborative processes, feature artifacts from the activities, and discuss implications for future practice.

COVID-19 Impacts Middle Schools and Teacher Education

This article explores how, considering COVID-19 restrictions to middle grades education and teacher education, university instructors collaborated with novice teachers and their school instructional coach to develop and enact equity-oriented strategies in line with middle school philosophies espoused in *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). From the 2020 COVID-19 themed issue of *Middle Grades Review* (Volume 6), we also respond to the call from Hodges et al. to consider shifting into a new domain: “The Digital Age of University-School-Family Partnerships” (Art. 4, p. 1).

The COVID-19 pandemic conquered Georgia schools in early March of 2020, when Governor Kemp issued an executive order to temporarily close public secondary and postsecondary schools for a period of two weeks. However, COVID-19 raged on and a subsequent executive order at the end of March essentially closed schools for the remainder of the school year. In this time, Georgia schools experienced decreased instructional time, less effective learning, lower student engagement, and a decline in passing rates at all grade levels (Griffith, 2021). In an audit of the impact of COVID-19 on student learning, Griffith reported that, “[d]eclines were more significant among schools with high proportions of economically disadvantaged students” (p. 1), such as East Jackson Middle

School (EJMS) in northeast Georgia, the school that teachers and University of Georgia (UGA) middle grades program alumni Allie Loder, Taera OConnor, and Brooke Wilson serve.

After more than four months of being out of school, students at EJMS returned to the building for the 2021-2022 school year, but it was nothing like students or teachers had experienced in the past. The return to in-person schooling was filled with new protocols, unexpected complications, and the “new normal.” Quarantining protocols called for students to be sent home for two weeks if they were designated as a close contact. While this kept kids and teachers safe, students were often out of school for long stretches of time. School absences added stress on teachers and students: teachers, because they were expected to teach to students in person and at home, and students because they fell further and further behind.

The pandemic’s disruptions extended to teacher education in Georgia with challenges around university instruction that included shifts to and from virtual, in-person, and hybrid formats. COVID-19 related disruptions in schools and districts also created significant challenges for clinically based teacher education programs. While the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education’s (AACTE) Clinical Practice Commission had called for “evidence-based practices for embedding teacher preparation into the P-12 environment” (2018, p. 2), the pandemic forced many teacher education

programs to pivot away from embedded teacher preparation (Carillo & Flores, 2020; Quezado et al., 2020). Teacher education programs faced significant challenges in finding spaces where teacher candidates (TCs) could gain experience working with children and youth. For example, programs could no longer offer teacher education courses on-site in a school, which eliminated the structured, and serendipitous, opportunities for TCs to interact with and learn from children and youth as boundary-spanning teacher educators (Leonard et al., 2021).

At UGA, the middle grades teacher education program experienced different but equally problematic disruptions to the TCs' learning. The two-year program runs on a cohort model and includes content pedagogy courses; a sequence of four middle grades core program courses, one every semester; two extensive field experiences; and full-time student teaching in the final spring semester. The core program courses emphasize middle grades philosophy and curriculum. The first course in the sequence focuses on community contexts in middle grades education. The course was taught at a local middle school, designed to rely heavily on interacting with young adolescents and teachers as part of the on-site location made possible by a partnership with the local school district. During this first semester in the program, TCs have no formal practicum/field experience, so aside from collaborations with local schools, TCs have no interactions in middle grades classrooms with young adolescents. Pre-pandemic, when this course was taught on-site in a local middle school, TCs would have worked with middle grades students *every* week in various ways, including, for example, supporting reading informational texts in social studies, observing classroom instruction and then debriefing with the teachers about those observations, interviewing students about their experiences in school, and interacting with student panels—a speaker panel of 4-8 students—around topics like gender equity and the students' perceptions of differentiation.

Teacher candidates would have also been engaged in supporting teachers outside the weekly university course meeting time, e.g., providing one-on-one tutoring, supporting small group instruction in classes, and helping out at the fall festival. In fact, the program's approach, which defines young adolescents as boundary-spanning teacher educators (Leonard et al., 2021), has relied on an on-site course to

introduce and enact the program's student-centered and assets/strengths approach to teaching and learning with young adolescents. In the absence of an on-site course, the urgent question emerged: how can we introduce teacher candidates to young adolescents so that the TCs get practice in grounding teaching in relationships with students? Continuing and expanding upon a virtual collaboration first established in 2020-2021 was one way we sought to respond to this burning question.

Context of the Collaboration

Allie Loder and Taera OConnor are novice teachers who graduated from the middle grades education program at UGA, where Susan Leonard and Gayle Andrews were their program instructors throughout their two-year program. Susan and Gayle stayed in touch with Allie and Taera after graduation, and, as it happened, Allie and Taera both ended up teaching seventh grade at the same school. In 2020, Allie and Susan initiated a partnership with the middle grades education program. In 2021, they built on that work by collaborating with the newest cohort of TCs who were instructed by Gayle. Brooke, the instructional coach at Taera and Allie's school, provided crucial support for our partnership work.

Throughout the 2021-2022 academic year, the five of us met weekly to plan meaningful, authentic, and engaging activities for UGA TCs to work alongside EJMS middle schoolers with different reading and writing assignments. Together, we collaborated and agreed on different activities that would mutually benefit the TCs and seventh-grade students. The frequent and regular meetings gave us opportunities to be responsive in real time to students' and TCs' emerging needs and allowed us to adjust as needed. For the interactions to run as smoothly as possible, we prepared clear expectations, talking points, examples, and other resources to model, scaffold, and guide the work of the university and middle school students.

Allie and Taera facilitated curricular and instructional work within the seventh-grade English language arts classrooms. Gayle did the same for the university TCs. Brooke and Susan worked together to keep the middle school administration informed about the collaborative work and navigate organizational logistics. Communication was tied to gaining approval of and permission for executing each stage, as well

as sharing out important dates, specific shout outs with school and district leadership regarding the collaborative planning sessions/ classroom observations, and an invitation to watch recorded presentations of the collaborative work. Additionally, Susan operated as a liaison and consultant between the university and middle school groups.

Due to continued COVID-19 disruptions and limitations, we realized that the partnership events could not occur in person. While these circumstances created the need for significant problem-solving, Allie was undeterred and persisted in the plan to connect students and TCs in meaningful and reciprocal collaboration. The original plan needed to be revised in order to accommodate the “new normal,” but the end goal had not changed—introducing relevant learning and authentic feedback into standards-based assignments. The experiences gained by this process were too valuable for Allie and her students to give up.

Equity-Oriented Teaching and Learning Tasks

Taera, Allie, and Brooke joined university class meetings virtually via Zoom or pre-recorded videos to introduce collaborative tasks and their purposes to the TCs, explain their process for integrating real-world issues into the content curriculum, and model how to complete tasks. The teachers also addressed the relevance of each activity across all content areas, such as learning how to give constructive and encouraging feedback to students. In thinking about her experience as a former teacher candidate and the impetus behind initiating the partnership, it was important to Allie to demonstrate for the future teachers that early-career teachers can enact equitable, culturally relevant teaching in their classrooms.

To support the development of authentic and meaningful relationships, each TC partnered with two to three seventh grade “buddies” throughout the school year. Asynchronous activities enabled us to overcome multiple challenges. The different class times and course curriculum for the TCs and middle school students limited opportunities for live interactions. Digital resources such as Flipgrid allowed for video-based interactions and Google Forms allowed for written communications that accommodate both parties’ respective schedules. Additionally, the asynchronous activities

provided informal interactions that prepared both students and TCs for synchronous activities. We collaborated on tasks that 1) developed relationships and classroom community among and between TCs and students, 2) positioned the novice teachers and middle school students as teacher educators, 3) modeled equity orientations and strategies, and 4) provided meaningful, authentic learning experiences for all of us. These goals were enacted around four major tasks: writing “Where I’m From” poems (Lyon, 1993), reading and writing realistic fiction stories, creating book talks, and a symposium.

Where I’m From

To launch the collaboration at the beginning of the school year, the seventh graders and the TCs wrote “Where I’m From” poems (Lyon, 1993), creating identity artifacts (Moulton, 2018) that explored their cultural and historical locations. The students shared their poems through a Google document with links, and the TCs read their respective buddies’ poems and prepared “talking points”—conversation prompts—before the first live interaction between the UGA and EJMS student buddies on Google Meets. The poems helped to build relationships between the students and TCs and helped generate buy-in for the conversations and assignments to come.

Realistic Fiction

The middle school teachers used the realistic fiction writing unit as an opportunity for students to create stories that they felt were missing from the world. After reading stories featuring diverse protagonists, such as *Names/Nombres*, *Fish Cheeks*, and *Who Are You Today, Maria?*, students brainstormed characteristics of their own identities. Then, students considered stories that they had the power to tell and wrote those stories into existence. Gayle assigned the same writing task to the TCs. Once both middle school students and TCs had written their stories, TCs developed their professional knowledge by practicing a pedagogical strategy called the TAG Protocol (see Figure 1), modeled by the middle school teachers, for providing feedback to middle school students on the stories they had written. We scaffolded this feedback process by creating a Google Form that TCs used to provide feedback on the students’ draft stories. Then, the teachers printed out the completed forms to give to each student.

Figure 1

Feedback Using the TAG Protocol via Google Form

The form is titled "Realistic Fiction Feedback Form" and includes a "Form description" field. It contains several question sections, each with a red asterisk indicating a required field:

- What's your name?** (Short answer text)
- What's your buddy's name?** (Short answer text)
- Using the TAG protocol, tell something you liked about the student's writing. It can be more than one thing!** (Long answer text)
- Using the TAG protocol, please ask a question. Your question can be for clarification or born from curiosity.** (Long answer text)
- The last part of the TAG protocol is giving the writer a suggestion for next steps (think bigger than spelling and punctuation)** (Short answer text)
- Why do you think it is important for this story to be out in the world?** (Long answer text)

Book Talks and Resources

In book clubs of 4-6, the TCs read YA novels (see Figure 2) centered on a variety of equity and justice-related topics. To support this work, Taera and Allie Zoomed into the university class session to describe how they use diverse texts as mirrors and windows (Bishop, 1990) for their students (see Figure 3). They also modeled a book talk, a strategy intended to persuade students to take interest in reading a given book.

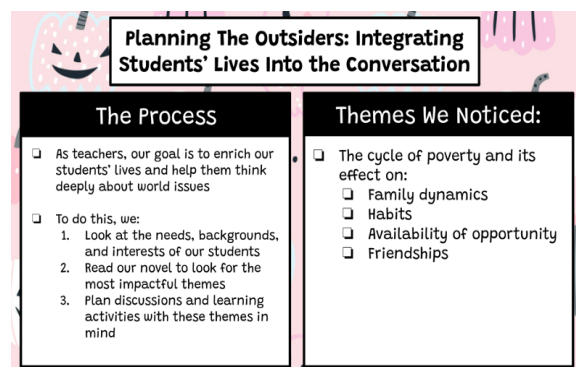
Figure 2

Teacher Candidate Book Clubs



Figure 3

Novice Teachers Modeling Equity-Oriented Curriculum Development



Gayle built a bridge between the book clubs and the process of embedding equity into curricular and instructional design. She led the TCs in creating and recording their own book talks and, in a related task, developing an inventory of resources (see Figure 4) that teachers could use to connect themes in the novel to real-world issues. With or without a pandemic, teachers and TCs often struggle to make real-world connections between content and their students and between content and social justice issues. Curating book resources for teachers related to the novels helped the TCs envision themselves as

constantly attuned to how something they hear, observe, notice—on social media, on the radio, in

a conversation—might inform and strengthen authentic and meaningful learning.

Figure 4

Resources and Real-World Connections to YA Books Developed by Teacher Candidates

**Inventory of Resources
for
Firekeeper's Daughter by Angeline Boulley**

Resource & Link	Brief Description of Resource & Relation to the Book
Teacher's Guide to <i>Firekeeper's Daughter</i>	This document contains pre-reading, during reading, and extension activities around <i>Firekeeper's Daughter</i> . It includes discussion questions, pre- and post-reading activities, and information about the book and its author.
Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs article about "protecting" all citizens, including Native Americans	This article discusses how a court case called <i>McGirt v. Oklahoma</i> promises to protect all Native Americans in the state; however, law enforcement officials say that it protects criminals. This relates to <i>Firekeeper's Daughter</i> in that Mike Edwards gets away with the crime of being involved in the drug trade while Stormy and Levi get caught. It also shows how hard it is to get justice for Native Americans.
Sisters Rising documentary	<i>Sisters Rising</i> is a documentary about Native women fighting for fair treatment. Their society, much like Daunis', has been plagued by violence and the unfair treatment of Native women. The meth business was tearing Daunis' community apart, just as in <i>Sisters Rising</i> the oil industry boom threatens to do the same. Just as Daunis fought back against the crime taking place and taking lives every day, this group of women fought back by teaching self defense classes, fighting to overturn restrictions on tribal sovereignty and increase legislative protections for Native women.
20 arrested in Middle Tennessee meth distribution ring	This is an article by a local news outlet in Middle Tennessee that was written on November 9th, 2021. (I am writing this on November 10th, by the way) I wanted to include this shorter resource because I think it is important to realize that the issues raised in <i>The Firekeeper's Daughter</i> regarding drug rings are very real and very current in our world today.
Current Representations of American Indians in Children's Publishing	One of the main reasons Angeline Boulley wrote this book is because of the lack of American Indians in books. With that being said, this resource shows the statistics of Children's Books By and About People of Color between the years 2002-2014.
Alcohol and Drug Abuse Among Native Americans	This resource shows the substance abuse among Native Americans and the percentages that have addiction disorders. It also goes into detail about the treatment considerations as well.
Many Native American Communities Struggle With Effects Of Heroin Use	This article describes an incident relating to the common theme of many Native American communities struggling with the effects of drug use. A recent FBI report shows the Mexican drug cartels are specifically targeting Indian Country. It also tells the first hand story of a man struggling with addiction, his health and his journey to getting clean and "rebirth."
Growing push to eliminate Native American mascots	This is an article by the Boston Globe about the increasing movement to eliminate Native American mascots in schools. Racism and Native discrimination are key themes of this book and I think this article is an example of potential racism they face.
Native American Casinos	This is an old article (2003) discussing Native American casinos. The casino in Sault Ste Marie was a dividing topic in the story and this article informs its readers on the social and economic impact.

Symposium

The culminating event for the collaboration between the university and middle school was a symposium with two events. The first was around the middle school argumentative unit and the second was a student interview panel about life as a middle schooler.

Argumentative Essays.

The argumentative unit was structured as a writing workshop, in which the seventh graders were given quick mini-lessons about writer's craft followed by writing time each day. Students worked through the writing process in two weeks and produced typed, completed drafts. Ultimately, students chose an actionable cause,

inspired by insights learned from a previous informational reading unit on activism, and composed a focused argument to share with TCs.

To make the essays meaningful to students, teachers encouraged students to write about topics they were passionate about. Prior to the argumentative unit, students had learned about activists and social issues that impacted the world around them, including racial inequality, social media and mental health, environmentalism, and educational disparities. This work provided an entry point into the argumentative curriculum and served as a way for students to think about the social issues that they cared most about. When given the choice, students rose to the occasion of writing about issues that impacted the world around them (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Students' Argumentative Essay Topics and Links to Teacher Candidates' Flipgrid Feedback

Student Name	Link to Essay	[University name] Buddy Response
Willy	Stop Asian Hate is an Important Cause	Flipgrid
Jayden	College Athletes Should be Paid	Flipgrid
Isacc	We Should Stop Discrimination against Hispanic People	Flipgrid
EJ	Gender Equality is Important	Flipgrid
Madisyn	We should stop students from dropping out of high school	Flipgrid
La-La	LGBTQ+ Equality is Important	Flipgrid
Jazael	Social Media is Negative	Flipgrid
Kylee	Dress Codes are Unfair	Flipgrid
Abby	Transgender Students should be allowed to express themselves	Flipgrid
Kinslee	We should stop the inhumane slaughter of horses	Flipgrid
Kamya	Mental Health Awareness is Important	Flipgrid
Alex	We should clean up the Oceans	Flipgrid
Saray	We should change immigration laws	Flipgrid
Leeha	We should stop animal abuse	Flipgrid
Reese	We should stop climate change	Flipgrid
Zac	Teachers should be paid more	Flipgrid
Jackson	Students should be given mental health days	Flipgrid

Again, we collaborated to develop guidelines that scaffolded the TCs' processes for reading, reviewing, and supporting students' work. The TCs were given specific prompts (see Figure 6) to address in their feedback, were tasked to identify a resource students could use to develop their essays on the topic they chose and

encouraged the students about their writing in both their completed feedback Google forms and Flipgrid videos. Once students received the written and Flipgrid feedback from their teacher candidate reader, they revised their essays and prepared for the live conversation with the TCs

Figure 6

Flipgrid Guidance and Relevant Resource Shared by Teacher Candidates

<p>[School name] Argumentative Essays Collaboration: Talking Points for FlipGrid responses to [School Name] essay topics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce yourself and say hi to the [School name] buddy for whom the feedback is intended, including saying that student's name • GLOWS- What did you like, love, find interesting, etc. about your buddy's argumentative essay topic? • Why is it important for this topic to be addressed? • Did you have any connections or questions related to the topic that you want to share with your buddy? • Name the article that you're recommending and identify 2 or 3 points in the article that you find interesting. Let them know that you've linked the article next to your buddy's name in the [University name/School name] Collaboration: Argumentative Writing document. • Is there anything else that you want to remember to talk about with your buddy? 	<table border="1"> <tr> <td data-bbox="841 625 1107 972"> <p>Kylee (Dress codes are unfair)</p> <p>Hey, Kylee! This is such an interesting and important topic for our generations to bring more attention to. I found a resource for you (https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/spring-2017/controlling-the-student-body) that is a little more broad than <i>just</i> the topic of dress code, but I think it can help you with writing about this topic! I cannot wait to read your writing!</p> </td> <td data-bbox="1107 625 1386 972"> <p>Autumn (Mental health is serious for kids and adults)</p> <p>Hey, Autumn! I love this topic, and I actually did a presentation about mental health awareness in middle school. Thank you for choosing to write about this, and I cannot wait to read what you have to say about it! A resource I found to help you out is https://www.timeforkids.com/g56/helping-kids-lead-2/?r=en-890.</p> </td> </tr> </table>	<p>Kylee (Dress codes are unfair)</p> <p>Hey, Kylee! This is such an interesting and important topic for our generations to bring more attention to. I found a resource for you (https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/spring-2017/controlling-the-student-body) that is a little more broad than <i>just</i> the topic of dress code, but I think it can help you with writing about this topic! I cannot wait to read your writing!</p>	<p>Autumn (Mental health is serious for kids and adults)</p> <p>Hey, Autumn! I love this topic, and I actually did a presentation about mental health awareness in middle school. Thank you for choosing to write about this, and I cannot wait to read what you have to say about it! A resource I found to help you out is https://www.timeforkids.com/g56/helping-kids-lead-2/?r=en-890.</p>
<p>Kylee (Dress codes are unfair)</p> <p>Hey, Kylee! This is such an interesting and important topic for our generations to bring more attention to. I found a resource for you (https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/spring-2017/controlling-the-student-body) that is a little more broad than <i>just</i> the topic of dress code, but I think it can help you with writing about this topic! I cannot wait to read your writing!</p>	<p>Autumn (Mental health is serious for kids and adults)</p> <p>Hey, Autumn! I love this topic, and I actually did a presentation about mental health awareness in middle school. Thank you for choosing to write about this, and I cannot wait to read what you have to say about it! A resource I found to help you out is https://www.timeforkids.com/g56/helping-kids-lead-2/?r=en-890.</p>		

Figure 7

Interview Questions for Middle Schoolers by Teacher Candidates

Middle School Questions

What questions do you have about the middle school experience? (minimum of 2 questions)

32 responses

How stressed out would you say you are on a daily basis? Do you think your teachers currently are being responsive enough to the level of stress you're under?

What is something you wish your teacher(s) knew but never want to tell them?

- What is your favorite thing that your teacher does that makes you feel seen?
 - How does your teacher get to know you better?
 - What's your least favorite thing that a lot of teachers do?
 - If you could be a teacher right now, what would you do in your classroom?

Do you have a favorite subject? If so, why is it your favorite?
 What are some of the biggest differences about middle school compared to elementary school?

What are your favorite subjects in school and why?
 What is something that your teacher does that you like?

What is the hardest subject for you? Why?
 If you could read one book 100 times over what would it be?
 What is one thing you wish your teachers would know?

Student Interview Panels

The second component to the symposium was a student interview panel. Upon reflecting on her own experiences as a teacher candidate, the opportunities in which Allie received feedback from middle schoolers *about* middle school life, were some of the most valuable to her practice. She wanted to repeat this with the TCs participating in the symposium, using her own students as teachers to the TCs about what life as a middle schooler is like. This process was also mutually beneficial—by becoming a part of these panels, students would be positioned as experts. The middle school teachers created a Google Doc on which the TCs could brainstorm questions that they wanted to ask the seventh graders about their experiences and expertise as middle school students (see Figure 7).

The interview panel positioned the seventh graders, not their teachers, as teacher educators. The seventh-grade students advised TCs on how to be good teachers. During this event, Taera, Allie, and Susan circulated the classroom to listen to the virtual discussion between the middle school students and the TCs, and Gayle did the same at the university. Conversations focused largely on developing relationships and respect between teachers and students.

Outcomes

After the first symposium, Brooke emailed feedback to the team, citing the students with the following reported comments to one of the questions TCs had added to the brainstorming Google Doc (see Table 1).

Table 1

TCs Question and Students' Comments

Teacher Candidates:	What is something that your teacher has done to automatically gain your respect?
Middle School Students:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• They respect US.• They aren't afraid of controversy.• We can be ourselves.• They don't care if we're different.

Allie shared that the middle school students were invigorated by the chance to teach future teachers and see themselves as the experts in the room. They were able to open up about the issues that they faced and their opinions on middle school life, which was an experience that was not often provided to them in the traditional classroom environment.

Teacher candidates shared positive feedback about the collaborative activities. One TC conveyed the significance of the university-school collaboration amid experiencing COVID-19 during their first semester in the middle grades program:

Interacting with my [student] buddies before starting my practicum was so incredibly helpful as an introduction to collaborating and working with young adolescents. I had no idea what to expect before I read through my buddies' poems and stories and I found it absolutely fascinating to see what they find important and how they express themselves through their writing. I gained unique insight into what it means to think like a middle-school student again since I have been so far removed from that part of life. It also served as a great entrance to working alongside teachers as it is such a collaborative field of work.

Another TC commented on building her identity as a *teacher* through the interactions with her buddies:

I really liked the interactions we had with the buddies in the fall! I feel like it gave me good practice speaking with middle schoolers and finding out about their general interests. I also remember it being so awkward asking them to call me Ms. Davis (pseudonym), but after that it felt normal in my placement!

The school district superintendent happened to conduct a walkthrough of Allie's classroom at the time that students were preparing for their argumentative writing. Brooke shared the feedback that the superintendent articulated to the school leadership:

[The superintendent] was so blown away that those types of topics were being discussed by middle school students in a positive way like that. It was pretty adaptive,

and they were able to handle that. And so she commented on, you know, the culture that must have been created in that classroom to allow for those topics to be discussed and written about, that students felt safe.

For the teachers, statements like these were incredibly affirming. Equity-oriented teaching, while some of the most important work educators can do, is often some of the most nerve wracking to carry out. Fear of pushback from parents and/or administrators was always in the back of the teachers' minds. For Allie, the commitment to equity-oriented practices was one that she had made at the start of her career, but she was often wary of administrators censoring this work should any conflicts arise. Therefore, when the comments were made by district leaders that not only acknowledged this work but *praised* it, she felt as though she could breathe easier and continue to provide equitable opportunities for her students—now, without fear.

Implications and Future Directions

This type of equity-oriented pedagogy made students excited about and invested in their writing; it was experience-driven and changed the trajectory of a traditional writing unit. The team believes the school-university partnership was worth the “added” work in order to provide students with an authentic (and equally invested) audience. If middle grades teachers are looking for a way to re-energize their students about *writing*, this is the way to do it. Although this work occurred in English language arts classes, centering the partnership around building relationships opens doors to implement this collaborative work in so many different ways and across all content areas. TCs can work alongside students with many different types of assignments, and it will be beneficial because the TCs are learning how to build relationships with students while giving the students individualized attention and instruction.

During a time in which nothing seemed to go according to plan, this work brought purpose and excitement back to learning. Students were able to explore timely and relevant issues like mental health and education policies and, in doing so, fed an intrinsic interest while fulfilling an academic expectation. Relationship building was made stronger, as teachers, TCs, and students were given a platform to be more “real”

and vulnerable during a time in which many felt isolated and frustrated. Together, all participants learned from and with each other, drawing on the sustaining power and possibilities of youth and middle grades educators. This work began and grew because of relationships. Throughout the virtual partnership, Allie and Susan collaborated in conjunction with Allie's colleague Taera, instructional coach Brooke, and Gayle the university instructor, each bringing in their own area of expertise to the work. Relationships were at the center of turning this idea into reality. Without the connections forged in Taera and Allie's undergraduate career and carried into their professional roles, the partnership would not have existed.

The amount of time, preparation, and energy required to plan and implement our work in a COVID-19 world was significant and fraught with challenges. With technology, there is a fine line between friend and foe. In a time when social distancing was of paramount importance, collaborative planning between the university and school was made possible by the virtual platforms, Google Meets and Zoom. Meeting virtually enabled maximum flexibility in scheduling with zero travel time. However, we quickly learned that the platforms demanded formality in meeting structure, allowing for only one speaker at a time to be heard and, consequently, creating a more restrictive environment. Generative cross-talk, excited emotional responses, and resource sharing were greatly reduced as a result. To mitigate these negative effects, Allie and Taera shifted to joining our virtual planning meetings on a single computer. With the two of them in the same location and on the same screen, they could chat freely without worrying about being canceled out by Zoom.

For our team's planning purposes, the virtual platforms were less than ideal, but they worked. For interactional activities between the middle school students and TCs, technology could be downright infuriating. There were often connectivity issues that prevented groups from connecting immediately or, in a few cases, at all. When groups were unable to connect, we had to revise plans to create an additional opportunity for the middle schoolers to meet with their TC buddies. Because the TCs and young adolescents did not know each other and were new to the collaborative experience, we wanted to create a comfortable, safe environment by structuring

small group interactions rather than one-on-one interactions. Each small group of two to three TCs at the university would share a single computer screen to allow for conversation and avoid the feedback and other audio issues that would have occurred if they were seated close together but logging into Zoom separately. Each small group of two to three middle schoolers at the school site also shared a single computer screen to allow for conversations. At both sites, small groups sharing a single computer meant that headphones could not be used, and it was sometimes difficult for one group to hear over the sound of a neighboring group. We spread students and teacher candidates down hallways and across multiple rooms as much as possible. The challenge was finding the space to provide each group enough privacy to hear their own conversation but, at the same time, being close enough to the university instructor or middle school teacher in case they needed help.

We had to continuously weigh the benefits and limitations of technology when planning what activity we wanted to do, the purpose of the activity, at what point of the year the activity would take place, and the outcomes for which we were aiming. To make these decisions, we considered the social and emotional needs of our students alongside the intellectual and academic demands of the tasks. Technology seemed most effective for asynchronous interactions. For example, FlipGrid videos allowed for individual, low-stakes interactions between TCs and middle school students.

We elicited feedback from our TCs about their experiences with the middle school interactions. One important idea we heard was that the interactions were particularly effective during their first semester in the program, during which time they have no field experience and, without an on-site course, no opportunity to work with young adolescents. This feedback highlighted the value of providing TCs with opportunities to informally engage with young adolescents at the earliest stage of their preparation as teachers. However, in their second semester of the program, the TCs began virtual and, later, in-person field experiences in schools with students. At this point, the TCs hoped to focus on developing relationships with their own students in their field experience classrooms. Looking to the future, we would love to pursue components of this work that COVID-19 prevented us from enacting. For example, we want to include parents and other stakeholders

in the symposium. Many schools, including EJMS, host literacy nights that encourage community members to engage in reading and writing with students. We envision students and TCs sharing their work with a larger audience, such as families and students and teachers in the school's other grade levels. Teacher candidates would have the valuable opportunity to meet and engage with their middle school students' families.

We want students to have in-person interactions with teacher candidates, and we view this goal as an opportunity for middle school students to visit a local university campus and surrounding area. Advocating for a university visit due to partnership work is also a way to support broader school-community goals. Studies have documented positive impacts of middle school students, particularly those in rural, low-income settings, visiting college and university campuses (e.g., Smith et al., 2022).

As we have shared, relationships were at the heart of our work and developed because the university instructors maintained relationships with graduates of their teacher preparation program, facilitating new possibilities for working together, as colleagues, to support future generations of students and teachers. COVID-19 has revealed how we can leverage technology to overcome barriers like physical distance—but it has also reminded us that technology cannot replace the value of in-person connection and communication. While COVID-19 continues to influence the goings-on in schools, we have adapted and innovated to strive towards our goals of equity-oriented education that supports every student and teacher candidate in feeling seen, heard, and valued in school, and we are excited to see how this work continues to grow.

References

- American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. (2018). *A pivot toward clinical practice, its lexicon, and renewing the profession of teaching: A report of the AACTE Clinical Practice Commission*. Washington, DC.
- Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and using books for the classroom*, 6(3).
- Bishop, P. A., & Harrison, L. M. (2021). *The successful middle school: This we believe*. Association for Middle Level Education.
- Carillo, C., & Flores, M. A. (2020). COVID-19 and teacher education: A literature review of online teaching and learning practices. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(4), 466-487. doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2020.1821184
- Griffith, G. (2021). *COVID-19's impact on K-12 education*. Georgia Department of Audits & Accounts. <https://www.audits.ga.gov/PAO/files/21-031PGSUM.pdf>
- Hodges, T. S., Kerch, C., & Fowler, M. (2020). Teacher education in the time of COVID-19: Creating digital networks as university-school-family partnerships. *Middle Grades Review*, 6(2, Art. 4), 1-12.
- Leonard, S. Y., Moulton, M. J., & Andrews, P. G. (2021). Redefining "boundary-spanning teacher educator" for critical clinical practice. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 96(1), 22-31. doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2020.1864243
- Lyon, G. E. (1993). *Where I'm from*. <http://www.georgeellalyon.com/where.html>
- Moulton, M. J. (2018). *Young adolescent identities beyond the single story: Re-humanizing experiences of homelessness to challenge dominant narratives*. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Georgia.
- Quezada, R. L., Talbot, L. C., & Quezada-Parker, K. B. (2020). From bricks and mortar to remote teaching: A teacher education programme's response to COVID-19. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 46(4), 472-483. doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2020.1801330
- Smith, M. C., Gosky, R. M., & Li, J. (2022). Campus visits as predictors of postsecondary enrollment in low-income, rural school districts. *Journal of College Access*, 7(1), 13-144. <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jca/vol7/iss1/10>

