

January 2018

## A Parent-Teacher Reading Conference Project: Using a Virtual Environment (TeachLivE™) to Improve Elementary Pre-Service Teachers' Conferencing Skills

Michelle J. Kelley  
*University of Central Florida*

Taylor Wenzel  
*University of Central Florida*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.stjohns.edu/thereadingprofessor>



Part of the [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kelley, Michelle J. and Wenzel, Taylor (2018) "A Parent-Teacher Reading Conference Project: Using a Virtual Environment (TeachLivE™) to Improve Elementary Pre-Service Teachers' Conferencing Skills," *The Reading Professor*. Vol. 41 : Iss. 1 , Article 22.

Available at: <https://scholar.stjohns.edu/thereadingprofessor/vol41/iss1/22>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by St. John's Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Reading Professor by an authorized editor of St. John's Scholar. For more information, please contact [fazzinol@stjohns.edu](mailto:fazzinol@stjohns.edu).

# **A Parent-Teacher Reading Conference Project: Using a Virtual Environment (TeachLive™) to Improve Elementary Pre-Service Teachers' Conferencing Skills**

Michelle J. Kelley and Taylar Wenzel

## **Abstract**

One of the most common forms of parent communication in the elementary classroom is the parent-teacher conference, specifically sharing student progress, yet little time is dedicated in teacher preparation programs towards developing this skill (Baum & Swick, 2008; Dotger, Harris, Maher, & Hansel, 2011). This paper describes a parent-teacher conferencing project created to provide elementary pre-service teachers with the opportunity to develop their reading assessment conferencing skills in a virtual environment with instructor feedback prior to completing their final internship placement. After identifying effective reading conferencing behaviors during phase one of a multi-year study, the researchers (also instructors) designed a Parent Conference Project reflecting these effective conferencing behaviors. This paper shares the parent project components, including a coding tool used by instructors to help provide concrete feedback and evaluate pre-service teachers' reading conferencing effectiveness. Student feedback on the project is also shared.

## **Introduction**

For more than a decade, national studies have pointed to the need for increased school and family communication (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Markow & Martin, 2005) and federal policies have subsequently required parent involvement or engagement as a condition of funding (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015 ; Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004; No Child Left Behind Act, 2002). Many researchers posit that the most significant opportunity to foster communication and collaboration between the school and family is the parent-teacher conference (Henderson & Hunt, 1994). Parental involvement is recognized as a contributing factor to student achievement, yet most teacher preparation programs do not adequately prepare pre-service teachers to communicate with parents (Dotger, Harris, Maher, & Hansel, 2011), let alone prepare them to share assessment data clearly and accurately. Baum and Swick (2008) attribute this deficit in teacher preparation programs to a theory approach to parent-teacher conferencing, whereby the instructor typically shares ways to communicate with parents via a formal presentation, rather than engaging students in real-life applications. Epstein and Saunders (2006) surveyed 161 deans of colleges of education across the United States and found that only 7% of respondents agreed that new teachers from their own programs were ready to work with students' families, even though over 96% believed this

competence to be important. Parent-teacher conferences are arguably the most common form of family-school communication as evidenced in the Met Life Survey of American Teachers, where 97% of the 800 teachers reported that students' parents are regularly asked to come to parent-teacher conferences (Markow & Martin, 2005). According to Markow and Martin (2005), "communicating with and engaging parents is the most frequently cited challenge among new teachers and the area they feel least prepared to take on in their first teaching position" (p. 4). This gap in teacher preparation is the focus of the parent project reported in this paper, which is part of a broader multi-year study exploring the efficacy of elementary education pre-service teachers as it relates to conducting parent-teacher conferences that are specifically focused on clearly and accurately sharing reading assessment data. This paper describes the second phase of this study, the alignment of effective reading conference behaviors identified in the first phase of the study (Kelley & Wenzel, 2017) to the development of a Parent Conference Project that implemented a coding tool designed to evaluate elementary pre-service teachers' effectiveness when communicating reading assessment data and instructional goals to parents.

## **Literature Review**

### **Parent-Teacher Conferencing and Pre-Service Teachers**

Challenges related to parent conferencing are not a new concept. In 1990, Fredericks and Rasinski noted that, "most teachers are not sufficiently trained in parent teacher conference techniques" (p. 174). Furthermore, they suggested that a successful reading program, "be designed in such a way that both parties work together to establish priorities, develop common goals, and achieve concrete solutions" (p. 174). Effective conferencing requires preparation and practice, demanding a thinking-on-your-feet fluency in which a teacher uses professional knowledge, skill, and disposition simultaneously (Walker & Dotger, 2012). Typically, pre-service teachers have very little opportunity to practice parent-teacher conferencing, yet there is an indisputable need to include this type of training in teacher preparation programs (Henderson & Hunt, 1993). In spite of the evidence, pre-service teacher programs do not characteristically include conferencing skills as a major course objective (Henderson & Hunt, 1993; McNaughton, Hamlin, McCarthy, Head-Reeves, and Schreiner, 2008), and most often, the skills required to effectively engage in conferences are "only addressed through occasional readings,

lectures, or observations of parent-teacher conferences” (Dotger, Harris, & Hansel, 2008, p. 337).

### **Role-Play and Simulation**

Pre-service teachers need to practice teaching skills outside the classroom environment, where it is okay to fail and where they are mentored by teacher educators (Puvirajah & Calandra, 2015). Role-play has been one successful activity used to train teachers for parent conferences (Henderson & Hunt, 1993). In addition, simulation allows pre-service teachers the opportunity to practice teaching skills, such as parent-teacher conferencing, without irrevocable damage (Kelley & Wenzel, 2017). McNaughton et al. (2008) suggest pre-service teachers be taught active listening in order for them to better make empathetic comments, ask appropriate questions, and communicate effectively to parents. Dotger, Dotger, and Maher (2010) adapted a “case” approach used in medical schools, allowing pre-service teachers the opportunity to practice parent-teacher conferences with feedback and reflection. The Simulated Interaction Model (SIM) began as six cases, but developed into 27 different simulations. Standardized Parents (SP) were trained to exhibit specific characteristics and attributes of parents identified in the cases. Teacher candidates interacted with SPs and received immediate feedback from faculty members following the simulation (Walker & Dotger, 2012). They found that teacher candidates participating in a simulation (case) showed improvements in professional dispositions and skills. Specifically, they improved their ability to structure a conversation with a parent and they became more responsive to parents. Their research yielded seven categories of desired conferencing behaviors. Walker and Dotger (2012) utilized experts in the field to establish content validity of one of their cases and reliability of the coding scheme they developed based on their research.

### **Role-Play and Simulation in a Virtual Learning Environment**

The adage, “practice makes perfect” applies to pre-service teachers as well. They need many opportunities to practice being teachers (Puvirajah & Calandra, 2015). Pedagogy is fundamentally important in terms of understanding the “why” of teaching, but virtual learning environments appear to be integral for practicing teaching skills, the “what” of teaching (Johannesen, 2013). Reality-based virtual learning experiences that require pre-service teachers to think on their feet coupled with self-evaluation are promising (McDonald, 2012). The act of role-playing and simulation in a virtual environment, along with critical dialogue not only increases pre-service teachers’ engagement, but also builds their instructional repertoire (McDonald, 2012). Role-play and simulation in virtual environments have been found to provide many benefits not attained from traditional classroom instruction; including better comprehension of content and improved interpersonal relations skills (McDonald, 2012; Puvirajah & Calandra, 2015). A virtual environment can better prepare pre-service teachers for

interacting with parents by helping them to hone communication skills without the threat of damaging important relationships in the event of a communication misstep (Dotger, Harris, Maher, & Hansel, 2011).

### **TeachLivE™**

This multi-year study utilized TeachLivE™, a virtual classroom environment that facilitates teacher professional development without potentially harmful ramifications (Dieker, Hines, Stapleton, & Hughes, 2007). TeachLivE™ has been used successfully to improve pre-service teachers’ classroom management, communication, and instructional skills through interactions with student avatars (interactors) in a controlled environment. Dieker et al. (2007) explain, “In a simulated experience, a [pre-service] teacher is able to do what they wouldn’t, couldn’t or shouldn’t do in real life to obtain compelling, trial-and-error examples of why and how key methods work” (p. 11). Originally, the TeachLivE™ avatars developed were middle school students with varying exceptionalities. Recently, English Language Learners and adult avatars have been added to TeachLivE™, thus widening the potential uses of this virtual environment. In this study, pre-service teachers interacted with a parent avatar, allowing them the opportunity for realistic practice of a parent-teacher reading conference with real-time instructor feedback.

## **Methods**

### **Purpose of the Study, Participants, and Background**

As previously stated, this paper focuses on the second phase of a multi-year study exploring elementary pre-service teachers’ efficacy of conducting parent-teacher conferences centered on clearly and accurately sharing reading data and related interventions for a single case study student as part of a semester-long course assignment (see Table 1). In the first phase of this study, the researchers (also instructors) observed over 200 pre-service teachers during an entire academic year as they conducted parent-teacher reading conferences in TeachLivE™ (Kelley & Wenzel, 2017). The participants were Elementary Education seniors enrolled at a large urban university in the state of Florida. The researchers used the first phase of the study to identify effective pre-service teacher behaviors during a parent-teacher reading conference, using the structuring and responsive conferencing behaviors identified by Walker and Dotger (2012) as a starting point. Given that the primary goals of the project were related to the pre-service teachers’ ability to accurately share reading assessment and intervention data from their individual case study students in a professional manner, it was necessary for the researchers to refine and align the desired conference behaviors to the content-specific project goals, specifically referencing informal reading assessments that the pre-service teachers learned and used with school-aged students in their case study assignment. Ultimately, the

researchers agreed on eight behaviors. The broad structural behaviors of the conference included: the opening, gathering information, sharing reading data, and identifying next steps. The responsive behaviors of the conference included: maintaining a positive relationship, managing the flow, exhibiting professionalism, and communicating clearly. Additionally, the researchers' developed indicators that represent each of the eight effective reading conferencing behaviors and drafted a coding tool that an instructor could use to a) provide the pre-service teacher with more specific feedback and b) evaluate the pre-service teacher's reading assessment conferencing effectiveness (see Figure 1). In addition, a response guide was developed for the virtual parent (simulated by a live interactor) that included open-ended probes and suggestions for what kinds of questions to ask during the conference in order to a) foster the pre-service teacher's "thinking-on-your-feet fluency" (Walker & Dotger, 2012) and b) assist the instructor in determining whether the pre-service teacher could accurately respond to a parent's common questions or concerns related to his or her child's reading development. For example, the pre-service teachers were required to give an informal reading inventory to their case study student. In the parent-teacher conference, they were expected to share the results of this assessment. While conferencing, many of the pre-service teachers were not able to explain the grade level equivalence of Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) levels or if the child was independent or instructional on the text level read. Thus, if a pre-service teacher said, "I used the DRA and your child was at a level 16," and there was no follow-up related to what a DRA is or what level 16 means, the parent avatar was asked to probe. Another issue that arose was related to terminology and content knowledge. For example, a pre-service teacher might share that his or her case study student was having problems with fluency. The parent avatar was prompted to probe further. They might say, "My child is fluent. She talks just fine. What do you mean she isn't fluent?" Some other probes recommended included: "Is my child on grade level?" "What are you doing in school to help my child?" "What can I do at home to help my child?" "Why is my child spending so much time being assessed in reading?"

This paper focuses on the second phase of the study, which included piloting a coding tool used by instructors while observing pre-service teachers conferring in TeachLivE™. This phase was completed during the fall semester of 2016 and involved 53 pre-service teachers and the two researchers, instructors of a reading practicum course taken concurrently with a part-time internship in a K-6 classroom. As such, the researchers were also participants in the study. The reading practicum course is a mixed-mode class, meeting online and face-to-face. In this course, pre-service teachers complete a case study on a K-6 student (ideally from their internship placement or in an on-campus university clinic setting). This overarching case study assignment involves the pre-service teacher comprehensively assessing a K-6 student in the following reading areas: motivation, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. After conduct-

ing assessments on a single K-6 student, the pre-service teacher meets with his or her course instructor in an individual data conference to share the K-6 child's strengths and weaknesses and identify areas of focus for instruction or intervention. The data conference provides the instructor with the opportunity to review the assessments given, determine if assessments were chosen and evaluated correctly, and identify whether the pre-service teacher has selected appropriate instruction or intervention goals. This setting also serves as an opportunity for the pre-service teacher to practice communicating reading assessment data, although with the course instructor as the audience. Additionally, in the data conference, there is an expectation for sophisticated use of content-level vocabulary to be shared. Following this data conference where instructional goals for the case study student are confirmed, the pre-service teacher implements instruction/intervention for the K-6 student, post-assesses in the areas of the instructional goals identified, and writes a diagnostic report (case study) documenting the experience. Traditionally in this course, the culminating assignment has been a (fictitious) letter to the parent of the child about whom they conducted the case study. In this letter, the pre-service teacher shared the reading data collected, instructional approaches used, his or her determination of the success of the instruction based on post-assessment data, and recommendations for at-home support. The parent letter was not given to the actual parent, but was instead used as evidence that the pre-service teacher could accurately share and communicate reading data and reading instruction with families. The Parent Conference Project described in this study was developed to complement the case study process and involved removing the parent letter requirement and replacing it with a more authentic simulated reading assessment conference in TeachLivE™, utilizing the parent avatar as previously described. Through this process, pre-service teachers prepare for and conduct a seven-minute reading assessment conference with a parent avatar who takes on the role of the parent of the child with whom the case study was conducted. After the conference, the pre-service teacher completes a reflection where he or she self-assesses the conference simulation based on the eight-conferencing behaviors (both structuring and responsive) and responds to open-ended prompts (see Figure 2). The instructor uses the coding tool (see Figure 1) while observing, and provides the pre-service teacher with specific, immediate feedback following the conference, but after the pre-service teacher has had a chance to reflect on his/her own reading assessment conferencing behaviors. During this debrief discussion, the instructor and pre-service teacher determine whether a 2nd virtual conference rehearsal experience is warranted based on which indicators on the coding tool were observed and/or not observed during the simulated reading assessment conference. If a pre-service teacher is identified as needing a 2nd conference in TeachLivE™, he or she identifies the behaviors that they want to focus on as a goal area for the subsequent reading assessment conference, prior to leaving the debrief with the instructor. Supporting instructional features of the project include face-to-face elements (brainstorming effective

conference behaviors, class discussion about parent conferences with introduction to project tools, and conference role plays in class) and online elements (an online module including links and resources related to parent teacher conferences).

### **Data Collection and Survey Instruments**

The data points pertinent to this phase of the study included: a coding tool and a post-conference reflection.

#### **Coding Tool**

As previously mentioned, during phase 1 of the study, the researchers/instructors observed over 200 pre-service teachers conferring in the TeachLivE™ simulation environment. This led to the revision of a coding tool used to both provide guidance and feedback to teacher candidates, and assist with evaluating pre-service teachers' conferencing skills. During the summer of 2016, the researchers revisited observations completed in phase 1 of the study to identify patterns indicative of each desired conferencing behavior. The goal was to mimic the teacher evaluation terminology used in local public schools. Therefore, three categories of performance were identified: Not Observed, Developing, and Applying, and appropriate descriptors for each category were created based on the review of data collected during phase 1. For example, during the opening of the conference, pre-service teachers were expected to state the purpose of the conference specific to sharing the reading assessment data that they had collected. A developing indicator for this behavior would be the pre-service teacher being general, nonspecific, and/or lacking clarity. They might pose, "I'd like to talk about your child's reading". While an applying indicator would reference specific reading assessment data and sound like, "I'd like to talk about your child's reading comprehension, specifically her use of self-monitoring strategies as she reads". The coding tool was designed to allow the researchers to highlight or underline the appropriate descriptors based on observation and to determine whether the pre-service teacher needed to conduct a second conference for additional rehearsal and simulated practice. For the purpose of this project, and in alignment with course objectives and standards, the researchers decided that two of the eight behaviors were non-negotiable for demonstration during the conference: sharing reading data and professionalism. Pre-service teachers were instructed that they must receive a rating of "applying" in four out of the five indicators under the behavior sharing reading data and a rating of "applying" in all three of the indicators under the behavior professionalism in order to be excused from a second parent-teacher conference (see Figure 1). During the debriefing discussion, the researcher shared the coding tool markings and provided each pre-service teacher with individual feedback about his/her conference skills and the determination of whether or not a second conference was warranted based on the indicators met. Beyond the researchers' determination of whether or not a second conference was required, they also allowed the pre-service teachers the option to do

a second conference if they desired more practice, even if he or she had met the assignment expectations. If a pre-service teacher was required to do (or desired) a second conference, the pre-service teacher was asked to identify a goal for improvement, which the researcher then indicated on the coding sheet. The focus of the second conference would be to see an improvement in the area that the pre-service teacher identified. The researchers used the same coding tool for the second conference, but wrote with a different colored writing utensil to record the second observation. Again, the researchers debriefed with each individual pre-service teacher after the conference, providing overall feedback, but honing in on the goal that the student had self-selected for improvement.

#### **Post-Conference Reflection**

The pre-service teachers completed an online post-conference reflection form (see Figure 2) each time they completed a parent-teacher conference in TeachLivE™. On this form, the pre-service teachers reflected on their performance for each of the eight identified conferencing behaviors, specifically documenting their perception of whether or not each indicator on the coding tool was demonstrated. The reflection was captured prior to the debriefing feedback discussion held with the instructor. This data collection sequence was intentional so that the pre-service teachers' reflections would accurately represent his/her own self-perception of the effectiveness of their conferencing skills. Following the debriefing where instructor observations and ratings were shared, each pre-service teacher completed the remainder of the reflection, identifying what course supports were most helpful and least helpful for their development of conferencing behaviors, in addition to identifying what they would do differently if given the chance to replicate the conference experience.

#### **Findings**

As this phase of the multi-year study involved the piloting of the coding tool and the post-conference reflection form, the pre-service teachers' conference outcomes and feedback from their post-conference reflections were the key sources of data for analysis.

#### **Pre-service Teachers' Conference Outcomes**

Of the pre-service teachers who conducted a parent-teacher conference, 62% demonstrated the conference behaviors identified as non-negotiable from the onset of the Parent Teacher Conference project, meaning that they were not required to complete a second conference. Interestingly, however, 4% of the participating students voluntarily requested to have additional practice through a second simulation, though not required. This left 38% of the pre-service teachers who were required to set a conferencing behavior goal and complete a second parent-teacher conference simulation.

The coding tool served as the feedback tool for the instructors. Depending upon the observed behaviors, the

instructor could give the pre-service teacher specific feedback related to each of the eight behaviors in the post-conference debrief. On the coding tool, the instructor identifies misconceptions and contradictory comments. For example, one pre-service teacher noted that the child “was on grade level, but falling below in comprehension”. Another pre-service teacher explained that the child was “a great reader, reading Magic Tree House Books,” yet shared that “the fluency was 68 WPM,” a reading rate markedly below the grade level expectation set by the school district’s reading plan and only a single dimension of fluency shared. The coding tool also allowed the instructor to document how the pre-service teacher responded to parent questions. For example, when one pre-service teacher said she was “working on sight words and digraphs,” the parent avatar legitimately asked what those were and for examples to be shared. When another pre-service teacher mentioned that she was “using Readers Theatre to develop fluency,” the parent avatar wanted to know what that meant. Pre-service teacher responses to such parent avatar questions were recorded on the coding tool and thereby helped the instructor determine if each pre-service teacher was able to demonstrate “thinking-on-your-feet fluency,” clearly and accurately, as related to reading assessment and instruction. In the debrief, the instructor shared these observations in alignment to the indicators met and clarified any misconceptions or confusions that were demonstrated over the course of the conference.

Feedback obtained from pre-service teachers was based on their self-reflection of the value of the Parent Conference Project as a learning experience, their identification of the most helpful instructional features for parent conferencing in the practicum course, and their perceptions of what they would have done differently if they had the chance. Further, additional feedback obtained by the students who were required to engage in a 2nd virtual parent conference included the change in conference indicators demonstrated from the first conference to the second conference and their perceptions of why they improved by the 2nd conference. Sample student responses for these feedback categories have been compiled (see Figure 3).

On the post conference survey, when asked what activity was most helpful in developing their parent-teacher conferencing behaviors, 60% of the pre-services teachers identified instructor feedback, 30% selected course content (online and face-to-face), and 10% chose the TeachLivE™ experience. When asked what activity was least helpful, 50% of the pre-service teachers chose the “none” category, while 22% checked online content, and 11% selected TeachLivE™, in class rehearsal, and in-class content.

After a second conference was completed by 42% of the initial participants, they were again asked what contributed to their conferencing skills. Thirty-two percent of participants identified instructor feedback, 14% chose course content (online and face to face), and 10% chose identifying a goal. When probed what activity was most helpful 27% selected instructor feedback, 9% chose course content and identifying a goal, and 4% chose TeachLivE™.

## Discussion

As the results indicate, the majority of the students in the second phase of the study felt that instructor feedback was critical to developing their parent-teacher conferencing skills, while only a few students identified TeachLivE™ as a key instructional support. Interestingly though, the TeachLivE™ experience is what allowed the instructors to provide timely feedback based on specific conferencing indicators observed and not observed. It may be that students do not view TeachLivE™ as an instructional support. As instructors and participants in this research, we also speculate whether the students’ preconceived notions of the TeachLivE™ conference experience, including their anticipation and nervousness during the preparation, may have impacted their low response rates in identifying the TeachLivE™ experience itself as a key learning experience. Further development of this specific reflection item might also be useful in determining whether the TeachLivE™ experience was beneficial, as compared to other more traditional instructional elements (such as online module resources and in-class role plays), followed by a more detailed breakdown of the elements of the TeachLivE™ parent conference, including: instructor feedback, uninterrupted virtual rehearsal, and simulated parent questions/confusions.

Additionally, many students identified the course content (both online and face-to-face) as helpful to their conferencing skill development. After phase one of the research project, changes were made to online and in class content, based on the identification of the structuring and responsive behaviors. The alignment of the course content to the project expectations assisted the instructors and researchers in providing clear, specific feedback. The virtual experience in TeachLivE™ was also moved to later in the semester, allowing the instructors to have more time to instruct and guide students to be more successful in the parent-teacher reading conference.

## Limitations

This second phase of the multi-year study was reliant upon the adaptation of tools from phase one, which included a lot of trial and error. The TeachLivE™ virtual environment provided pre-service teachers with a risk-free environment in which to practice parent-teacher reading conference skills and allowed the researchers to identify effective reading assessment conference structuring and responsive behaviors; however, a significant limitation exists where the tools developed were created to be in direct alignment with the case study assignment for the reading practicum course. As such, discussions about other content area progress (such as math and science), classroom expectations, and/or student behavioral concerns are not addressed in the TeachLivE™ parent reading conference experience as currently implemented. Thus, as currently designed, this project is narrowly focused on the accurate communication of reading assessment data, and it excludes many of the other reasons why teachers conduct conferences. The researchers do suggest, however, that,

while the categories and criteria on the developed tools are specific to reading conferences, they could be easily be adapted to other content areas or general conference topics. Previous TeachLivE™ research guided us to have the virtual experience last no more than seven minutes, but many of the students reported that they needed more time to demonstrate their conferencing skills. Therefore, this time constraint will be revisited. An additional limitation is that the preservice teacher participants in this study represent only two sections of students enrolled in a reading practicum course, when a total of 6 sections of the course were offered at the participating university during the semester of this implementation phase. Challenges related to scalability could emerge, especially when it comes to scheduling and time demands for virtual conference experiences. Additionally, access to TeachLivE™ may be a limitation for other institutions seeking to replicate this project, due to lack of access and/or the participation costs.

### Conclusion

As previously discussed, pre-service teacher programs have not characteristically included parent conference skill development through major course objectives or targeted learning experiences (Henderson & Hunt, 1993; McNaughton et al., 2008) despite research that highlights the complexity of conferencing behaviors as a synchrony of professional knowledge, skill, and disposition (Walker & Dotger, 2012). Emerging findings suggest that the learning experiences embedded in this project are both meaningful for pre-service teachers and have resulted in the documented development of conferencing competencies based on desired reading conferencing behaviors. The implementation of the TeachLivE™ parent-teacher reading conference incites preservice teachers to develop their “thinking-on-your-feet fluency” (Walker & Dotger, 2012), which is a skill that cannot be practiced through a parent letter or case study writing tasks. This study reiterates the complexities of parent conferencing and the need for focused training in teacher preparation programs, with a specific emphasis in challenges that emerge when sharing reading assessment data and instructional plans in a parent conference setting.

Table 1  
Parent-Teacher Project Research Overview

Phases of Study	Goals
Phase 1: Fall 2015-Spring 2016	Identify effective reading conferencing behaviors. Draft a Coding Tool and Project Rubric to be used in Phase 2.
Phase 2: Fall 2016	Pilot the use of the Coding Tool. Pilot use of the Post-Conference Reflection Tool.
Phase 3: Spring 2017	Full implementation of Parent-Teacher Conference with revised tools.

Figure 1

## Researcher Parent-Teacher Reading Conference Coding Tool

Structuring Behaviors	NO	Developing	Applying
<b>1.Opened the conference by...</b>			
introducing self.			
using parent's and child's name.			
using specific comment(s) to affirm or praise the child.		Used some comments to affirm or praise child, but non-specific (the child is great...fun...awesome).	Used specific comments to affirm or praise the child (ex. the child did great during the math activity, he/she could count by 5's).
stating the purpose of the conference specific to reading assessment data.		Identified a purpose for the conference referencing data or instructional goals in general/non-specific terms (I'd like to talk about your child's reading) and/or lacked clarity.	Identified conference purpose specific to reading assessment data (I'd like to talk about your child's phonics, specifically long vowel knowledge).
<b>2.Gathered information from the parent by ...</b>			
asking if they had specific concerns/questions they wanted addressed in the conference.			
seeking input regarding out of school reading habits.			
actively listening and responding.		Some listening and responding.	Actively listened to the parent by nodding, taking notes, repeating what parent stated, and/or probing.
<b>3.**Shared reading data by...</b>			
Using the data conference form or other documents.		Used minimal data sources and/or had documents but did not use them.	Used data conference form or other documents while sharing data.
responded to the parent's questions with specific answers.		Responded to parents questions, but not necessarily answering them in full, correctly, and/or vague (Oh I think your child will be fine).	Responded to the parent's questions with specific answers.
using terminology the parent could easily understand.		Used some terminology but did not fully or accurately explain acronyms or content-specific language.	Used terminology easily understood by parent (no acronyms or explained acronyms and/or content-specific language).
accurately reporting reading data interpretations.		Shared somewhat accurate interpretations of assessments/data.	Shared completely accurate interpretations of assessments/data.
accurately sharing how the child's reading behaviors align to grade level expectations.		Somewhat shared how child's reading behaviors align to grade level expectations (ex- seems to be doing fine, no need to worry, he's doing well).	Accurately shared how child's reading behaviors align to grade level expectations.
<b>4. Identified next steps by...</b>			
sharing what would be done at school to improve reading.		Vaguely identified "next step" procedures and/or next steps which may not be aligned to student's needs.	Identified feasible "next step" procedures aligned to student's needs.
providing ideas for at home support to improve reading.		Provided parent with non-significant home ideas to improve (vague, not specific to student's needs).	Provided parent with home ideas to improve (specific, feasible examples related to student's needs, such as book titles).
<b>Responsive Behaviors</b>			
<b>5. Maintained a positive relationship by...</b>			



being positive, praising, encouraging efforts, and/or validating ideas/feelings.		Sometimes maintained a positive tone and/or inconsistent. Validated little or showed little about parent's ideas and feelings.	Maintained a positive tone by smiling, gesturing, good posture, and/or appropriate tone. Validated/showed parent's ideas/and feelings throughout the duration of the conference.
showing a genuine interest in the student's well-being.		Showed little interest in the student's well-being and success.	Showed interest throughout the conference in the student's well-being and success by being animated, nodding, agreeing, and/or notetaking.
<b>6. Managed the flow by ...</b>			
maintaining the time.		Did not manage time (too short, too long, or may have spent too much time on one aspect of the conference).	Managed time well (finished on time or slightly early), clear, succinct.
maintaining the flow.		Conference was disjointed (jumped from one thing to another) and/or used a script to read off (robotic in nature).	The conference was well planned and flowed from one part to another. A conversational tone was maintained.
keeping the conversation "on track."		Held conversation but did not keep it "on track". May have lost track of purpose.	Conversation was "on track" for the most of the conference
meeting the purpose of the conference.		Somewhat met the purpose of the conference.	Met the purpose of the conference as stated in the opening.
<b>7.**Exhibited professionalism by...</b>			
arriving on time.			
dressing professionally.			
using content-specific language.		Used content-specific professional language minimally.	Used content-specific professional language throughout the conference.
<b>8. Clearly communicated by...</b>			
using transition words to connect ideas (rather than conversational fillers).		Used some transitional words, but used conversation fillers (ex-um, definitely, excited, okay, awesome, yea).	Used transitional words to connect ideas and primarily stayed away from conversational fillers.
using grammatically correct English.		Used grammatically correct English inconsistently during the conference.	Used grammatically correct English throughout the duration of the conference.
Displaying appropriate, engaging body language.		Displayed some welcoming body language throughout the duration of the conference (posture, facial expressions, gestures, and/or eye contact).	Displayed consistent welcoming body language throughout conference (posture, facial expression, gestures, and/or eye contact).

Figure 2 Student Parent-Teacher Reading Conference Reflection #1

Participant Code \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Conference \_\_\_\_\_

	NO	D	A	Instructor Feedback
<b>Structuring Behaviors</b>				
Opened the conference by...				
introducing self.				
using parent and child's name.				
using specific comment(s) to affirm or praise the child.				
stating the purpose of the conference specific to reading assessment data.				
Gathered information from the parent by...				
asking if they had specific concerns/questions they wanted addressed in the conference.				
seeking input regarding out of school reading habits.				
actively listening and responding to the parent.				
**Shared reading data by...				
using the data conference form or other documents.				
using terminology the parent could easily understand.				
accurately reporting reading data interpretations.				
accurately sharing how the child's reading behaviors align to grade level expectations.				
Identified next steps by...				
sharing what would be done at school to improve reading.				
providing ideas for at home support to improve reading, such as book titles.				
	NO	D	A	Instructor Feedback
<b>Responsive Behaviors</b>				
Maintained a positive relationship by...				
being positive (praising, encouraging efforts, and/or validating ideas/feelings).				
showing a genuine interest in the student's well-being.				
Managed the conference by ...				
maintaining the time.				
maintaining the flow.				
keeping the conversation on track.				
meeting the purpose of the conference.				
**Exhibited professionalism by....				
arriving on time.				
dressing professionally.				
using content-specific language accurately.				
Clearly communicated by...				
using transition words to connect ideas rather than conversational fillers.				

using grammatically correct English.				
displaying appropriate, engaging body language.				

**\*\*** In order to be excused from mock conference #2, candidate must demonstrate all behaviors in sharing data and exhibiting professionalism, and can only miss one behavior in each of the other areas.

KEY: NO- Not Observed; O- Observed; D-Developing; A-Applied

*What do you think went well during your parent-teacher conference?*

What would you do differently if you had the chance to conduct this conference again?

Check any of the following course activities that contributed to your parent conferencing skills:

☐ in class session on parent conferencing      ☐ feedback from the instructor/researcher  
☐ online content/modules      ☐ identifying a goal to improve  
☐ virtual rehearsals (TeachLive)

Which course activity (from above) was most helpful and why?

Which course activity (from above) was least helpful and why?

Figure 3 Sample Student Feedback Responses from Post-Conference Reflection Forms

Post-Conference #1 Reflections	
Self-reflection of the value of the Parent Conference Project as a learning experience	<i>This method of learning was helpful because it allowed me to practice speaking to parents about reading assessments and to explain what the data meant. It allowed me to gain confidence and make note of what aspects of a conference are important and which areas I need to discuss with parents.</i>
Identification of the most helpful instructional features for parent conferencing	<p><i>This lab was very useful to me because it allowed me to get a feel of how a parent would react to the information that I was providing. I really liked having the rubric because it allowed me to fix a few things before I had the actual conference with Yadiel's mom. It was great for practice and it helped me feel more confident when meeting face to face with Ms. Zambrana.</i></p> <p><i>Although I am not the biggest fan of practicing with avatars, I do believe that it is a great learning experience. When talking, I do or say things that I never notice and being able to participate in TeachLivE allows me to get proper feedback.</i></p> <p><i>This is extremely helpful. I watched a parent conference soon after I had this experience and it was not as complex. So this experience over prepared me for what I will experience as a teacher.</i></p> <p><i>This was very helpful because it will prepare me to have conferences in the future with parents. It allowed me to take my data and actually explain what it meant to the parent.</i></p> <p><i>It was very helpful that the avatar was very life-like and asked real life questions. The questions were somewhat challenging, which simulated a real conference. I think that this helped to calm my nerves about parent/teacher conferences and provided me with a valuable experience.</i></p> <p><i>It was helpful because I was caught off guard by questions I wasn't expecting the parent to ask. It prepared me to answer questions on the spot that I am not prepared for.</i></p>

Perceptions of what they would have done differently if they had the chance	<p><i>If I could do something differently, I would explain Adrian's grade level reading a little better. Since he is two grades below the reading level, I should not say "don't worry". I need to be honest.</i></p> <p><i>I would further explain terminology in a way the parent can understand. The parent was confused when I spoke about fluency and when I described it to her I left out parts that contribute to fluency other than words correct per minute.</i></p> <p><i>I would focus more on relating long vowels to the student's reading fluency, as well as explain fluency to the parent to give a better understanding of what long vowels have to do with the student's reading skills. I would also provide the parent with a list of book options to read with their student.</i></p> <p><i>One of the biggest things I would do differently is to have a checklist to follow as I go through the conference to make sure I hit everything instead of trying to remember all that I need to hit. I would also try to be more relaxed as I was nervous for some reason.</i></p>
Post-Conference #2 Reflections	
Change in conference indicators demonstrated from the first conference to the second conference	<p><i>After doing this conference the 2nd time I feel that I was able to manage the flow of the conversation better and that I was able to effectively share information.</i></p> <p><i>This time around, I was a lot more clear with any information I provided to the parent. I also spoke with better grammar :)</i></p> <p><i>After doing this conference the 2nd time I feel that I was able to manage the flow of the conversation better and that I was able to effectively share information.</i></p> <p><i>I think my confidence during this conference helped me to correctly deliver the information to the parent so that they are aware of their child's progress in reading instruction.</i></p>
Perceptions of why they improved by the 2 <sup>nd</sup> conference	<p><i>This time around, I was a lot more clear with any information I provided to the parent. I also spoke with better grammar :).</i></p> <p><i>After doing this conference the 2nd time I feel that I was able to manage the flow of the conversation better and that I was able to effectively share information.</i></p> <p><i>I was able to talk about all the important data with the parents. I felt very prepared and ready to discuss the student's strengths and weaknesses with the parent. I also feel as if I did a good job answering the parent's questions and responding to her initial concerns.</i></p>

## References

- Baum, A., & Swick, K. (2008). Dispositions toward families and family involvement: supporting pre-service teacher development. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 35(6), 579–584. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-007-0229-9>
- Beaver, J. (2012). *Developmental Reading Assessment*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Dieker, L. A., Hines, M., Stapleton, C., & Hughes, C. A. (2007). Virtual classrooms: STAR simulator building virtual environments for teacher training in effective classroom management. *New Learning Technology*, SALT (4), 1-22. Retrieved May 27, 2013 from <https://www.altcert.org/Articles/PDF/VirtualClassroomsStarSimulator.pdf>
- Dotger, B. H., Dotger, S. C., & Maher, M. J. (2010). From medicine to teaching: The evolution of the simulated interaction model. *Innovation in Higher Education* 35, 129-141.
- Dotger, B. H., Harris, S., Maher, M., & Hansel, A. (2011). Exploring the emotional geographies of parent-teacher candidate interactions: An emerging signature pedagogy. *Teacher Educator*, 46(3), 208–230.
- Epstein, J. L., & Sanders, M. G. (2006). Prospects for Change: Preparing Educators for School, Family, and Community Partnerships. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 81(2), 81–120. [http://doi.org/10.1207/S15327930pje8102\\_5](http://doi.org/10.1207/S15327930pje8102_5)
- Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, Pub. L. No. 114-95. 114 Stat. 1177 92015).
- Henderson, M. V., & Hunt, S. N. (1993). Parent-teacher conferencing skills and pre-service programs. *Education*, 114(1), 71.
- Henderson, M. V., & Hunt, S. (1994). A model for developing pre-service parent-teacher conferencing skills. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 21(1), 31.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-446
- Johannesen, M. (2013). The role of virtual learning environments in a primary school context: An analysis of inscription of assessment practices. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 44(2), 302–313. <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8535.2012.01296.x>
- Jordan, L., Reyes-Blanes, M. E., Peel, B. B., Peel, H. A., & Lane, H. B. (1998). Developing teacher-parent partnerships across cultures: Effective parent conferences. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 33(3), 141–47.
- Kelley, M., & Wenzel, T. (2017). Identifying effective pre-service teacher behaviors during a parent-teacher reading conference in a virtual environment (TeachLivE™). *ALER Yearbook*, 39, 109-125. *Literacy: The Critical Role of Teacher Knowledge*.
- Markow, D., & Martin, S. (2005). The MetLife survey of the American teacher: Transitions and the role of supportive relationships. Retrieved May, 29, 2013 from <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED488837.pdf>
- McDonald, D. (2012). Building experiential knowledge through hypothetical enactments: A meta-pedagogical process. *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching & Learning Journal*, 6(1), 1–18.
- McNaughton, D., Hamlin, D., McCarthy, J., Head-Reeves, D., & Schreiner, M. (2008). Learning to listen: Teaching an active listening strategy to preservice education professionals. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 27(4), 223-231.
- No Child Left Behind Act, Pub. L. No. 107-110 (2001). Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oii/nonpublic/nclbinfo.html>
- Puvirajah, A., & Calandra, B. (2015). Embodied experiences in virtual worlds role-play as a conduit for novice teacher identity exploration: A case study. *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*. 15, 23-47.
- Walker, J. M. T., & Dotger, B. H. (2012). Because Wisdom Can't Be Told Using Comparison of Simulated Parent-Teacher Conferences to Assess Teacher Candidates' Readiness for Family-School Partnership. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 63(1), 62–75. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0022487111419300>

## About the Authors

**Dr. Michelle J. Kelley** is an Associate Professor at the University of Central Florida, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in elementary and secondary education. She is the co-director of the UCF Reading Clinic and UCF Digital Storytelling Camp, all of which offer intervention and enrichment opportunities to serve K-5 students in the Central Florida area. Her research interests include improving K-12 literacy learning/teaching and developing/implementing service-learning projects/initiatives in the community.

**Dr. Taylar Wenzel** is a faculty member at the University of Central Florida, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in elementary and secondary education. She is the co-director of the UCF Reading Clinic and the director of the UCF Downtown Saturday Reading Camp and UCF Digital Storytelling Camp, all of which offer intervention and enrichment opportunities to serve K-5 students in the Central Florida area. Her research interests include children's use of cognitive comprehension strategies in cross-curricular contexts, the development of pedagogical content knowledge for preservice and in-service teachers, and the impact of integrating social emotional learning in the curriculum.