

**A Case Study of a School-University Partnership Focused on Literacy and Educational Equity: Responding to COVID-19 in the Early Grades**

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**Abstract:** School-university partnerships have emerged over the past three decades to increase educational opportunities for underserved students. One example is the Literacy Fellows Program (LFP), a recently created partnership between the Sherman Center for Early Learning in Urban Communities at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County and two Baltimore City public schools. The LFP recruits and coordinates undergraduate volunteers to support literacy teaching and learning in first and second grade classrooms. This paper draws on interviews with 11 teachers and 20 volunteers, and 32 classroom observations conducted before and during COVID-19. Classroom teachers and undergraduate volunteers recognized multiple benefits of the program for all participants. COVID-19 has imposed challenges for teaching and the implementation of the LFP that have temporarily reduced the program's effectiveness. However, these challenges also provide important lessons for improving implementation in the future. Implications of these findings for future research and partnership practice are discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** School-university partnerships, literacy, early childhood education, classroom/community volunteers, underserved schools, COVID-19

**NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:**

**Essential One: A Comprehensive Mission.** A professional development school (PDS) is a learning community guided by a comprehensive, articulated mission that is broader than the goals of any single partner, and that aims to advance equity, antiracism, and social justice within and among schools, colleges/universities, and their respective community and professional partners.

**Essential Four: Reflection and Innovation.** A PDS makes a shared commitment to reflective practice, responsive innovation, and generative knowledge.

**Essential Eight: Boundary-Spanning Roles.** A PDS creates space for, advocates for, and supports college/university and P-12 faculty to operate in well defined, boundary-spanning roles that transcend institutional settings.

Essential Nine: Resources and Recognition. A PDS provides dedicated and shared resources and establishes traditions to recognize, enhance, celebrate, and sustain the work of partners and the partnership.

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## **A Case Study of a School-University Partnership Focused on Literacy and Educational Equity: Responding to COVID 19 in the Early Grades**

Despite ongoing education reforms, many children in large urban school systems like Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) are denied equitable learning opportunities (Anyon, 2014; Payne, 2008). These inequities are visible in school outcome data. For example, in 2018, 81.4% of elementary students in BCPS *did not meet expectations* on the Language Arts Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) compared with 49.5% for the state (Maryland Report Card, 2019). Such statistics suggest the need for early interventions if we want to improve educational outcomes for underserved students.

One of these interventions is a school-university partnership between the Sherman Center for Early Learning in Urban Communities (Sherman Center) at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) and BCPS schools. A key initiative of this partnership and the focus of this article is the Literacy Fellows Program (LFP). The LFP is a service-learning project designed to improve literacy outcomes for first and second grade students at two Baltimore City schools whose student populations are primarily low-income, and Black or Brown. The LFP assigns UMBC undergraduates to schools and classrooms. Before the transition to online learning due to COVID-19, volunteers supported classroom language arts instruction face-to-face twice a week from 1 to 1.5 hours each time during the fall and spring semesters. During COVID-19, the program's overarching goals remained the same, but the instructional support was provided through ZOOM, a synchronous virtual platform.

In this article, we respond to the call of scholars to expand the knowledge base on the implementation and sustainability of partnerships (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). We report findings from a multiple case study examining the perceptions and experiences of university (undergraduate volunteers) and school (classroom teachers) stakeholders participating in the LFP. We also analyze how the shift to a virtual platform due to COVID-19 affected program expectations, implementation, and mission. This study builds from the literature on school-university partnerships and overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein, 2010). Using qualitative data from interviews with classroom teachers and undergraduate volunteers and observations in classrooms, it asks: 1) *What are the perceived benefits of the LFP for students, teachers, and undergraduate volunteers?* and, 2) *How did the program modify its practices to respond to new teaching realities resulting from COVID 19 and with what effects?*

By answering these questions, we highlight the process, including successes and difficulties, of implementing a school-university partnership program that centers equity and social justice. We also elevate the perceptions and experiences of teachers and university undergraduates who were key stakeholders in the implementation process.

### **Literature Review**

#### **School-University Partnerships**

With the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act* in 2002, and the related press to close demographic-associated academic disparities among students, schools have increasingly turned to community engagement strategies to address educational concerns. School-university partnerships is one of the four major community engagement strategies that have emerged over the last three decades (Sanders, 2003). Callahan and Martin (2007) discuss different

classifications of school-university partnerships based on their goals and types of connections between the two organizations. According to Walsh and Backe (2013), the majority of school-university partnerships have focused on three areas: (1) teacher training and development, (2) co-construction and evaluation of curriculum, instruction, and leadership strategies, and (3) service learning.

- (1) *Teacher training and development.* While these partnerships originated from the need to have sites for preservice teacher development, they have evolved into more egalitarian partnerships between schools and universities (LeFever-Davis et al., 2007). The increasingly egalitarian relationship has resulted in longer-lasting, more positive outcomes for all stakeholders. Student-teachers have an opportunity to link theory to practice and observe teaching in real settings as well as share their knowledge of current pedagogical practices and support classroom instruction (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Hascher et al., 2004; Reischl et al., 2017).
- (2) *Co-construction and evaluation of curriculum, instruction, and leadership strategies.* In contexts where principals and teachers are struggling to provide students with meaningful learning opportunities, universities can be thoughtful partners and assist with reform implementation (Borthwick et al., 2003; Jeffery & Polleck, 2010; Rosenquist et al., 2015). In this type of partnership, schools and universities work collaboratively to support systemic change. In many cases, schools lack resources to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of the practices and programs they implement. In contrast, universities have the tools, resources, and expertise to evaluate programs implemented by schools, and facilitate the use of research for education decision-making (Bryk et al., 2015).
- (3) *Service-learning.* This type of partnership is usually based on a critical need displayed by one partner, typically the school, and the ability of the other partner, typically the university, to address that need. Universities can offer a wide range of services, including food pantries and health-services, educational materials, tutoring programs, and afterschool programs, to support the multiple needs of schools and students as part of their service-learning requirements (Bringle et al., 2009; Walsh & Backe, 2013; see also Donaldson & Daughtery, 2011). Some recent service-learning approaches follow a participatory model where school personnel are actively engaged in designing the service-learning experience and involved throughout the decision-making process (Mitchell, 2007). In these cases, school stakeholders not only participate in defining the scope of the experience but also become critical agents in refining and monitoring its implementation.

Although these types of partnerships have a long history, they have recently come under increased interest as universities expand their commitment to work with local schools as part of their social and civic responsibilities (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000). These partnerships are also considered a possible means of closing learning disparities and opportunity gaps (disparities in access to high-quality schools) between underserved students and their middle-income or White peers (Brabeck et al., 2003; Sanders & Campbell, 2007; Sanders & Galindo, 2014).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Educational and developmental theorists have long discussed the need to consider the overlapping and interacting contexts in which students develop and the relations between these contexts to optimize their learning (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Epstein's (2010) theory of overlapping spheres of influence provides a theoretical perspective to better understand the

transformative potential of school-university partnerships, in general, and of the LFP, more specifically.

Epstein's (2010) theory posits that the *overlap* between and among contexts of influence, the family, school, and community, enhances benefits for students' learning and overall well-being. This study focuses on a collaboration between two of these contexts, the school and the community, to improve primarily low-income, and Black or Brown students' educational opportunities.

The quality and degree of *overlap* between these contexts determine the success of the partnership. Instead of taking a top-down approach, successful partnerships place schools and their students at the center and identify common goals that are oriented toward facilitating academic success and other positive outcomes (e.g., social emotional development, improved attendance). Partners also share responsibilities and maintain positive collaborations that are based on trust to achieve common objectives (Griffiths et al., 2021).

To build successful partnerships with schools, universities have a major role to play in establishing mutually beneficial, bi-directional relations that go beyond their self-interest (Buys & Bursnall, 2007). The university commitment to successful partnerships needs to be reflected at the individual and organizational levels. Weerts and Sandmann (2010) posit that individuals at the university need to take the following leadership roles to support successful school-university partnerships: *community-based problem solver, technical expert, internal engagement advocate, and engagement champion* (p. 642). At the organizational level, a university's commitment to school partnerships must be an integral part of their overall mission, with dedicated staff and funding (Sanders, 2003). Individual and organizational-level support will enhance the *overlap* between schools and universities and their capacity to improve underserved students' learning opportunities. One example of a recently created school-university partnership is the Sherman Center at UMBC.

### **The Sherman Center and The Literacy Fellow Program**

The Sherman Center was established in 2017 with a generous gift from the George and Betsy Sherman Family Foundation. Through applied research, professional and leadership development, and partnerships with schools, families, and communities, the Sherman Center seeks to build a strong educational foundation for children from birth to age eight in Baltimore City, and develop empirically tested early childhood education practices for urban schools. The Sherman Center's implementation strategies and goals are delineated in its theory of change (see Fig. 1).

## Sherman Center Theory of Change

The Sherman Center for Early Learning in Urban Communities seeks to build a strong foundation for lifelong learning and academic success by connecting theory, evidence, and practice.

### PARTNERSHIPS.

Collaborating to expand resources and opportunities for young learners, birth to eight.

*Activities: Diverse Books Project; Families, Libraries, and Early Literacy Project; Literacy Fellows Program*

### MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP.

Producing and disseminating new knowledge on early childhood education policies and practices.

*Activities: Faculty Recruitment, Faculty Research Award*



### PROFESSIONAL AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT.

Building professional knowledge and leadership in early childhood to promote transformational change.

*Activities: Teacher Summer Institute, Maryland Early Childhood Leadership Program*



**SHERMAN  
CENTER**

for Early Learning  
in Urban Communities

The Sherman Center currently partners with five PreK-8 schools serving racially and ethnically diverse, low-income students in a historically industrial section of South Baltimore. It began working with two of these schools in the 2017-2018 academic year (AY). In AY 2018-2019, the Sherman Center expanded its work to include two additional partner schools. A fifth school (beginning with its kindergarten team) was welcomed in AY 2020-2021.

The Sherman Center collaborates with its partner schools to implement site-specific and cross-site projects to enhance early literacy instruction, resources, and outcomes. This focus reflects the schools' goals and a recognition of the importance of early literacy for young children's life-long success (International Literacy Association, 2018; Schwanenflugel & Knapp,

2016). Currently, the Sherman Center implements four school-based initiatives: the Diverse Books Project, the Teacher Summer Institute, the Families, Libraries, and Early Literacy Project, and the LFP.

Established in fall 2018, the LFP is a collaboration between the Sherman Center and the Shriver Center (a service-learning center at UMBC) to provide undergraduate volunteers to assist with literacy at two schools. Early childhood teachers at these schools identified the recruitment of classroom volunteers as a major challenge and indicated the need for "extra hands" to support their teaching and learning. Through consultation with school principals, first and second grade classrooms were selected for participation in the LFP.

Each school is assigned a team of undergraduate volunteers led by literacy fellows, one or two undergraduate students interested in education and community service who enroll in the Shriver Center's Community Service & Learning Practicum (Leadership Section). Literacy fellows apply for the position and are interviewed and selected by Sherman Center and Shriver Center staff. Each literacy fellow receives a stipend, works a minimum of four hours per week, serves as a literacy volunteer, and recruits and organizes an additional three to five volunteers for their assigned school. Literacy fellows are also responsible for transporting volunteers to and from school sites using vans provided by the Shriver Center, managing the online volunteer service verification forms, and documenting volunteer hours and activities in end-of-semester reports.

Literacy fellows and volunteers reflect UMBC's highly diverse student population. They serve as classroom helpers two days per week for 60-90 minutes during the first and second grade language arts instructional blocks. The classroom teacher determines volunteer activities. For example, a volunteer might assist with a whole-class instruction activity, work with small groups, provide one-on-one support to individual students, or assist the classroom teacher with developing and preparing instructional materials. Each team of volunteers at a school receives \$500 per semester to purchase instructional materials or student incentives for their host classrooms. UMBC faculty and staff provide support, guidance, and professional development to facilitate volunteers' work and success.

In March 2020, the activities of the LFP abruptly ended when Maryland's governor, Larry Hogan, issued a stay-at-home order in response to COVID-19. This study describes perceptions of the LFP's impact before and during COVID-19. It also discusses implications of the study's findings for school-university partnerships that seek to improve educational experiences and outcomes for underserved students.

### **Methods**

Based on data collected as part of a mixed-methods, multiple case study, this paper examines the *implementation and effectiveness* of the LFP at two Baltimore City schools.

### **Setting and Participants**

The participating schools served primarily low-income, and Black or Brown students and had an increasing multilingual population (see Table 1). Students in these schools were warm and welcoming, yet many struggled in mathematics and English language arts with average proficiency-levels well below the district's averages. The study's participants included first and second grade students, parents, and classroom teachers at the two case schools. Undergraduate volunteers, and UMBC faculty and staff supervising the undergraduate fellows and volunteers were also part of the study.

Table 1.  
*Student Characteristics and Outcomes, School Year 2018–2019* (in percentages unless otherwise specified)

	School One	School Two
Size (number of students)	317	222
Racial/ethnic composition		
African American	44	68
Latinx	19	26
White	32	5
Other	5	1
English learners (ELs)	15	17
Students eligible for free and reduced-price meal (FARM)	61	67
Student Outcomes		
Proficient in Mathematics	4.5	4.1
Proficient in English Language Arts	5	6.6
Chronologically absent	55	46

*Notes.* Information comes from the AY 2018-2019 Maryland Public Schools Report Card. AY 2018-2019 is the latest year for which data are available. At the time of the study, both schools were combined. Report data came from the elementary grades. Chronologically absent students are considered those who missed school for 10% or more school days.

All participating classroom teachers were women, and 80% had fewer than five years of experience working in their schools. Around half of the undergraduate volunteers identified as Black (African American or of African descent; 55%) and 90% were women. Sixty percent were freshmen and 25% were juniors. Fifty five percent were majoring in social sciences or humanities, and 30% in natural science or mathematics. The study used a multi-source, multi-methods approach to gather rich data and increase credibility.

**Data Collection**

The first two authors collected data over a period of two years, beginning in AY 2019-2020. Data collection included semi-structured interviews (30-60 minutes) with program leaders at UMBC and volunteers and teachers from the two case schools. These interviews addressed the goals, successes, and difficulties of the program and practices or activities that volunteers were implementing in the classroom. Undergraduate volunteers and classroom teachers received \$30 and \$70, respectively, for each interview as a thank you.

Data collection also included individual interviews with first and second grade students using structured questionnaires (lasting 7-12 minutes) to assess their reading motivation and self-concepts. Additionally, it included telephone interviews with parents (mostly mothers; 15-25 minutes) to examine the frequency with which children read at home, and more generally, the



home reading environment. Interviews with Latinx students and parents were conducted in Spanish, their preferred language. Students received stickers and parents received \$15 for each phone-interview as a thank you.

The first two authors also observed first and second grade classrooms during the language arts instructional block (60 minutes) to examine teacher instruction, volunteer engagement, and teacher and volunteer interactions. In most cases, one volunteer was assigned to each classroom, but there were a few exceptions where two volunteers worked together in one classroom. Data collection also included the review of relevant documents, specifically website postings, handouts from professional development activities for volunteers, recruitment documents, newsletters, and literacy fellows' end-of-semester reports. Each school received \$1500 as a thank you for its participation at the end of the study in the fall of 2021.

For this paper, we analyzed qualitative data derived from classroom teacher and undergraduate volunteer interviews and classroom observations collected during the fall semesters of AYs 2019-2020 and 2020-2021. There are two main differences between data collection during the two academic years: one, data collection was face-to-face in AY 2019-2020 and virtual in AY 2020-2021, and two, fewer classroom observations were conducted in AY 2020-2021 than in AY 2019-2020 due to technological challenges associated with COVID-19.

#### ***Data Collection during AY 2019-2020***

School visits were conducted at least once a week during the fall of 2019 to collect data. Nine teachers (six at School One, three at School Two) and 14 volunteers (seven at each school) were interviewed, and 24 formal classroom observations were conducted. Instrument protocols are included in the Appendix.

#### ***Data Collection during AY 2020-2021***

Data were collected from two first grade classrooms in School One and one first grade and one second grade classroom in School Two via ZOOM. These classrooms were observed two times each between September and December 2020. Six teachers and nine volunteers were interviewed, and eight formal classroom observations were conducted. Across the two years (AY 2019-20 and AY 2020-2021), four teachers and three volunteers were interviewed twice. These were teachers who taught the same grade level at the same school and volunteers who participated in the LFP during the two academic years. Data collection with students and parents was not possible during AY 2020-21 because of constraints presented by COVID-19.

#### **Data Analysis**

Interviews with teachers and volunteers were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Classroom observations were recorded using hand notes and also transcribed. All transcribed data were imported into Nvivo software and then analyzed using an open coding approach (see primary and secondary codes in Table 2). By taking this emic approach to coding, we centered participants' perspectives and understandings (Saldaña, 2015).

Table 2.  
*Primary and Secondary Codes*

Primary Codes	Secondary Codes
Perceived benefits for students	Literacy learning opportunities
	Behavioral regulation
	Bonding with adults
	Role models
Perceived benefits for teachers	Instructional support
	Facilitate their work
	Help with stress
	Educational Resources
Perceived benefits for undergraduate volunteers	Opportunities for learning
	Making a meaningful impact
	Bi-directional bonding
Challenges during COVID 19	
Teaching	New mode of instruction
	Time pressure
	Stress
Undergraduate volunteers' experiences	Fewer bonding opportunities with students
	Fewer opportunities to support learn
	Underutilized
	Less impact
Positive aspects during COVID-19	
	Partnership program remained
	Volunteers commitment
	Improved commitment
	Parents support

Data analysis started with data collection. After each session of data collection, the first two authors recorded their thoughts and identified areas for further inquiry. For this paper, data were reviewed and analyzed individually and collectively. In a series of meetings, the authors met to discuss emergent themes related to LFP implementation, benefits, and challenges identifying points of convergence and divergence. To refine the final narrative, we systematically triangulated data sources, identified key patterns, and considered contradictory evidence (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). We edited quotes for clarity and brevity as needed, but we mostly maintained participants' voices and idioms. We use the pronoun "they" to guard the anonymity of volunteers.

### Findings

Interviews and classroom observations revealed LFP successes and challenges. Below, we discuss these findings before and during COVID-19.

#### The LFP before COVID-19

As described below, study participants (classroom teachers and undergraduate volunteers) valued the multidimensional impact of the LFP on underserved students, teachers, and undergraduate volunteers.

### *Perceived Benefits for Students*

Teachers and undergraduate volunteers described multiple benefits of LFP activities for students, including increased literacy learning opportunities, better classroom behavior, greater opportunities for bonding with other adults, and access to role models. Overwhelmingly, teachers and undergraduate volunteers recognized that students' literacy skills were improving. One teacher at School Two shared,

Their scores [are improving]. It is undeniable; you can see it in the DIBEL [Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills] scores. I monitor my red and orange groups, which is the largest portion of this class...My red and my orange groups are both below grade level. They [a volunteer] worked with these groups, they needed that double dose. But, you also see improvement in their verbal skills...and even in small things like handwriting and in anything that they [the volunteer] could help them with.

Undergraduate volunteers also acknowledged the improved literacy skills that many students demonstrated in foundations (e.g., phonological awareness, knowledge of alphabet), and reading skills. Volunteer A explained how the small group or individualized interactions with students generated positive learning outcomes:

I have seen a significant difference in the reading levels of some students. Students who were below the class reading level did not get much targeted help before because they are not on grade level, and there are twenty other students who would not be getting the needed instruction if [teachers] prioritized those below grade level.

Undergraduate volunteers in the classroom supported learning by offering additional exposure to previously taught content or giving different explanations than those initially offered by teachers. When explaining why Volunteer C observed improved learning, they shared:

Volunteers could have different ways of teaching students and have them understand it better. One student might not understand how the teacher's explaining it. But maybe the volunteer explains it differently, and the student is like, 'Oh, I understand it now'." Depending on whether the student is a visual learner or an auditory learner. The volunteers could help the student learn it better or build off what the teachers already taught them.

Teachers and undergraduate volunteers also recognized significant behavioral benefits for students, identifying behavioral management as a significant challenge in these schools. Teachers acknowledged that the presence of undergraduate volunteers, walking around while students worked independently, was useful to control minor misbehaviors (e.g., calling out, out of seat) and helped students stay on task. Undergraduate volunteers also mentioned that some students became "less disruptive" over time because they were actively involved in assisting them to focus on learning and interact more positively. Volunteer D explained the behavioral benefits as follows:

When I first walked in the classroom, I noticed that many children were distracted and weren't paying attention to directions. But once we had that one-on-one time, they began to warm up to us, and then they became more enthusiastic about learning and following directions.

Volunteer E elaborated,

I am very tough love. When they have good behavior, I am very, very happy. But when they have bad behavior, I discipline and talk to them... Sometimes the way that they

[students] talk to each other, they know that when they talk to me, they can't talk like that. Some students have become more polite or treat their friends better.

Undergraduate volunteers not only helped students understand how to communicate respectfully with other peers or stay focused on their learning tasks, but some of them also intervened when major behavioral problems (e.g., fighting, disruptive outbursts) occurred. Volunteer C explained, "Sometimes I stepped in [to help with behavioral issues] ... to help them refocus and calm down. We talk about the problems one on one; they ask me questions, and I ask them questions." The teacher appreciated the involvement of this volunteer in de-escalating behavioral difficulties.

Another significant benefit for students of having undergraduate volunteers in the classroom was having additional bonding opportunities with adults. Undergraduate volunteers, whom teachers commonly described as "patient," "respectful of students," "calm," and "firm" were intentional about building positive relationships with students, and students were responsive to these attempts. Teachers acknowledged, "students love the volunteers, they are happy to see them," or "students trust the volunteers, and they looked forward to working with them." Participants' descriptions of the close relationships between undergraduate volunteers and students were consistent with our observations. In our visits, we perceived a sense of caring and positive connections between undergraduate volunteers and students. When undergraduate volunteers arrived, students often ran to hug them and chatted with them. Moreover, when they were working together in groups, we observed lively interactions.

Some teachers used a family analogy to explain the connections that students and undergraduate volunteers developed, "teachers were like parents and volunteers were like older siblings.... When your parents tell you to do something, you don't want to do it...But, with the volunteers, when I ask them [the students], to go through this with them [volunteers], they do it."

A related benefit of the LFP undergraduate volunteers was that they served as role models for low-income, and Black or Brown students who might have limited contact with college students, particularly those who were male or Black or Brown. Thus, students in the first and second grades developed positive relationships with successful university students who looked like them. As role models, undergraduate volunteers served as positive influences and sources of inspiration.

### ***Perceived Benefits for Teachers***

LFP undergraduate volunteers also provided direct support to teachers during classroom instruction. In general, teachers recognized the importance of having "extra hands" in the classroom to help with small groups and time management. Teachers acknowledged that sometimes they struggled to work efficiently with all small groups because of limited time; however, this was not the case when the undergraduate volunteers were visiting. Because of division of labor, no group was left out. A teacher in School Two explained,

I really love it when they [volunteers] come. They are a huge help with rotations [students working in different centers]. I am like ah, yes, they're going to be here so I can do this activity during small groups. I put one volunteer at one center and the other volunteer at another center. In this way, I am not over here one minute and over the other center the next. I know that my students are going to have that adult set of eyes to help them with it.

Undergraduate volunteers not only "helped a lot," they also made teachers' work "easier and less stressful." A teacher at School One described how they felt less overwhelmed when

undergraduate volunteers were in the classroom; volunteers were very supportive and willing to help with what was needed,

I appreciate that they are so eager to help. It doesn't really matter with what, they just want to help. The volunteer is always saying, 'I just want to help, whatever I can do to help.' I really like that because we could use more and more help.

The instructional support that undergraduate volunteers provided to teachers was especially appreciated when teachers needed to monitor students' progress individually or in small groups (four or five students at a time). While doing this, they did not have time to focus on the rest of the class. In these situations, having the undergraduate volunteers to help with instruction was much appreciated.

Another support that teachers recognized was the material resources that undergraduate volunteers were able to get for students. One teacher shared, "[The volunteer] noticed that a couple of students needed wider pencils, and they brought some for them." As we mentioned earlier, each team of undergraduate volunteers received \$500 per semester to spend in their host classrooms. Some of the teams utilized that funding to buy needed educational resources.

### ***Perceived Benefits for Undergraduate Volunteers***

Undergraduate volunteers joined the LFP for multiple reasons. Some had personal or professional interests in education or thought it could be an interesting experience. For others, it helped them fulfill a university program requirement. Regardless of the reasons, undergraduate volunteers recognized that being part of the LFP was an important learning experience.

Volunteer F shared,

The best is you get to work with kids. You get to learn about yourself along the way too like your own weaknesses and your own strengths with kids. Working with different kinds of students [well behaved or those who don't follow instructions easily] helps you understand kids as a whole and it helps you become more patient and more understanding. When you are outside of your comfort zone, you learn a lot.

For those undergraduate volunteers who came from affluent backgrounds and were less knowledgeable about the challenges faced by low-income students or the schools they attended, participating in the LFP was an eye-opening learning experience. Volunteer G reflected how participating in the LFP expanded their worldview,

I feel like it also gives us [volunteers] a chance to meet different people and to see how others are living. I grew up in Affluent County; this was very different for me. I actually loved the experience [LFP] very much. I thought everyone received an education like the one I did. Now I am realizing that that is not the case; it gives me a different perspective. In the same way that the kids are learning from me, I am also learning from them.

For a few undergraduate volunteers, having the opportunity to "serve" or "make an impact" was very important; they "felt passionate about social justice" and wanted to give back to their community acknowledging their "privileged" upbringing. For other undergraduate volunteers, although giving back was not an original intention, they "felt proud" to be making a difference in the lives of underserved students. The following quote reflects the perspectives of many of the LFP undergraduate volunteers:

It makes me feel really accomplished when I see that the kids are learning and that they are really interested. I was working with a Spanish-speaking student—whose English was not good. One time, I taught him how to spell 'sun.' He was so excited when he finally got it. He drew a picture of a sun, wrote S-U-N and showed it to the rest of the class. He was

just so excited. It was nice to see that even with only a couple of hours that I was in the classroom, I was already making changes. (Volunteer H)

The sense of accomplishment that came from feeling they were *making a difference for students* positively impacted the undergraduate volunteers' levels of commitment. Volunteer E described their volunteering experience at School Two,

When we get to school. I feel like everyone [volunteers] forget about everything outside of the school. Everyone becomes very immersed in the kids and what they have going on. Everyone has formed connections with their kids. When they come in, some of the kids are in the hallway and they're always coming up and hugging the different volunteers... You could just see that they are very engaged teaching the kids different things.

Finally, the undergraduate volunteers valued the bonding experiences they had with students. Volunteer E shared, "I like the kids; they listen to me. When you build a relationship with kids, they just stick to you more. They pay attention to you more." Volunteer C added,

I am excited to see my kids and I'm excited to work with them. As soon as I step through the door of the classroom, all the tiredness and groggy energy just go away. I am just filled with positive feelings, like, they're my priority; they have my full attention.

### **The LFP during COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic by necessity changed the teaching and learning realities of participating students, teachers, and undergraduate volunteers in diverse ways. These changes influenced both teaching and the implementation of the LFP.

Before the start of AY 2020-2021, BCPS distributed electronic devices to students in the district so they could attend classes virtually. Some schools were designated as *student-learning centers*, where students with the most potential difficulties (e.g., English language learners or students with individualized Education Plans) or those who had no childcare provider at home could come to self-contained spaces with adult supervision to attend classes online. COVID-19 brought major difficulties to the implementation of the LFP, but also provided some positive lessons that could inform program implementation after the pandemic ceases.

### ***New Teaching Realities and LFP Implementation***

Before the start of AY 2020-2021, the Sherman Center and participating schools agreed to resume the LFP to provide volunteer support during online literacy instruction. Teachers and undergraduate volunteers involved in the program knew that the new academic year would bring unknown difficulties and that flexibility and adaptation were needed to implement the program during COVID-19.

While coping with the personal consequences of the pandemic, teachers needed to learn to teach virtually, shorten or modify their curriculum, implement strategies to maintain the attention of young students, and build relationships with students through a different mode of interaction. One teacher from School One described how her teaching changed after the pandemic,

Teaching is taking a lot more. The prior years, I had my weekends off. I did not have to spend much time on [planning]. Now, I am planning seven days a week. It is hard to do everything online (like the small groups). Sometimes, I don't do too much instruction, because there are so many different things to pay attention to like technology. We have a

lot of technical issues that prevent things from flowing smoothly... You never know day to day what is going to happen.

Another teacher from School Two compared her current teaching to a "marathon" and explained, "I teach a twenty-minute curriculum in about 15 minutes. I teach Foundations (the phonics program) in about 5 to 10 minutes, but it should be twice [that time]. We run, run, and run."

At the same time that teachers felt pressured to fulfill teaching goals in a shorter period of time, they also struggled to help students remain focused on the content of the class and build a sense of community with their students. A teacher in School One noted, "I don't know the students as well. They are still babies--they like hugs. It is difficult to do through a screen."

Undergraduate volunteers who had participated in the LFP before COVID-19 also missed the social interactions with students and having meaningful bonding opportunities. New undergraduate volunteers also missed the bonding interactions with students. Volunteer C explained:

None of the students know my name. In the face-to-face classroom, everyone is calling you, 'I need help.' It is not like that in the online classroom. It is very hard for them to get to know you and you don't get to build positive relationships.

Some undergraduate volunteers felt that they were making less of an impact because of the online environment; they felt "underutilized." Either because they spent only a short time with students or their group assignments constantly changed, some undergraduate volunteers felt that they were not helping students as much as they could. Volunteer I, explaining that they worked with different groups of students every online session, shared,

To help students learn, it is important to build relationships with them. You have to learn how they learn and what content you need to work on. If we are working with different students, that is not very useful to the student. This is different from having students working with a volunteer regularly because you already have good rapport, you know their areas of improvement, and their strengths.

In addition to issues noted above, there were technical difficulties and restricted access to ZOOM for individuals outside of the school district. This issue limited participation of undergraduate volunteers at School One, where during the fall semester of AY 2020-2021 only two of the six classrooms were accessible for undergraduate volunteers. For those undergraduate volunteers who could access ZOOM classrooms, their interactions with students were typically limited to breakout sessions for brief periods, typically 10-20 minutes. In other online sessions, teachers ran out of time and could not implement breakout groups. In such cases, undergraduate volunteers attended the whole group session but did not interact with students. Thus, the potential of the program for increasing learning opportunities for students was negatively impacted by COVID-19.

### ***Sustained Benefits and Lessons Learned***

Despite challenges presented by online instruction, teachers and undergraduate volunteers remained committed to the LFP. Teachers were appreciative of having undergraduate volunteers attending the online classes and for their support during breakout sessions. Undergraduate volunteers adjusted to supporting students' online learning experiences to the best of their ability and remained enthusiastic about building positive relationships with students. Breakout sessions presented opportunities for students to receive learning support in small groups and have direct interactions with undergraduate volunteers that could mimic face-to-face interactions.

In one observation we conducted, two undergraduate volunteers implemented phonics activities with five students in a breakout session to reinforce whole group instruction. As occurred pre-COVID-19, students were excited to work with the undergraduate volunteers (e.g., "We miss you! How are you doing?"), and remained actively engaged in the rhyming tasks when in their breakout rooms. In another observation of a breakout room, the undergraduate volunteers implemented similar activities to the ones that the teacher did with the whole group. They took turns leading the activity, shared their computer screen to show artifacts, and called students by name to make sure they were involved. Three of the five students actively responded. The undergraduate volunteers also used many words of encouragement like "Good job!", "You can do it!" to promote student engagement.

There also were positive changes in the communication between teachers and undergraduate volunteers. Before COVID-19, teachers often told the undergraduate volunteers what to do when they arrived in the classroom. There did not appear to be much discussion or collaborative planning, although the undergraduate volunteer-student interactions appeared smooth and appropriate. However, with the onset of online instruction, teachers emailed the undergraduate volunteers in advance (usually during the weekend or the night before) and sent them instructional materials. This made coordination easier between teachers and undergraduate volunteers and allowed volunteers to prepare ahead of time for the work they were going to do during the online class.

Some teachers and undergraduate volunteers reported that online instruction was generating more positive results than expected for some students. A teacher from School Two explained the results of a three-week benchmark assessment, "Seventy or seventy five percent of my well-below and below kids are on-track, they are on their growth curve. They are actually doing very well." An undergraduate volunteer also recognized that the practice that some students were receiving in the breakout rooms provided the extra-attention that they needed.

Teachers also mentioned that their relations with families and understanding of the students' home environments changed with virtual instruction during COVID-19. A teacher in School One mentioned that parents appeared more involved with their children's education. This teacher noted that "Parents stepped up. I don't think I would have heard from as many parents. I think we have a better relationship. I have parents sitting there all day to make sure kids focus." On the other hand, another teacher noted that not all parents were able to give their children the support they needed. This teacher said she gained new insights to the struggles that some students have at home.

### **Discussion**

School-university partnerships have the potential to improve students' educational experiences, provide teacher support, and enhance service-learning opportunities for students in higher education institutions. This article highlights the successes and challenges of the LFP, a



recently created partnership program between the Sherman Center at UMBC and two Baltimore City schools, before and during COVID-19. In so doing, we expand the limited research that focuses on understanding the processes and dynamics of school-university partnerships (Coburn & Penuel, 2016).

We acknowledge the complexities of establishing sustainable partnerships, especially when organizations have diverse goals and interests (Firestone & Fisler, 2002) or there are power disparities between partners (Sanders, 2003). However, we argue that when the needs of students are placed at the center, equity-oriented partnerships can support the daily functioning of schools. The LFP is a program that exemplifies this commitment. By providing university undergraduate volunteers to assist teachers, students received individualized attention and learning support, and access to positive role models. This was beneficial for students' literacy outcomes and classroom behaviors. Importantly, teachers and undergraduate volunteers also benefited. For teachers, having additional support in the classroom, either during face-to-face or online instruction, facilitated their work and helped relieve stress. For undergraduate volunteers, the LFP provided an opportunity to become members of a community, build positive relationships with students and teachers, and learn more about themselves and their surrounding community. As Epstein's (2010) theory of overlapping spheres contends, when families, schools, and community partners work together, all members of the partnership benefit.

The success of the LFP also highlights the importance of critical elements of collaboration for effective partnerships (Epstein, 2010). In particular, the LFP is characterized by shared goals for students' learning and success, open communication about student and classroom needs, mutual respect among undergraduate volunteers, teachers, and students, and processes and opportunities for adaptations and problem solving (Lefever-Davis et al., 2007; Griffiths et al., 2021; Walsh & Backe, 2013). These program attributes proved essential in responding to COVID-19.

While COVID-19 negatively affected the implementation of the LFP, this school-university partnership may have helped to offset the increased learning disparities between underserved and more affluent students that have resulted from the pandemic (García & Weiss, 2020; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020). The challenges to teaching and learning presented by COVID-19 have been significant. Teachers have been forced to learn a new mode of instruction in a short period of time, and teachers and families alike are facing multiple stressors, including economic insecurity, health problems, and changes in family routines. Students are missing classes more often and are struggling to remain focused during online instruction. These current realities highlight the need for school-university partnerships designed to ameliorate growing educational challenges and inequities.

In examining LFP implementation before and during COVID-19, this study uncovered essential lessons about how technology can be used to sustain school-community partnerships. For example, to address students' learning needs, teachers and undergraduate volunteers used technology to communicate more frequently about classroom activities. Before COVID-19, these conversations and opportunities for collaborative planning were less frequent. Moreover, families, who have not been active participants in the LFP to date, had the opportunity to observe teacher and volunteer interactions with their children during online instruction, building an awareness of the program that can potentially strengthen family, school, and community connections. Thus, COVID-19 has shown how technology can be used as one tool to facilitate meaningful communication between home, school, and community partners when face-to-face interactions are limited or difficult. While current limitations are due to social distancing

mandates, strategies that have been implemented during COVID-19 can also be used to address more common challenges such as scheduling conflicts and transportation constraints that can negatively impact school-community partnerships (Sanders, 2005).

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although this paper elevates teachers' and undergraduate volunteers' perspectives and experiences to understand the effectiveness of the LFP, we have not yet examined student data. Empirical evidence demonstrates the reading benefits of having volunteer programs (Ritter et al., 2009) or one-on-one tutors in elementary grade classrooms (Elbaum et al., 2000). Other research emphasizes the importance of this type of program for improving young students' socio-emotional skills, including cooperative skills, attention to tasks, adaptation to social routines, and self-regulation during conflicts (Denham, 2006). Future publications from this study will include student outcome data to triangulate reported learning improvements.

Additionally, the LFP is only in its third year of implementation and the nature of program delivery in AY 2020-2021 changed greatly due to COVID-19. Given the particularities of the contexts in which data were collected, it is unclear whether the features identified are stable attributes of the program. This suggests the need for ongoing LFP evaluation to identify best practices and guide program improvement. Despite these limitations, findings from this study have important implications for the implementation of school-university partnerships.

### **Conclusion**

The LFP is one example of a school-university partnership that has demonstrated a strong potential for improving the educational experiences of underserved students. By recruiting and coordinating undergraduate volunteers to support literacy teaching and learning in the first and second grades at two Baltimore City schools, the program aims to improve students' learning experiences and outcomes, and support teachers' classroom practices. Using Epstein's (2010) theory of overlapping spheres of influence as a theoretical framework, this paper found that the LFP's grounding in key elements of collaboration (i.e., shared goals, open communication, mutual respect, and processes for problem-solving) allowed it to meet unprecedented challenges and identify strategies for future program improvements. As noted by Epstein (2010), "Although the interactions of educators, parents, students, and community members will not always be smooth or successful, partnership programs establish a base of respect and trust on which to build" (p. 84). Indeed, good partnerships withstand challenges, and can be maintained through and even strengthened by them.

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Appendix

**Literacy Fellow/Volunteer Interview Protocols (Years 1 and 2 of data collection)**

Year 1: AY 2019-20	Year 2: AY 2020-21
1) How did you become involved in the program? Since when have you been involved?	1) How did you become involved in the program? Since when have you been involved? 1) Why did you decide to continue volunteering this year?
2) What are your main responsibilities in the program?	2) If this is your first year involved, what are your main responsibilities in the program?
3) What training, if any, did you receive for the program?	3) If this is not your first year involved, how different are your responsibilities this year from your responsibilities of last year?
4) What activities do you do when working with children in this school?	4) What activities do you do when working with children in the (online) classroom?
5) How would you describe your collaboration with the classroom teacher?	5) How would you describe your collaboration with the classroom teacher?
6) How would you describe your effectiveness as a volunteer? What factors impact your effectiveness the most?	6) What trainings, have you received since you became a volunteer for the program?
7) What do you think about the program? What are the things that work the best? And, what are the things that work the least?	7) How would you describe your effectiveness as a volunteer? What factors impact your effectiveness the most?
9) What benefits, if any, does the program bring to students in the school?	8) What do you think about the program? What are the things that work the best? And, what are the things that work the least?
10) What suggestions do you have to improve the program?	9) If you were involved with the program before, how the program has changed from prior years?
	10) What benefits, if any, does the program bring to students in the school?
	11) What benefits, if any, does the program bring to teachers in the school?
	12) What benefits, if any, does the program bring to volunteers?
	13) How did COVID impact your work with the program?
	14) How is COVID impacting the implementation of the program?
	15) How is COVID impacting the learning experiences of students in the school?
	16) What suggestions do you have to improve the program?

*Note: For year 2, the questions asked during the interview depended on whether the volunteer was new.*

**Teacher Interview Protocols (Years 1 and 2 of data collection)**

Year 1: AY 2019-20	Year 2: AY 2020-21
1) How did you decide to become a teacher?	1) How did your teaching responsibilities change due to COVID?
2) How long have you been involved with the program?	2) What happened with the program in the spring of 2020 when COVID started?
3) What do you think about the program? What are the things that work the best? And, what are the things that work the least?	3) How are you adjusting to teaching online? What are the things that work the best? And, what are the things that work the least?
4) What benefits, if any, does the program bring to your work as a teacher in the classroom?	4) What do you think about the implementation of the program? What are the things that work the best? And, what are the things that work the least?
5) What benefits, if any, does the program bring to your students?	5) What benefits, if any, does the program bring to your work as a teacher?
6) What do you think about the volunteer who is assigned to your classroom?	6) What benefits, if any, does the program bring to your students?
7) How would you describe the collaboration with them?	7) Since when have you been involved with the program? What changes, besides, online instruction have you seen in the program?
8) Did you provide any training to the volunteer working in your classroom? If so, what?	8) What do you think about the volunteer who is assigned to your classroom?
9) What suggestions, if any, do you have to improve the program?	9) How would you describe the collaboration with them?
10) Please describe the various activities that you do in the classroom to foster the children's literacy skills.	10) If you were involved with the program before, how different is this collaboration from prior years?
	11) Did you provide any training to the volunteer working in your classroom? If so, what?
	12) What suggestions, if any, do you have to improve the program?

*Note: For year 2, the questions asked during the interview depended on whether the teacher was new.*



**Classroom Observation Protocols for Teachers (Years 1 and 2 of data collection)**

Total # of Students:

Describe the arrangement of the classroom:

Observe using the checklist for 20 minutes (Obs 1). Complete a narrative observation for 10.

Observe for 20 minutes (Obs 2). Complete a narrative observation for 10.

1. LEARNING CONTENT	Observation 1		Observation 2	
a. Code-related skills	Yes	No	Yes	No
b. Vocabulary	Yes	No	Yes	No
c. Reading Comprehension	Yes	No	Yes	No
d. Reading fluency	Yes	No	Yes	No
e. Other (specify)	Yes	No	Yes	No

Notes:

2. QUALITY OF INTERACTIONS WITH STUDENTS	Observation 1		Observation 2	
a. Demonstrates regard for student perspectives	Yes	No	Yes	No
b. Quality of feedback NA	Yes	No	Yes	No
c. Interactions are positive social/affective quality	Yes	No	Yes	No
d. Mutual respect is evident during interactions	Yes	No	Yes	No
e. Effectively manages children’s behavior	Yes	No	Yes	No
f. Other (specify)	Yes	No	Yes	No

Notes:

If applicable,

3. INTERACTIONS WITH ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS	Observation 1		Observation 2	
a. Teacher uses gestures, acting out, and/or miming to supplement oral language	Yes	No	Yes	No
b. Teacher uses Spanish in the classroom	Yes	No	Yes	No
c. Teacher uses visual aides	Yes	No	Yes	No
d. Teacher explains/instructs basic words	Yes	No	Yes	No
e. Teacher explains English language idioms	Yes	No	Yes	No
f. Other (specify)	Yes	No	Yes	No

4. TEACHER AND VOLUNTEER INTERACTIONS	Observation 1		Observation 2	
a. Teacher acts in a respectful manner towards	Yes	No	Yes	No
b. Teacher appreciates volunteer ideas	Yes	No	Yes	No
c. Teacher encourages volunteer to actively engage	Yes	No	Yes	No
d. Teacher provides advice/feedback to volunteer	Yes	No	Yes	No
f. Other (specify)	Yes	No	Yes	No

Notes: and NARRATIVE OBSERVATION NOTES

**Classroom Observation Protocols for Volunteers (Years 1 and 2 of data collection)**

The volunteer needs to be involved in these activities either working 1:1 or with a group of children. Observe using the checklist for 20 minutes (Obs 1). Complete a narrative observation for 10. Observe for 20 minutes (Obs 2). Complete a narrative observation for 10.

1. LEARNING CONTENT	Observation 1		Observation 2	
a. Code-related skills	Yes	No	Yes	No
b. Vocabulary	Yes	No	Yes	No
c. Reading Comprehension	Yes	No	Yes	No
d. Reading fluency	Yes	No	Yes	No
e. Other (specify)	Yes	No	Yes	No

Notes:

2. ACTIVITIES	Observation 1		Observation 2	
a. Reading aloud to students (title of book)	Yes	No	Yes	No
b. Listening to child read aloud	Yes	No	Yes	No
c. Helping students with writing assignments (not handwriting)	Yes	No	Yes	No
d. Helping students with handwriting assignments	Yes	No	Yes	No
e. Prepares literacy activities/materials for teacher	Yes	No	Yes	No
f. Other (specify)	Yes	No	Yes	No

Notes:

3. INTERACTIONS WITH STUDENTS	Observation 1		Observation 2	
a. Interactions are positive social/affective quality	Yes	No	Yes	No
b. Respect is evident during interactions	Yes	No	Yes	No
b. Effectively manages children's behavior*	Yes	No	Yes	No
c. Other (specify)	Yes	No	Yes	No

Notes:

If applicable,

4. INTERACTIONS WITH ENGLISH LEARNERS	Obs 1		Obs 2	
a. Uses gestures, acting out, miming to supplement oral language	Yes	No	Yes	No
b. Volunteer uses Spanish in the classroom	Yes	No	Yes	No
c. Volunteer uses visual aides	Yes	No	Yes	No
d. Volunteer explains/instructs basic words	Yes	No	Yes	No
e. Volunteer explains English language idioms	Yes	No	Yes	No
f. Other (specify)	Yes	No	Yes	No

5. TEACHER AND VOLUNTEER INTERACTIONS	Observation 1		Observation 2	
a. Teacher acts in a respectful manner towards the volunteer	Yes	No	Yes	No
b. Teacher appreciates volunteer ideas	Yes	No	Yes	No
c. Teacher encourages volunteer to actively engage	Yes	No	Yes	No
d. Teacher provides advice/feedback to volunteer	Yes	No	Yes	No
f. Other (specify)	Yes	No	Yes	No

Notes: NARRATIVE OBSERVATION NOTES