Research that Reaches Out Podcast

Episode 6: Improving Tutor Training with Dr. Vicki Luther

Hannah Nabi:	Hello, and welcome to the Research that Reaches Out podcast from Mercer University. I'm your host, Hannah Vann Nabi. Research that Reaches Out is an initiative at Mercer University in Macon, GA that was launched in 2015 as part of Mercer's Quality Enhancement Plan, or QEP. We work with faculty and students to help them integrate service and research to address real-world problems affecting our communities at the local, regional, national, and global levels.
	We're here today with Dr. Vicki Luther, an associate professor in the Tift College of Education at Mercer University. Dr. Luther earned her Bachelor's from Southern Wesleyan University and her Master of Ed and her Doctor of Education at Wilmington University. And she teaches a variety of courses at Mercer in reading, literacy, theory, and development. Before she became a professor, she was an elementary school teacher. But her passion for quality public education led her to become a teacher of teachers, where she could have a bigger impact on kids futures.
	Dr. Luther dipped her toe in the waters of Research that Reaches Out a few years ago, and she loved it so much she just cannonballed right in. And we have the pleasure of working with her in a variety of different ways, but today we're going to talk about her service-research work with undergraduate students to develop evaluation and training tools for Mercer's reading tutors out in the community. Dr. Luther was the PI on a project in the 2019 Summer Student Research Program for the Research that Reaches Out office where she and two education majors, Grace and Katelyn, developed a set of online training modules for Mercer's Center for Community Engagement to use to improve the quality and confidence of Mercer's community-based tutors. I'm really looking forward to today's conversation. Welcome, Dr. Luther!
Vicki Luther:	Thank you so much. It's so good to be here. Thank you.
Hannah Nabi:	Let's start with hearing a little about the project. What is the real-world problem that you're addressing, why is it important, and how does it affect us?
Vicki Luther:	That is a great question. To start off, the global impact of the project concerns reading, and we are in a county in which a lot of our schools are Title I. They are high free- and reduced-lunch, high percentages of students who don't have those foundational skills in reading and literacy. And Mercer University, one of the great things about Mercer University, is that we do have our students that go out into these schools and we have them work one on one or in small groups with these students who need that extra support and that extra little bit

of, just a little bit of a helping hand to get them over a barrier and give them more enhanced time to work on those foundational skills.

I started feeling the impact, as a teacher of teachers, I started seeing the impact because I would go into these schools, and a lot of these students did not have the the foundation. And we're asking students in, maybe, third grade to be on a level in which they are still reading at a kindergarten or below-kindergarten level. And so this was something that was near and dear to my heart because it's focused on schools where you have impoverished students but also really helping them with their reading. So what I wanted to do was just to survey the Mercer tutors to find out what's going well, and what's maybe something that you want to see enhanced, and what are your perceptions. I think a lot of times we we may do things, but we don't always go back and reflect. And so this was more of a reflective type of assessment, evaluation. And then using the data, I was able to get Katelyn and Grace on board to help disaggregate the data, to look and to see what are some things that our tutors need to feel more successful with the school. So ultimately, it was to help our Mercer college tutors, but also ultimately to help the P-5 environment that really needs those extra supports in reading.

Hannah Nabi: So the Center for Community Engagement deploys, I think it's between 200 and 300 tutors a year, between service learning and the America Reads America Counts work study program, into the local public school system. So you had quite a large sample to work with.

Vicki Luther: Absolutely. And I am so excited that, although you don't get 100% participation, which is, it was voluntary, and I was just so grateful that we did get a large percentage of the population who agreed to take the survey and agreed to give their real thoughts. Obviously, everything, you know, there was nothing that would give any type of name or, you know, we weren't looking for actual persons, we were just looking for a concept of, what are the majority of these tutors saying and what are they finding to be appropriate training techniques, and what are some things that they feel that they need more in order to be more successful in the classroom.

Hannah Nabi: So you started with the survey. And then tell us how was the rest of the research project designed, and what role did your undergraduate researchers take?

Vicki Luther: Well, I am going to say emphatically, Katelyn and Grace were amazing. They, from day one, just rose to the challenge. In fact, they were involved even before the summer because they really saw the need, and they saw that this was something that could really be beneficial. After we collected the surveys, they were able to sit and transcribe and analyze all of that information. And so

within the first week, we had a good, we had graphs. We had charts. To be able to say, oh, you know, this is an area that needs improvement. We know that most of our tutors are not teacher candidates, and they are not in the College of Education, and so a lot of them just did not know.

One of the things that we really also honed in on was the fact that many of our Mercerians may not have the same educational experience in elementary school. For a lot of our tutors, maybe reading came very easy to them. And so going into a school in which maybe a lot of children don't have that background and don't have that foundation, it might be a little daunting. And so getting them to be able to have as many skills as possible was really what we were focused on.

From then on, it was kind of almost like a seamless transition in which we would, we came up with this game plan and we started working on it. And we were finding, oh, they are saying that this may need to be improved, so let's work on that. At the beginning of our time, we were spending a little more time together. But then, toward the end, they were actually on their own doing some online training tools, some tutorials, some information that could be easily taken and placed into a Canvas course, which we did. And then as we went through, I started working more on a writing piece and working on other components of this. They started working more on the tutorials. I thought it would be best if those were things that came from fellow students.

We were tracking the number of times that the tutors, starting in August, would look at the tutorials and we were so amazed that they kept looking. And so people were viewing them and seeing different ways that they could go in and help their students. And the tutors may only be in a school for one or two or three hours a week, but we want them to have the best possible one or two or three hours a week, and so we spent a lot of time thinking of what are some ways we can help those tutors to not feel so overwhelmed, and we wanted them to feel confident.

Hannah Nabi: It sounds like y'all developed tutorials and resources both for skills but also maybe for some cultural competency. So what kinds of things were identified as a result of the survey for areas that the tutors had identified needs, or needs that y'all identified based on their answers?

Vicki Luther: A lot of it had to do with just sheer management. And we can say classroom management is the same, even if you're only working with one student, managing that educational environment at that particular time is so key. So not only did we want to give them ideas for reading and literacy, but we also wanted to give them skills and tools to help them to recognize ways that they could effectively manage a one-on-one conversation or a small group conversation with these students. A lot of these students don't necessarily know this person coming in the first few times. And for them it's, they need that time to build up trust and and relationships. One of the things that we did was, we

just did a, like an interest inventory that we were able to give the tutors to basically say, before you start reading or asking a child to read and write, why don't you get to know them. Why don't you get to know their skills. And a lot of the tutors really felt like, I'm only here one day a week or two days a week, a couple hours. I don't have time for that. But if you don't take the time for that, a lot of that trust is not developed.

And you focused on a social and emotional conversation about how the, you know, different cultures and different ways of thinking even. Because a lot of our tutors may think reading is easy, reading is fun, I love to read. And then they go into an environment where that's not always the case. And so just even thinking a different mindset. But what we found was, the tutors really honed in on, we need more structure in how to manage these times, what to do. We need thoughts about time management, and one of the things that we didn't do as much this past time was that social and emotional, which is why I wanted to continue this for next year, or for this upcoming year, and really hone in and focus more on, okay, here are ways you can help the students academically but now let's look at how we can help them socially and emotionally. Because all of those factors just go, you know, together in the development of the child.

Hannah Nabi: You mentioned that Grace and Katelyn started as early as helping with survey development, and they learned data analysis, and they even went so far as to do online instructional design when they were creating these modules. How did you balance supervising them and training them and making sure they had the skills necessary to do the work and also giving them room to discover their own capacity and to develop some leadership on the project?

Vicki Luther: It's funny because I look back now and I just think, wow, that was just so, it was seamless. But I think a lot of it just, I think it was their passion and their desire that really came through on this project. And I would say that they were leaders from day one. But we mapped out, you know, we were, we tried to be very organized with our thoughts. Okay, this week we're going to do this. This week we're going to do this. There were times that those things got a little shuffled, but at the end of the day, we really felt like we had a game plan from beginning to end. So that really helped us to kind of focus on the big picture and then get down into the the details.

The other part of it was, I think a lot of it had to do with, I was always supporting them, and they knew I was always supporting them. I was able to actually use an empty office across from my office, so we were always in close proximity. But the first couple of weeks, we really worked together and then it was almost like the Gradual Release of Responsibility where I was still there, but I knew that they were able to handle whatever it was. And then they would come back and forth, and I would go back and forth. And we would just talk about, this is what I'm doing, let me know if you have any questions, this is

what we're doing. And so I think that gradual release of responsibility really played a big part in getting this done and accomplished. I knew that I trusted them to get the work done. And it was amazing how they work so well together. But also they both have their own special, unique talents and skills. so they were able to almost feed on each other and feed off of each other. So I think a lot of it was just that time management, that overarching planning, but then also recognizing that plans can be adjusted and adapted for what you need.

Hannah Nabi: So how did this experience impact Grace and Katelyn professionally?

Vicki Luther: When they did this project, they were upcoming seniors, and during our placements I saw confidence that maybe I hadn't seen in the past. And they were always very confident, but I think this built even more confidence, and they felt more competent in their abilities. As educators and also as researchers, I also think that it allowed them the opportunity to really start to see how much their work was impacting. It was so fun to see them come up to me and say, we have this many hits online of videos. And it was so fun to get to just notice how they really started to see themselves as researchers. And I think they've always been very competent and confident, but this raised it to such a new level. In fact, their teachers that they worked with in the schools even said how just, you know, attention to detail. And so I would constantly hear these wonderful things. And I loved and appreciated how they were able to say, I did this. It wasn't, oh, I worked with someone and this faculty member gave me a little bit to do. They had, they were vested and they really, you know, they really rose to the occasion.

I would say, too, before we had the pandemic, I was able to take them to a national conference, and I cannot even tell you how much of an impact that made. Not only on them - and I was just the proud parent sitting there, just so proud of them because I basically, I said, I will talk if you need me to, but this is your show. I want you to do it. And I had people that came up to me and said, so these are graduate level, you know, these are graduate students. And I said, no, these are seniors. They're undergrad. And they were so impressed. And so I think the word is out that we have some amazing undergrads who do amazing research. And it was research that was impactful, and it was research that they truly wanted to do because it helps their career.

Hannah Nabi: You mentioned that you're continuing this on, looking at the social and emotional development component. But, you know, Grace and Katelyn are just graduating, and you're going to be continuing this project with new students. What is the process like of identifying new research students on an existing project, and how does that turnover affect the work?

Vicki Luther: I am really excited to continue this. I'm so excited because I think there's more work to be done. And obviously, it's going to be structured in a different way but also in a similar way. So, I was looking, when I started the the process, I really did want to stick with students who were upcoming seniors because I think that's a great time because it really does help them as they get into that year-long placement. Another thing that I look for is just, someone who has that passion and someone who really wants to know more about how this can impact students in these local elementary schools. And so I was really looking for individuals who showed motivation, showed concern for the students. And there were a lot of students who fit that criteria and rise to the challenge, but I ended up finding a couple of upcoming seniors who really showed me that this is something that they are so passionate and they want to be engaged.

And one of the great things is, when you are in a school like, you know, or in a college like Tift College of Education, I get to see these students, so I I have taught them their sophomore year, their junior year and then I teach them their senior year. And the great thing about it is, I know the passion that comes through, and the motivation, and we do have truly wonderfully motivated teacher candidates. But I did choose a couple that just really rose to that occasion. In fact, during our online teaching, I was constantly getting emails - are we going to be able to start, can we start now? And that really does show me I picked the right people, you know, for, for the position to help me with this. Not only are they interested in reading, they are very interested in making the field of education, Bibb County Schools, they're interested in making everything better.

Hannah Nabi: I've heard you talk before about your goal to train your undergraduate students to become, I think you call it either teacher-researchers or practitioner-researchers, when they enter their classroom. So what does that mean, and how does the strategy in your classroom prepare your students to work with you as undergraduate research assistants?

Vicki Luther: Yes, I know I've said that many times, probably. I'm sorry. I think a lot of times when people think of research, they think, Oh, someone who's in a lab, someone who is developing something. And yes, that is part of research, but research looks so different in so many different ways and so many different forms. And as a teacher, you cannot be an effective, quality teacher without doing research. And research means a lot of things, but it can mean just knowing your students and knowing their interests. Like we talked about earlier, knowing who they are as far as their background, their foundational skills.

And we call, in education, I know a lot of times people say, best practices in teaching. I don't really buy into best because I find that someone's best may not be someone else's best. You know, getting to know your students, getting to know their needs, their interests. What they really truly need. I tell my

students, let's look for better ways to teach. Let's look for high quality resources. Let's look for research-based practices that we know will help students. It may not help every student. Not every strategy is going to work with everyone. But if we can open ourselves to saying, I'm going to research what's going to be best for my students, it's going to help us as a practitioner.

And one of the things that I'm very passionate about is not just reading, but also teacher retention. And so I find that if I'm able, from day one, to help the teacher candidates at Mercer understand that they are researchers, they feel more comfortable going into that classroom during that pivotal first year where everything is new and scary, and they're able to say, I've got this. I can do this. I know where to look for resources. I know what might work. I know how to differentiate my instruction. And then I think it helps them to feel more comfortable in this scary new world of being a teacher for the first couple of years, being a novice teacher. So I think that, when I talk about being a researcher, it's researching better practices for your students. Researching your own teaching abilities. Finding out what works for you. And everything in education is, it's, we're run by data. We are data-driven. And so getting them to understand that, you know, gone are the days where someone walks into a classroom and, you know, teaches and there are no consequences. Those days are long over. There are consequences for everything we do as educators. So my job is to make sure you are as prepared as possible for that role.

Hannah Nabi: Thank you, Vicki. We're coming to a close, but before we leave I'd like you to leave us with your thoughts on why your work is Research that Reaches Out.

Vicki Luther: I am a firm believer that you should bloom where you're planted. And Research that Reaches Out, to me, means that we are at Mercer, whether we are here for 30 years as a faculty member, or whether we are here for 4 years as an undergrad student. Our job is to make Mercer and to make Macon and Bibb County better than when we got here. And I'm a firm believer that, you know, you should take responsibility. To whom much is given, much is required kind of thing. My job, I feel, and I'm very, very passionate about it, but my goal is to make sure that when I work with teachers, when I work with students, when I work with teacher candidates, I try my best to make sure that they feel more confident in their abilities. And if I can do that, I'm definitely reaching out to the greater good and to the public.

Hannah Nabi: Well, thank you so much for all the work that you do. Reading and literacy is a huge part of our Macon community, and Mercer is a big part of that initiative. And so thank you for your work in helping to strengthen our impact and improve the quality of the the services that we do in partnership with our public schools.

And thank you to our listeners for tuning in to this episode of the Research that Reaches Out Podcast at Mercer University. You can check us out on our website at QEP.mercer.edu and subscribe to our show at SoundCloud.com