Partnering with Families to Prevent Reading Difficulties in Young Children

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Preparing our graduates to solve pressing problem in our communities is a central part of Elon's mission (The Elon Commitment, 2009). Tackling multilayered difficulties takes a deeply interconnected knowledge base and strong collaboration skills, yet students do not always graduate from universities having developed such abilities (Schneider, 2008). This proposed project for the CATL Scholars Program requires students to integrate their learning across courses and work collaboratively with others in an effort to address a significant societal concern.

Among the many devastating effects of childhood poverty, difficulties with language development and emergent literacy are common and carry lasting impact (Rodriguez & Tamis-LeMonda, 2011). Compared with wealthier children, those living in poverty tend to have depressed vocabulary levels, less exposure to print media, impoverished learning environments, and a lack of well-developed language skills (Simmons et al., 2008, p. 188). According to a recent national assessment of school-age children in the area of reading, 75 percent of the fourth-grade students who scored below the 25th percentile come from households with incomes below the poverty line (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2011).

The situation is dire, but not without hope. Early childhood is the optimal time for developing language and emergent literacy. Compelling evidence points to the value of providing rich opportunities for learning oral language and for practicing literacy-related skills during the preschool years (Connor, Morrison &

Slominski 2006; Dickinson & McCabe 2001; Dickinson, McCabe, Anastasopoulos, Peisner- Feinberg, & Poe 2003; Menzies, Mahdavi & Lewis 2008; Nation & Snowling 2004; NICHD 2005). Fortunately, early childhood educators can help prevent reading difficulties by partnering with families so that children at risk experience robust language and literacy development (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998).

Achieving strong, meaningful partnerships with families is a complicated process, most particularly when a teacher's culture, race and socio-economic class are different from the families' (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). Teachers can bring a deficit perspective to their work with diverse families, rather than focusing on ways to make use of family strengths (Lightfoot, 2004). Learning how to establish open and trusting relationships with families is an essential aspect of working with families whose children are at risk for reading difficulties.

This project seeks to develop and assess early childhood education (ECE) students' knowledge, skills, and dispositions for partnering with families to prevent reading problems in young children. The project involves two teacher educators, who will work jointly as CATL scholars, and takes place in two service-learning courses in the Early Childhood Education Program: EDU 454 Early Childhood Language and Literacy, and EDU 323 Early Childhood Family-Team Partnerships. Specifically this project plans for

- Conducting qualitative research with the students majoring and minoring in ECE to learn about their growth in the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for partnering with families to prevent reading problems in young children

- Fostering and appraising students' integration of learning across courses, particularly EDU 454 and EDU 323 and across service-learning experiences with course content

- Gathering information from ECE students after taking EDU 454 Early Childhood Language and Literacy to help design EDU 323 Early Childhood Family-Team Partnerships[1]

- Combining the expertise of two teacher educators, one with a background in speech, language and literacy development and the other with a background in social work, diversity, and educational inequities, to design an effective service-learning experience with the families of young children at risk for reading difficulties, and

- Creating and publishing a model to be used by other ECE programs for preparing early childhood educators who are skilled at partnering with families for preventing reading difficulties.

Student involvement in the project

Students who are majoring or minoring in early childhood education will be involved in this project in several ways. They will be study participants in the research project exploring the development of their knowledge, skills, and dispositions for partnering with families to prevent reading difficulties. Additionally, the study will determine whether efforts to help the students integrate learning across courses in the ECE Program and between their service-learning experience

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[1] As the new ECE Program rolls out courses, EDU 454 will be offered before EDU 323. After 2014, students will take EDU 323 prior to EDU 454.

and course content are successful and meaningful while also learning about the types of connections the students made. After completing EDU 454, students will be invited to provide input for designing EDU 323 Early Childhood Family-Team Partnership course. Based on their learning in EDU 454 and the associated service-learning experience, the students' input for EDU 323 will be beneficial in designing the course and refining the service-learning experience. Students will have opportunities to present at local and regional conferences about aspects of the project, such as the insights they gained though the service-learning portion of the courses.

Evidence of student learning

Assessment instruments for evaluating teachers' knowledge of early literacy concepts are available (Moats, 1994) and can be adapted for use in this project. An assessment process will need to be designed to gather data about ECE students' interactions with family members. Drawing on literature about family-teacher partnerships in ECE (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009) an assessment process will be developed focusing on the extent to which students value and build upon the strengths of families for improving their children's language and literacy growth. Additionally, the assessment will appraise students' integration of learning across EDU 454 and EDU 323 in the ECE program, and students' connections between their service-learning experience and course content.

Project's implications for faculty

Mary Knight-McKenna has a background in speech, language, and literacy development. She teaches literacy courses in both general and special education.

She published an article about the content of ECE language and literacy courses, presented at the National Association of Young Children Conference on the topic of partnering with families to promote language stimulation in infants and toddlers, and regularly shares research about preventing reading difficulties in the courses she teaches. Mary chaired the ECE Program Design Team and collaborated with others in establishing the program. This project is central to her work as a teacher-scholar.

Cherrel Miller-Dyce has a background in social work, diversity, and educational inequities, and has worked closely with many families living in poverty. Her recent publication calls attention to the achievement gap and school success of African American males in the America's public schools. Additionally, Cherrel is a regular presenter at local and national conferences regarding issues of school success for students and color and low-income students and their families. This project will enhance her classroom practices as she teaches courses on working with diverse learners, as well as families and communities.

Project's implications

The final goals of the project are to prepare early childhood educators who are skilled at partnering with families for preventing reading difficulties and to develop a model based on their integrative learning and experiences. Publication of the model in an early childhood education journal along with presentations at regional and national/international conferences are ways this project will extend beyond Elon's campus.

Project's timeline

<u>Year One</u>

-Develop assessment process for ECE students' collaboration with families for the purpose of fostering language and literacy growth

-Gather baseline data regarding ECE students' knowledge, skills, and dispositions for preventing reading difficulties

-Develop service-learning experience by partnering with a local high-poverty school

 -Prepare ECE students in EDU 454 to work toward trusting and helpful relationships with families whose children are at risk for reading difficulties

-Assess the growth of ECE students in the target areas upon completion of EDU 454

-Invite student from EDU 454 to share their insights and recommendations for the development of EDU 323 Early Childhood Family-Team Partnership course based on their service-learning experience working with families and conduct the course design session

<u>Year 2</u>

-Utilize information shared by students for development of EDU 323

-Continue service-learning partnership with local high-poverty school

-Gather data during and after EDU 323 to assess students' learning for partnering with families to prevent literacy difficulties in young children, integration of learning from EDU 454 and EDU 323 and connections made between service-learning and course content.

-Develop model for ECE programs to prepare graduates who are skilled at partnering with families to foster children's language and literacy growth

-Write a paper on the project with the goal of publication in an early childhood education journal

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