Quality Enhancement Plan

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER ON
EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Facilitating English Language Learners' Literacy Learning and Parental Engagement

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The Covid-19 pandemic has prompted teacher education programs to reconceptualize experiential and clinical education and explore alternative ways to prepare teacher candidates (TCs) to work with students and parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Virtual technology offers a viable way to support this reconceptualization. In the College of Education, TCs in ED 404 (Methods and Materials for Teaching English Language Learners) engage in digital community outreach in which they have opportunities to apply their cultural knowledge and pedagogical skills to facilitate elementary English language learners' (ELLs) literacy learning and parental engagement through a service learning project.

The service-learning project takes place in school areas with an increasing number of Asian immigrant families that experience educational inequalities (e.g., language barriers and limited access to resources) in the wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The project focuses on preparing TCs to teach elementary ELL students from immigrant families who need additional instructional support in developing literacy skills in English. It also supports TCs' use of technology for fostering culturally responsive parent engagement. In this project, TCs are expected to accomplish two instructional goals: (1) to enhance the literacy learning and attitudes of ELL students through technology-rich experiences; and (2) to increase ELL parental engagement in literacy education.

Each TC is matched with a student-parent pair. The course instructor and parent volunteers provide translation services for ELL parents. The project includes four phases of culturally responsive literacy instruction: (1) identifying learner needs through a pre-assessment, (2) developing literacy lesson plans using multicultural children's literature, (3) offering virtual literacy lessons, and (4) evaluating learning outcomes through a post-assessment.

The project adopts two types of technology: Flipgrid and Zoom. Flipgrid, a cloud-based video discussion platform, is used to provide a technology-enhanced social learning environment and engage student-parent pairs in literacy activities. In a typical sequence of events, TCs assign a brief Flipgrid reading activity as a pre-assessment and share it with student-parent pairs. Then, students and parents create a video-based response (3-5 minutes long) and upload it on Flipgrid. TCs respond to the video response with feedback individually and pre-assess ELL students' literacy skills. Based on the results of the pre-assessment, TCs develop literacy lessons using culturally responsive pedagogy and multicultural children's books. Next, they teach literacy lessons to ELL students through Zoom. Finally, they assess ELL students' learning outcomes. Upon the completion of the project, TCs are asked to write an essay to reflect on their participation in the project. Also, ELL parents are invited to participate in an online survey and offer feedback on the effectiveness of the project.

This service learning project highlights how technology-enhanced, community-based learning can serve as an important clinical component for TCs' learning in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Particularly, it creates a technology-supported collaborative learning environment in which TCs, ELL students, and their parents build a "community of practice" via interactions. Moreover, the results of the parent survey show that this digital community outreach helps ELL parents become more involved and be better positioned to help with their children's literacy learning. Overall, through this experiential learning opportunity with ELL students and parents, TCs show enhanced knowledge about ELL families' "funds of knowledge" and demonstrate increased self-efficacy about facilitating ELL students' literacy learning and culturally responsive parental engagement.

Haleigh Harbison:

A Student's Perspective

As a senior Elementary Education major at Athens State University, I was given the opportunity in Fall 2020 to work via Zoom with an English Language Learner (ELL) student needing reading intervention during the COVID-19 school closures. Prior to this venture, I had been working with K-2nd ELL students through intervention at the school where I currently work, so I was very eager to broaden my horizons through virtual tutoring. Going into this experience I felt confident considering my background but was eager to gain experience with online tutoring and encourage this student in his reading journey while also working with the student's parent.

I was matched with a student-parent pair and pre-assessed the student's literacy skills through an online program called Flipgrid. Immediately, I gathered that the student was able to decode unfamiliar terms easily, but he did not always understand or comprehend the words he was reading. I did not presume a language barrier being an issue, so for our first lesson, I decided to work on reading comprehension using a multicultural book that I thought he would be able to enjoy and relate to in some way. We looked at unfamiliar terms and read together "Grandfather's Journey" by Allen Say, stopping frequently to discuss the story. Through this activity, the student was able to stop and think about what he was reading instead of just reading the words on the page and moving on, which is a good practice for him to continue to better comprehend a given text.

After our first lesson, I talked to the student and his parent about an activity to complete and also sent the instructions via email. The student would speak with a relative about a place they had traveled or lived and draw a picture along with a few sentences about the place. Although I felt like the lesson was not difficult, they were still unable to complete it on top of other schoolwork. This was understandable considering the already rigorous online learning environment, but I do believe had I worded things differently and followed up sooner, they may have been able to complete the assignment. I was still able to gather information/build on his progress in the second lesson.

Through this experience, I learned a lot of things; one in particular being just how important parent involvement/effective communication is when it comes to student success. Although this student lived in a culturally diverse home, his parents seemed very involved and concerned with his academic progress. I thoroughly enjoyed working with this family in order to set up these sessions to work towards a common goal in the student's reading journey. Overall, this opportunity was very beneficial to me by furthering my knowledge on ELL instruction/parental involvement. I feel I was able to create an enjoyable learning experience for this student and help him take baby steps towards becoming an improved reader. I really enjoyed this community-based learning experience, especially the fact that I was able to gain confidence in working with the parents of the student to engage them in the student's learning. Reflecting back, I feel more confident in my ability to overcome obstacles that may arise during online tutoring, parental involvement, and ELL instruction.