Advancing Equity Through Collaborative Partnerships: Developing an Emergent Literacy Open Educational Resource (OER)

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Abstract

Educator preparation programs play an important role in preparing early educators (EEs) to work with young children (PPNTF, 2020). However, EEs often experience suppressed salaries making preparatory programs financially burdensome (NASEM, 2018). It is incumbent upon institutions of higher education to embrace practices that alleviate financial barriers experienced by EEs seeking critical knowledge regarding practices that support learners throughout their formative years (NASEM, 2018). Open Education Resources (OER) is emerging as an effective equity practice that positively impacts students' perceptions, performances, and perseverance while also alleviating some of the financial burdens associated with higher education. This article explains a cross-institutional collaboration to create a high-quality OER to enhance EEs' professional knowledge in language and literacy practices for young children, birth to age five. This initiative reflects standards articulated by the Association of Teacher Education, specifically in the areas of collaboration, cultural competency, scholarship, contribution, and vision (ATE, n.d.).

Keywords: Open Educational Resources, early literacy, early childhood teacher preparation

The use of Open Educational Resources (OER) embraces technology and new configurations of learning to promote equity. The term OER emerged in 2002 from forum discussions held by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) focused on establishing inclusive and equitable distribution of knowledge resources

(Miao et al., 2016). UNESCO (n.d.) defines OER as "any type of educational materials in the public domain, or released with an open license, that allows users to legally and freely use, copy, adapt, and re-share" (p. 2). Since 2002, a significant variety of OER has been created and shared globally for teachers and students to use and modify freely, many with a Creative Commons license (Hilton, 2016).

This article examines how we designed an OER textbook with equity in mind for early educators (EEs) and the learners they serve. The development of *Early Childhood Literacy: Engaging and Empowering Emergent Readers and Writers, Birth – Age 5* (Schull et al., 2021) was the result of ongoing conversations among teacher educators about the need for an affordable textbook detailing early literacy. The goal of this project was to provide accessible resources for EE students and encourage the integration of rich, culturally responsive practices. This work was made possible by a grant obtained through Virginia's Academic Library Consortium (VIVA).

VIVA is an association of nonprofit academic libraries within the Commonwealth. VIVA states that its mission, "is to build an equitable and accessible infrastructure of library resources for higher education students and faculty in Virginia" (VIVA, 2022). With this mission in mind, VIVA offers grant funding, allocated through a competitive process to adopt, adapt, or create new materials published as OER. The creation and subsequent use of OER is a way to remove barriers to degree completion and improve content mastery for all students, including aspiring and practicing teachers (Petrides et al., 2011). Policies advocating for the integration of OER into higher education contexts mitigate financial costs for students. These policies encourage faculty to reconsider knowledge transmission practices grounded in the use of commercially available textbooks. VIVA funding provides the necessary support structures and resources for faculty to

engage in the generation, integration, and adoption of OER. VIVA's sustained commitment to increasing faculty adoption of OER supports movement towards inclusive excellence by removing potential barriers students experience. This project furthers the mission of VIVA as well as the Association of Teacher Educators professional standards of collaboration, cultural competency, scholarship, contribution, and vision (ATE, n.d.) and underscores ATE's commitment to equity.

Our Collaboration

Our authoring circle was composed of five faculty members with expertise in early childhood literacy and early childhood teacher education. The authors represented four public institutions: two 2-year institutions and two 4-year institutions. Among these institutions, one community college and university are in a major metropolitan area. The other university and community college are located in distinct rural communities associated with farming and mining respectively. Our collaboration was an outgrowth of a number of statewide initiatives designed to streamline EEs' progressions through credentialing and licensure programs, reducing structural barriers limiting students' access. This work codified articulation agreements that eliminated credit loss for early childhood educators who completed associate degree programs and transitioned to accredited early childhood education undergraduate state licensure programs. As a result of this agreement, many students transition from associate degree programs in early childhood to bachelor degree programs. Reciprocal relationships and cross-institutional alliances allow EEs continued engagement and successful completion of degree programs to inform their work with young children and families.

This work was grounded in social justice initiatives that promote access to educational pathways for the student populations we serve. Equity, diversity, and inclusive philosophical

lenses were foundational perspectives we carried into our writing collaboration. An important aspect of equity is ensuring access to materials that are inclusive and culturally representative. We made intentional decisions throughout the textbook creation process to ensure a diversity of perspectives. This focus began with our authoring circle, including our respective institutional affiliations, student demographics, geographic locations in the state, personal cultural identities, and teaching experiences. Our commitment to this intentional focus on diversity subsequently extended to the content we chose to highlight, including the families and children referenced throughout the text. Finally, we expanded the diversity of our group by incorporating the voices and perspectives of reviewers and students, solicited in multiple waves over the duration of the project. The collaborative partnership developed for this project directly impacted the OER text both in scope and in design.

Intended Audiences

Early childhood educators (EEs) are instrumental in supporting young children's literacy development. There are a plethora of high-quality commercially available emergent literacy texts on the market. However, the cost of commercially available texts are financially burdensome, leading students to forgo the purchasing of required course materials (Buczynski, 2007). This sustains cycles of educational inequity for students, which may be more keenly felt by early educators who engage in professional spaces that have been historically undervalued and underpaid (Austin, 2019). Our initial review of available OER revealed a sparse number of texts examining early literacy practices. Therefore, when deciding to develop an OER textbook, we strove to tie research-based practices to theoretically and developmentally appropriate experiences to prepare current and future educators to effectively teach early literacy to our youngest learners.

The OER textbook developed through this collaboration was intended to serve EEs who bring racial, ethnic, linguistic, and/or socioeconomic diversity to the field. We anticipated that many of these EEs would be part of a certificate or degree program in the community college system. Community colleges in general are more diverse than higher education in aggregate (Ma & Baum, 2016). The Associate of Applied Science in Early Childhood Development is a common degree across the state and early literacy coursework is a foundational component of the curriculum. Many of the faculty teaching the early literacy course require students to purchase the same commercial textbook, the price of which has typically ranged from $150 to $200 over multiple editions. Because of the common state community college curriculum, the opportunity existed to encourage instructors from all community colleges across the Commonwealth of Virginia to adopt this new resource. To increase the likelihood that early childhood instructors across the state would replace the texts they currently require students to purchase, we disseminated a survey to current faculty across the community college system at the onset of the grant. Faculty articulated strong support for the development of an OER textbook focused on early literacy.

Equity in Teacher Education

Equity work requires an examination of power structures that work to either privilege or perpetuate the marginalization of individuals or particular groups. These power structures are evident within institutions of higher education and teacher educators need to engage in reflective work to shift this paradigm. One major barrier is the cost associated with obtaining a degree. The use of commercially available textbooks as an essential tool for imparting knowledge is historically a structural component of academic life. However, the cost of textbooks is a financial burden for many college students. Not having access to the textbook creates an access to

knowledge deficit that negatively impacts overall course and program outcomes and ultimately

can prevent a student from mastering the content (Colvard et al.2018; Ikahihifo et al. 2017).

At the individual level, advancing equity means that students have the tools they need to

learn. Flexibility in how, where, and when students access learning resources including texts is

also an important equity lens worth considering. Both the readability of digital print across

devices (e.g., smart phones, laptops, exportability, etc.) and ease of obtaining access to resources

can pose structural barriers for students that need to be considered to promote engagement. Once

accessed, texts open opportunities for developing equity pedagogical perspectives. As students

and teacher educators engage meaningfully with texts created with an equity lens, EEs reflect on

their own learning, and begin to see how they can advance equity in their own classrooms.

Addressing Equity in Early Childhood Education

Early educators (EEs), serving children, birth through age five, play a central role in

promoting learners' emergent literacy practices. However, this workforce has not always been

valued for their significant contribution. EEs are often the lowest paid workers, compared to

teachers in the K-12 system. On average, EEs make $10-$13 per hour (Austin et al., 2019;

Loewneberg, 2018). Additionally, EEs are the most racially diverse sector of the teaching

workforce; 40% of EEs are women who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color

(Austin et al., 2019). Requirements for EEs vary greatly in large part because of a belief that

working with young children requires less skill than teaching older students. Brain development

research has clearly shown that the EE workforce is vitally important and that there are different,

but equally important, competencies required (IOM & NRC, 2015). As Schull et al. (2021) state,

> Looking at the importance of early childhood educators from a numerical perspective, the
>
> number of children throughout the country in care and education settings from birth

through age five is over 60% of the population (Childstats.gov, 2018). With well over

half of children in the U.S. being cared for and educated by someone in addition to the

support they receive in the home, it becomes clear that the work of these educators has a

significant impact on children's development. Having a highly skilled workforce is vital

to capitalize on children's learning potential. (Ch. 2, Importance of Early Childhood

Educators section, para. 2)

EEs are dedicated to enhancing children's literacy development. Knowledgeable

educators understand that children rapidly acquire language and literacy skills beginning in

infancy and that intentional pedagogies support children's early literacy practices (IOM & NRC,

2015). However, to acquire the essential content and pedagogical knowledge for supporting all

young readers and writers, EEs must engage in ongoing professional development experiences or

enroll in educator preparation programs. Institutions of higher education are instrumental in

supporting EEs' growth across their professional journeys. It is incumbent upon institutions of

higher education to embrace practices that alleviate financial barriers experienced by EEs

seeking critical knowledge regarding practices that support learners throughout their formative

years (NAEYC, 2021; NASEM, 2018). To that end, teacher educators are turning to OER to

remove the expense students confront when purchasing commercially available texts.

The Value of OER

Textbook costs are a substantial expenditure for students. In 2007-2008 it was reported

that the cost of textbooks accounted for 59% of the total cost of attending community college in

California (Goodwin, 2011). When faced with difficult financial decisions, sometimes students

will forego the purchase of textbooks (Buczynski, 2007). OER integration reduces the financial

burden students experience pursuing educational opportunities. In multiple studies, cost is

indicated as the most important factor for students as they selected courses containing OER

(Bliss et al., 2013; Bowen et al., 2014). As the number of courses utilizing OER increased,

understanding and documenting the benefits of OER for faculty and students also intensified. For

nearly two decades, research examining student and faculty preferences for OER, OER quality,

and the impact of OER on student learning and retention has evolved and findings suggest a

number of benefits.

Recent studies report OER have a positive impact on student perceptions, performance,

and perseverance. For example, a large-scale study by Colvard et al. (2018) found students

enrolled in courses with OER achieved higher grades and reported lower withdrawal and failure

rates. Similarly, Ikahihifo et al. (2017) reported providing free, high-quality OER textbooks and

materials bolstered student retention and enhanced academic achievement for all students. In a

recent synthesis of the research examining OER integrations Hilton (2020) concludes,

> Based on the growing research on the efficacy and perceptions of OER, policy makers
>
> and faculty may need to judiciously examine the rationale for obliging students to
>
> purchase CT [commercial text] when OER are available. … The fact that (1) more than
>
> 95% of published research indicates OER does *not* lead to lower student learning
>
> outcomes, and (2) the vast majority of students and faculty who have used both OER and
>
> CT believe OER are of equal or higher quality make it increasingly challenging to justify
>
> the high price of textbooks. (p. 873)

The successful completion of coursework for students experiencing economic insecurity

bolsters the use of OER as an equity strategy that reaches beyond the initial cost of textbooks

(Colvard et al., 2018). Removing the cost barrier associated with textbooks may open access to

the essential content students need to be successful and help students avoid the punitive expenses

they incur when withdrawing from or repeating coursework for passing credits (Colvard et al., 2018).

A complementary study, Fischer et al. (2015), found statistically significant differences in enrollment intensity between students enrolled in courses using OER and students enrolled in courses using commercially available text. The authors hypothesized, affordability was the deciding factor compelling students in OER courses to "reinvest" savings by taking on additional courses in the future thereby accelerating their graduation timelines (Fischer et al., 2015, p. 169). Finally, a small study by Vojtech and Grissett (2017) found students held more favorable impressions of faculty on dimensions of kindness, encouragement, and creativity when they used OER. Students also said they would be more likely to take another class with faculty using an open textbook (Vojtech & Grissett, 2017), further demonstrating the potential for OER to encourage students' progressions through programs of study. Quality OER materials not only increase student success as a result of affordability, there is also evidence that it has a positive influence on student achievement and this difference is even more viable amongst Pell recipients and other student populations that are historically underserved by higher education (Colvard et al., 2018).

The number of OER available in the field of early childhood remains limited in comparison to the breadth and depth of commercially available textbooks. Our initial review of available OER revealed a sparse number of texts examining early literacy practices. Developing educators' understandings of emergent literacy practices that promote young learners' literacy enactments and developmental progression is a central area of focus for teacher educators (NAEYC, 2019). The intentional infusion of early literacy experiences that expand learners' language, reading, and writing expressions are instrumental in developing the pre-literacy

behaviors and skills that support children's acquisition of conventional literacy (Sulzby et al., 1991). Against this backdrop, we decided to create OER for teacher educators to use within an introductory early language and literacy course that embeds the Virginia Early Learning and Developmental Standards (Virginia Board of Education, 2021).

OER Development Process

This section documents the three development phases we followed to create the OER early literacy text. Critical conversations focused our progression as we conceptualized, developed, and disseminated the text (see Figure 1). Before beginning the drafting process, we met as a group to identify the essential theoretical frames, literacy concepts, and pedagogical practices EEs need to support young children's literacy development. The intensive conceptualization phase was foundational and informed our work as we collaboratively developed and revised the textbook over time.

Figure 1

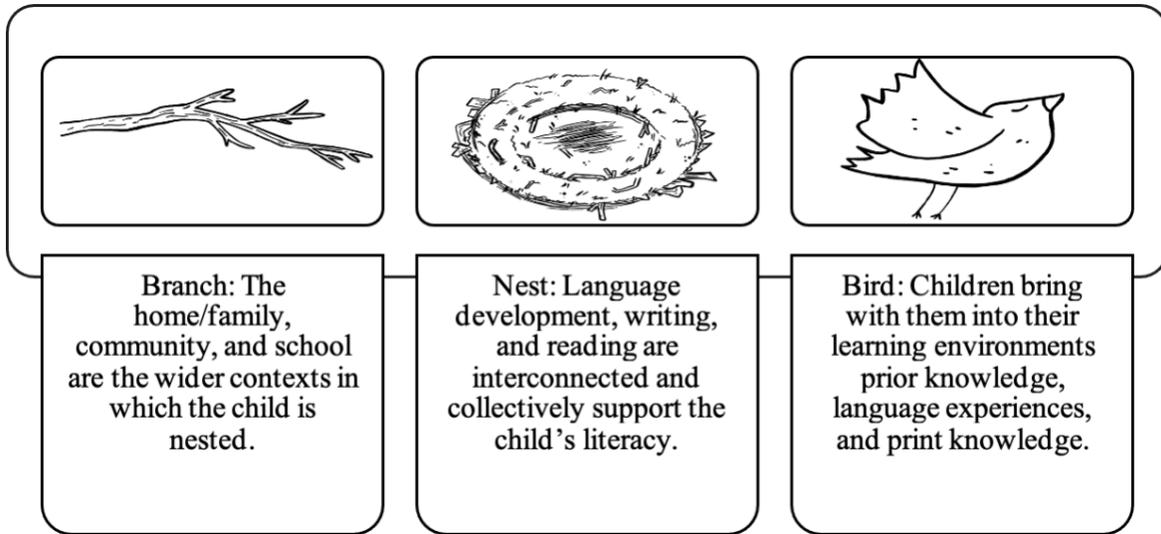*Open Educational Resource Development Process*
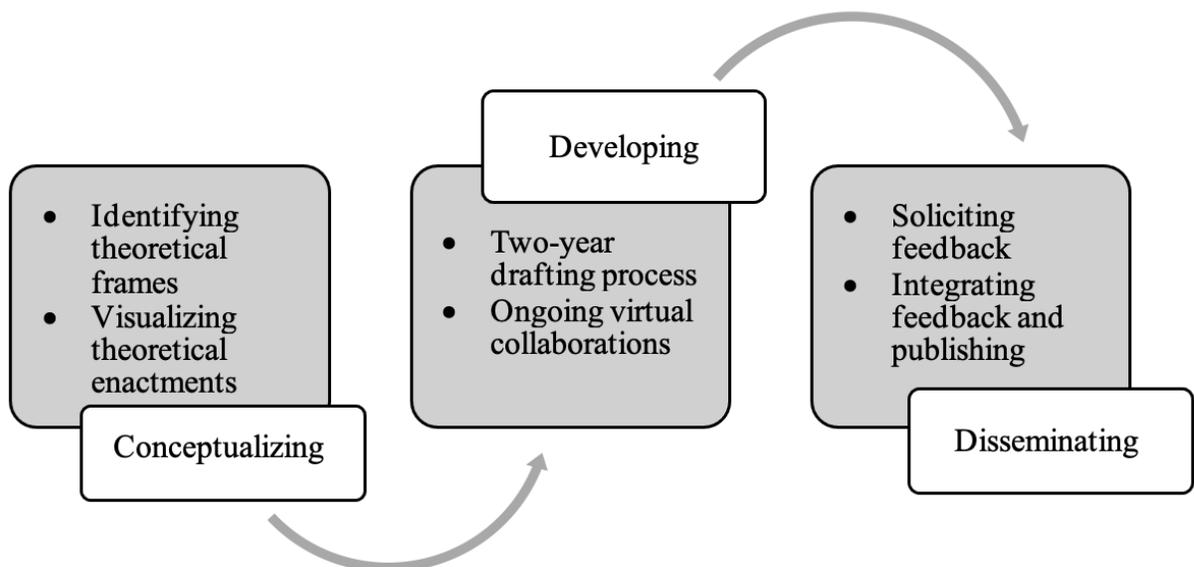
Conceptualizing

Our collaboration began with iterative brainstorming to identify the pedagogical content knowledge and literacy-specific knowledge EEs need to intentionally support young children's literacy enactments. In our conceptualizing conversations, we challenged each other to identify, clarify, elaborate, and justify components we believed needed to be included in the text as well as how the specific components should be presented. We grappled with challenging questions to clarify our perspectives and provide the necessary philosophical anchor for our continued collaboration.

Our Philosophical Perspectives. Children's literacy knowledge and skills develop over time and their literacy progressions are influenced by a child's unique characteristics, social experiences, and environmental contexts. We embedded constructivist, sociocultural, and ecological theories to guide EE's conceptualization of the dynamic, multifaceted early literacy environments influencing children's language, reading, and writing expressions (see Figure 2). In a complementary way, we integrated Freire's (1985) critical literacy lens to emphasize the contextual nature of language and literacy development. We used critical perspectives to provoke students to consider the importance of power and context as they examine how children learn and how they acquire language and literacy (Luke, 2012). Our theoretical frames prompted the development of a visual graphic for EEs to symbolize the important role theory plays in supporting children's emerging literacies.

Figure 2

The Nested Literacy Model

| Branch: The home/family, community, and school are the wider contexts in which the child is nested. | Nest: Language development, writing, and reading are interconnected and collectively support the child's literacy. | Bird: Children bring with them into their learning environments prior knowledge, language experiences, and print knowledge. |

Note. Adapted from Schull et al. (2021).

These theoretical perspectives honor the contextual experiences children bring to classroom communities and encourage EEs to leverage children's unique voices, abilities, and interests as they collaboratively construct literacy understandings. The bird, branch, and nest symbols are integrated throughout the text to guide readers' attentions and help readers understand the why and how behind specific early literacy practices.

In addition to the constructivist, sociocultural, and ecological theories presented, we also committed to using a strengths-based framework regarding educators, children, and families. In a complementary way, we embraced equity lenses to empower EEs to engage and create inclusive literacy settings for all learners and families. These commitments allowed us to continually challenge and reframe deficit perspectives, model strengths-based language, and promote equity practices throughout the text. Our critical conversations led us to conceptualize the text into two parts. The first part of the text immerses EEs in explorations of essential content we view as

foundational elements all EEs need to intentionally encourage young learners' language and literacy expressions. The second part of the text examines children's emergent language, reading, and writing development and the pedagogical practices that best promote children's literacy progressions.

Text Components. The first chapter introduces the nested literacy model as the theoretical frame for examining, creating, and developing young children's literacy world. Subsequent chapters describe the essential research examining (a) early brain development, (b) theories that support early literacy development, (c) the role of families, (d) the impact of play-based literacy environments, and (e) the power of strategic assessment practices in enhancing children's early literacy development. To honor our strength-based perspective we intentionally put our families chapter into the first part of the text. Similarly, the assessment chapter is also in the first part of the text to underscore the essential role assessment plays in shaping children's literacy experiences, documenting children's literacy development, and identifying children who may benefit from literacy and language intervention services.

Collectively, the first part of the text provides the structural aspects necessary for the successful integration of intentional emergent language, reading, and writing opportunities for young learners. In conceptualizing the text, we wanted to ensure that EEs understood the important role of creating the environment, engaging in assessment, and interacting with families. In subsequent chapters of the textbook, we presented language development, reading development, and writing development as central emergent literacy domains or components. It is within these domains that EEs promote children's literacy understandings. Our framework supports the explicit teaching of discrete skills, while promoting holistic integrations of

language, reading, and writing development. We aimed to show a strong practitioner lens while asking critical questions about why EEs should engage in certain practices.

Developing

Our approach to writing the textbook enabled us to develop a collective vision for our work and refine our conceptualizations as the textbook evolved. We convened for three overnight retreats in Spring 2019, Fall 2019, and Winter 2020. These in-person opportunities enabled us to identify roles and responsibilities. We used Google Drive to further our collaborations, and committed to weekly 2- to 3-hour writing/work sessions via Zoom. One member of our authoring circle, who teaches an emergent literacy methods course at a community college, served as first author of the textbook and took on the role of overseeing and coordinating efforts. She scheduled our authoring meetings, worked with our consulting OER librarian, and facilitated the external feedback processes.

For each chapter, we designated a lead author who was responsible for facilitating the drafting and revision of the chapter. Our process involved (a) drafting independently or with a partner; (b) uploading drafts to our Google Drive for review and written feedback; (c) meeting to discuss, draft, and revise; and (d) finalizing each chapter after all of the chapters were drafted. Although we worked on several chapters simultaneously, we continually used what we had already written to inform subsequent drafts and circled back to previous drafts to revise based on our ongoing conversations. In addition, we invited a doctoral candidate to co-author one chapter and a practicing prekindergarten teacher to co-author two chapters and provide feedback on the other chapters. This recursive writing approach ensured cohesion among chapters and drew upon everyone's expertise to inform the final product.

During this phase, we integrated vignettes and examples privileging the experiences of children, families, and communities with diverse ways of knowing. We critically refined text examples to model inclusionary practices and strengths-based perspectives to offer opportunities for examining implicit bias, structural barriers, and the rich intersectionalities children bring to classroom communities. This led to the creation of vignettes such as "Prashant's Naan," "More Leche," and "The Tale of Two Teachers" where we asked EEs to think about children's contexts, acknowledge power imbalances, and critique assumptions about family literacy experiences.

Disseminating

We intentionally leveraged feedback from a variety of sources to inform our dissemination process, using an iterative revision process that solicited feedback over the course of the project. Dissemination of text ideas, concepts, and chapters occurred throughout all phases of the OER development process. Feedback was gathered from the following audiences throughout our writing process: (a) community college instructors, (b) students, (c) key instructional faculty, and (d) specialists. This dissemination process sharpened our equity lens and the critical perspectives emphasized throughout the text.

Internal Stakeholders. Early in the developing phase, we initiated feedback on the book outline, theoretical framework, and introductory chapter with a large group of community college early childhood instructors from across the state. These instructors indicated their support of the project and recommended specific items to include in the text, such as the use of case studies to illustrate examples. Next, students at one community college read several draft chapters of the text as part of their coursework and offered feedback regarding accessibility and value. The students in this early dissemination phase indicated some specific requests, including

color photographs and additional use of headers to segment content. This feedback process yielded helpful information about student expectations and overall usage of the OER textbook.

The feedback cycle was repeated in year two of the project with a larger pilot group at two institutions in the community college system offering an emergent literacy methods course. Students during this dissemination phase articulated suggestions for clarification and wording. The students also clearly expressed their support of a free textbook option in the class.

Blind Review. Once all chapters had been drafted, a blind review process was initiated to solicit critical feedback from various specialists. The five experts represented various parts of the state (e.g. urban, suburban, and rural) and areas of expertise (e.g., special education, curriculum and instruction, and language and literacy). In addition, we requested that the reviewer pool include individuals who use an anti-bias lens and are racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse. We also sought help from institutional experts that work in areas of accessibility. Some recommendations from these reviewers were applicable to the full text. For example, reviewers suggested incorporating additional resources at the end of every chapter and enhancing the key takeaways. Other recommendations were chapter specific, particularly related to theories, assessment, and language differences. As a result of the review, the stage models in the theory chapter were clarified. The assessment chapter was also streamlined for continuity. This cycle of feedback was robust and served to strengthen the book by topic and enhanced overall cohesion.

Targeted Feedback. Throughout the dissemination phase, we solicited professionals with expertise in anti-bias approaches. The ongoing review process revealed opportunities for us to extend our efforts articulating diversity, equity, and inclusion within the text. For example, the information related to multilingual and multi-dialectical learners was substantially expanded and reworded to address perceived negative connotations surrounding various dialects. Additionally,

we emphasized the development of children who have autism and are deaf and/or hard of

hearing. Finally, implicit bias and associated resources were intentionally addressed in both the

chapter on theory and families. Then we worked with an accessibility office and an OER

librarian to finalize text elements to ensure accessibility for all readers. After changes were

made, we submitted the textbook back to the reviewers for a final review.

Discussion

As early childhood teacher educators, we embrace the call for teacher preparation

programs to implement practices that promote pre-service and in-service teachers' professional

development (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Given

that students in higher education identify purchasing textbooks as an enrollment barrier (Senack,

2014), we recognize the potential of OER texts to act as an additional equity strategy for EEs'

pursuit of professional opportunities within institutions of higher education. We also

acknowledge the need to share potentially effective preparatory practices with our professional

community of scholars (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

Expanding EE's access to free resources that support their learning, through the

development and dissemination of OER, is a viable practice for promoting equity for teachers,

children, and families. The intentional conceptualization process led to the creation of an early

literacy textbook that connected all literacy components and honored the complex reciprocal

nature of children's language, reading, and writing expressions. We designed the nested literacy

model to encourage EEs to visualize the dynamic relationships influencing young children's

literacy development and guide EEs' early literacy content and pedagogical knowledge.

The three-phase process of conceptualizing, developing, and disseminating OER provides

a framework for creating content for diverse audiences. Our collaborative writing process,

coupled with our intentional review processes, enhanced the quality of the text. The reflective

revision process encouraged the integration of more voices and enhanced the inclusive nature of

the text. Participating in collective decision-making and producing joint materials make

vulnerable populations visible and are examples of equity-focused practices.

In the end, our collaborative design process resulted in an OER for teacher educators and

EEs who are seeking to engage and empower emergent readers and writers, from birth to age

five. The generation and integration of OER is an advocacy stance we are committed to as

teacher educators. Removing structural barriers by creating textbook materials that increase

accessibility diversifies the teacher educator pipeline and subsequently influences and reforms

education. We encourage other teacher educators to consider how they may contribute their

expertise to expand the available collection of OER for education students.

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