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Fostering Shared Decisions to Promote Literacy: Strategies for Talking with Families

by Christine Hancock, Ph.D.



Christine Hancock, Ph.D.

Families play a critical role in their child's literacy learning (e.g., Bridges et al., 2012; Sheridan, Knoche, Kupzyk, Edwards, & Marvin, 2011). Family literacy practices are embedded in routines and everyday activities that enact cultural and family values (Gonzalez, Bengochea, Justice, Yeomans-Maldonado, & McCormick, 2019). Further, family literacy routines create foundations for later learning. For example, Bridges et al. (2012) found that children's home literacy experiences were strongly associated with their language and cognitive development. In addition, Sheridan et al. (2011) found that an intervention embedding learning opportunities during family routines contributed to statistically significant increases in preschoolers' language use, reading skills, and writing skills as compared to a control group. Collaboration with families can enhance educators' understanding of children's strengths and needs, contributing to higher-quality classroom literacy instruction and more tailored individualization for children (Friesen et al., 2014). Thus, an essential element of fostering early childhood literacy is cultivating family partnerships (Peralta, 2019; Simone, Hauptman, & Hasty, 2019).

Reflecting the importance of family-educator collaboration for literacy and the value of family contexts for

learning, Michigan's (2016a, 2016b) *Essential Instructional Practices in Language and Literacy* (Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators General Education Leadership Network Early Literacy Task Force, 2016a; 2016b) recommend that early childhood educators (i.e., prekindergarten-grade 3) partner with families to promote literacy in everyday family activities. To carry out this recommendation, educators and families must engage in reciprocal communication to exchange their individual expertise about family routines and literacy. Ideally, such dialogue will result in shared decisions as parents and early childhood educators collaboratively select appropriate literacy-promoting strategies and plan how to embed them within family activities. Consideration of culturally relevant practices and family and community contexts across Michigan is essential to carry out this recommendation (Edwards, White, & Bruner, 2019).

However, a growing body of research indicates that early childhood educators tend to dominate decision-making, particularly with families from historically marginalized backgrounds, such as families of color, families who are multilingual, or families experiencing poverty (e.g., Canary & Cantú, 2012; Cheatham

& Ostrosky, 2011). Literacy practices are culturally bound, and those typically expected in U.S. schools are likely to align with White, middle-class, English-speaking family practices, while differing from practices of families from marginalized backgrounds (e.g., Gonzalez et al., 2019). For example, some families may emphasize oral language traditions rather than reading and writing of text as is often prioritized in schools. In addition, families from marginalized backgrounds and educators may approach the same practices differently. Curry, Reeves, and McIntyre (2016) found that many shared book reading strategies were present across school and home for families experiencing poverty, but parents utilized different approaches than educators, such as assessing comprehension through broad discussion of meaning, rather than probing for specific known answers.

Disconnects between family and school literacy practices can result in missed opportunities for families and educators to collaboratively promote children's literacy (Gonzalez et al., 2019). In addition, a deficit-based perspective regarding family practices can further marginalize families and impair efforts at partnerships (Kim & Song, 2019). As a result, early childhood educators often struggle to build meaningful partnerships with families for children's literacy (Friesen et al., 2014). Thus, a gap exists between the intent of recommendations such as those in the *Essential Instructional Practices* and shared decision-making by educators and families. Because decision-making takes place through language (Dall & Sarangi, 2018), educators must consider intricacies of communication when exploring how decisions to promote literacy are made. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to examine how PK-3 educators and parents communicate as they discuss family literacy practices. I argue that when educators attend to details of language use, they can better facilitate shared decisions that build on family knowledge, priorities, and culture, thereby promoting children's literacy. I first briefly discuss decision-making, discourse, and power. Next, I synthesize empirical research to present recommendations for PK-3 educators to foster collaborative decisions regarding family literacy.

Decision-Making, Discourse, and Power

Decision-making is a multi-step process that takes place through discourse (i.e., language in social interaction) as individuals talk about and select a course of future action (Dall & Sarangi, 2018). Following Gee (2014), discourse involves more than what was said (i.e., features such as vocabulary and intonation), and also includes actions speakers take through language (e.g., agreeing, offering strategies). Further, speakers construct power relationships and socially significant identities through their language use. During interactions with families, early childhood educators often position themselves as experts and families as recipients of expertise, which can further marginalize families (e.g., Canary & Cantú, 2012).

Although there are no known investigations of decision-making specific to PK-3 literacy, examinations of decision-making in other contexts that include a professional (i.e., educator) and layperson (i.e., parent) can offer insight into family-educator decisions to promote children's literacy. Collins, Drew, Watt, and Entwistle (2005) found that that doctor-patient decisions about everyday healthcare routines typically followed a sequence that included a number of steps including discussing need, introducing the opportunity to make a decision, and addressing options. Further, Collins et al. (2005) identified features of shared and unilateral decisions within each of these steps. Shared decisions were collaboratively developed and took into account multiple perspectives, whereas unilateral decisions were individually developed and represented a single perspective. In early childhood contexts, decisions are made as families and educators exchange and build upon one another's knowledge to better understand a child and family's strengths and needs; this exchange ultimately allows the family-educator team to select and individualize strategies to enhance child learning. Selecting literacy-promoting strategies to embed within a family's current practices and routines, as recommended by the *Essential Instructional Practices*, represents one such decision.

Recommendations for PK-3 Educators

The following sections outline five recommendations for PK-3 educators to foster more collaborative decisions regarding family literacy routines: (1) create multiple opportunities to learn about family literacy routines; (2) be explicit about the opportunity for families to make a decision; (3) recognize indirect advice-giving; (4) offer and discuss multiple options; and (5) position yourself as a partner, learner, and problem-solver. Within each recommendation, I first draw on empirical research regarding family-educator interactions and decision-making to outline what is known about these strategies. Next, I discuss implications for promoting literacy with families when these strategies are—or are not—carried out. Finally, I detail the strategies, providing examples educators might use during conversations with families.

Create Multiple Opportunities to Learn about Family Literacy Routines

Literature review.

Historically, efforts to promote child development and literacy for families and children considered “at risk” (e.g., families of color, families experiencing poverty, families of children with disabilities) employed a deficit focus and trained parents to reproduce school activities (Friesen et al., 2018). As a counterpoint to deficit-based perspectives, Moll, Amanti, Neff, and González (1992) argued that families had “funds of knowledge” educators could embrace to enhance family-educator relationships and classroom instruction. Subero, Vujasinović, and Esteban-Guitart (2017) reviewed several research-based strategies to draw on family funds of knowledge in the classroom, including developing maps and bringing meaningful objects from home into school. However, these investigations did not typically address details of how educators communicated with families to learn about funds of knowledge. Understanding how educators engage in such conversations is essential, because educators report having little knowledge of community cultural resources to support literacy (Peralta, 2019).

Investigations in other contexts can provide insight into decisions promoting children’s literacy. For example, researchers have identified that the extent to which professionals guide discussion of patients’ preferences and needs is a key feature of shared decisions about healthcare routines, because decisions were then able to be rooted in the individual’s context (Collins et al., 2005). In contrast, unilateral, professional-driven decisions did not take into account individual context, and often appeared as though the decision was made by the professional prior to the conversation (Collins et al., 2005). Thus, incorporating what is learned about family routines, preferences, and needs is an integral feature of shared decisions for children’s literacy.

Implications for partnering with families.

How educators facilitate conversations with families greatly influences the opportunities parents have to share their experiences and expertise about their child. Without knowledge of families’ current practices, educators may magnify disconnects between home and school literacy routines, further marginalizing children and families from diverse backgrounds. In contrast, when educators take steps to learn from families, they are more likely to develop trust and rapport. By creating multiple opportunities to learn about family literacy routines, educators can develop a more detailed sense of family strengths and current practices, thereby enhancing opportunities to individualize literacy-promoting strategies with families to embed in their current routines.

What educators can do.

To collaborate with families in integrating literacy-promoting strategies into their everyday activities, educators must first learn about families’ current practices. Thus, educators can create a range of opportunities to learn from families about their routines. Because families and educators often have differing views of literacy (e.g., Friesen et al., 2018), educators can keep discussions broad rather than indicating a focus on literacy, which may inadvertently constrain what parents share. Instead, educators might begin with prompts such as, “Tell me about a typical day for your family.” Similarly, educators might ask families to share about current

routines or activities based on features such as the most frequent, most important, or most enjoyable. Identifying routines that are already working well allows educators to recognize, affirm, and build on family strengths (e.g., Keilty, 2019). Such discussion can be embedded as part of educators' already established activities for building rapport with families, as well as integrated into contexts such as parent-teacher conferences or family nights.

In addition to initiating conversation about current family practices, educators can invite families to share their experiences through creative home-school activities. For example, educators might observe family routines in action through home visits or encourage families to share videos or photos of everyday activities. Observations, photos, and videos can then serve as anchors for more in-depth discussion. Following Keilty's (2019) recommendations for sensitive assessment of young children's learning in home environments, educators might ask families to "talk through" certain aspects of routines, creating opportunities to learn more about how family culture, values, and priorities are reflected in these activities ("I noticed [*detail of routine/activity*]... Can you tell me more about that?"). Educators might also adapt activities to allow students to utilize funds of knowledge to create family activities, such as creating visual representations of meaningful people, objects, activities, and institutions in a family's life (e.g., Subero et al., 2017). Family book-making can also create rich opportunities to share funds of knowledge (e.g., Kim & Song, 2019), and can be designed to focus on favorite family activities or routines.

Be Explicit about the Opportunity for Families to Make a Decision

Literature review.

A long-standing body of research has examined how conversations typically unfold between professionals, such as educators, and laypeople, such as parents (Heritage, 2013). As professionals, educators have more knowledge of conversational expectations in educational contexts than families, giving educators more opportunity to guide discussion and decisions. As a

result, family knowledge and priorities can go unheard (e.g., Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011; McCloskey, 2016). For example, in an investigation of kindergarten parent-teacher conferences with parents who were Mexican immigrants, Howard and Lipinoga (2010) found that, prior to conferences, parents indicated that they planned to ask questions. However, when the conferences went differently than parents expected (e.g., format, discussion topics), parents ultimately declined to raise their own questions and topics for discussion.

Collins et al. (2005) provide insight into decisions to promote literacy; they identified that during shared decision-making, professionals signaled the opportunity to make a decision at the outset of a conversation, as well as highlighted the specific opportunity to make a choice within the conversation. In the context of literacy, educators might signal decision-making by asking "What do you think you would like to add to this routine?" or "What strategies seem like they would be the best fit for your family?" In contrast, Collins et al. (2005) found that unilateral decisions did not make clear the opportunity to participate in decision-making.

Implications for partnering with families.

When educators are explicit about the opportunity for families to make decisions, they provide meta-linguistic cues about how discussion is expected to proceed, aligning with recommendations to engage in dialogue with families who are bilingual or immigrants (e.g., Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018). In contrast, when educators are unclear about the opportunity to make a decision, it may appear to families that the decision has already been made. As a result, educators may inadvertently minimize opportunities for families to participate in further enhancing their literacy practices.

What educators can do.

To be clear about the chance to participate in decision-making, educators can label these opportunities at the beginning of their conversations with families, as well as during discussion. Educators might create a simple visual to illustrate the decision-making process and use this to guide discussion with families. In addition, educators can review home-school literacy

practices to identify other opportunities for families to make decisions. For example, Simone et al. (2019) recommend that educators create time for parents to make a number of decisions regarding literacy, including selecting books, choosing family literacy experiences, and planning when and how to have conversations about books at home.

Professionals can also make clear the opportunity to participate in decision-making from the start by describing the purpose of the conversation. In the context of identifying strategies to promote literacy, educators might say, “Today, I’m first going to ask some questions to learn more about your family routines. Next, we’ll identify a specific routine you’d like to address. Finally, you’ll choose one or more strategies you’d like to try adding into this routine.”

Recognize Indirect Advice-Giving

Literature review.

Advice-giving has been found to play a role in how families and educators set goals and identified strategies to promote children’s learning. Whereas direct advice is explicitly labeled as advice (e.g., “I would recommend that you...”), indirect advice is often presented as information that could be applied to anyone (see Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011). Cheatham and Ostrosky (2011) found that during preschool parent-teacher conferences, conversation structures required educator expertise while deprioritizing family knowledge. As a result, parents were constructed as advice seekers and educators as advice givers.

Collins et al. (2005) identified that when professionals engage in advice-giving, it may obscure the opportunity for individuals to participate in making a decision. When professionals present a decision as advice, such as by beginning with discussion of recommendations, they narrowly construct possibilities to address the decision. As a result, a context is created where it becomes unnecessary to further discuss possible ways to address the issue, and the advice becomes the solution, regardless of whether or not it is the best fit. Thus, presenting a decision through advice is a characteristic of unilateral decisions (Collins et al., 2005).

Implications for partnering with families.

Educators are typically sensitive to providing direct recommendations to families (e.g., Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011). However, indirect advice-giving is prominent, and may impede partnership efforts. When educators engage in advice-giving at the expense of creating opportunities for shared decisions, they can constrain collaboration. Advice-giving limits the range of possibilities discussed, resulting in decisions less tailored to family’s strengths and priorities. In contrast, by recognizing indirect advice-giving, educators can more creatively plan with families how literacy strategies fit within their routines.

What educators can do.

Educators can listen for features of indirect advice-giving in their communication with families, such as offering generalized suggestions, or advice in the form of information (Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011). Because the details of language use are difficult for speakers to identify in the moment, educators might observe and reflect on their communication patterns, such as by asking a peer to observe an interaction, and then provide feedback. With parents’ permission, educators might also consider video-recording a discussion to facilitate more detailed reflection. In addition, educators might role play with colleagues to practice listening for features of language use, such as indirect advice.

To address their communication in the moment, educators can take steps to start with open-ended discussion of options (e.g., “What strategies might be the best fit for your family?”). During discussions such as parent-teacher conferences, educators might make cues to emphasize open-ended discussion and limit the tendency to give advice, such as by adding prompts to paperwork, or creating sentence starters.

Offer and Discuss Multiple Options

Literature review.

Many strategies for effective group decision-making in education aim to encourage creativity and support individuals in respectfully sharing disagreement to avoid overlooking alternate possibilities (Becker, Israel, Gustat, Reyes, & Allen, 2013). For example, Gutkin

and Nemeth (1997) called for assigning an individual to act as “devil’s advocate” to encourage seeking out additional information when needed. Other researchers have found that activities such as brainstorming promoted inventive problem-solving (Becker et al., 2013).

Friesen et al. (2018) investigated family-school projects designed to support preschoolers’ literacy. All projects embedded options for families by including a set of detailed instructions, as well as suggestions for a more flexible activity. When sharing feedback about the projects, families indicated that these choices were an important feature that supported their participation. These recommendations align with the work of Collins et al. (2005), who found that a feature of shared decision-making was exploration of multiple options, while unilateral decision-making discussed a single course of action.

Implications for partnering with families.

When educators and parents aim to identify multiple strategies, creative and flexible decision-making is supported. Moreover, outlining multiple options may facilitate deeper discussion of current practices, ultimately fostering decisions that are more tailored to families. In contrast, when educators discuss a single strategy, decision-making is more likely to be professional-driven. Even if educators intend for the strategy shared to serve as an example rather than a direct recommendation, if additional possibilities are not addressed, the option can be construed as advice. In such cases, families may withdraw from collaboration efforts, as it appears a decision has already been made.

What educators can do.

To enact this recommendation, educators can ensure that multiple options are discussed with families. This need not be complex or involve discussion of many distinct strategies simply to create an option. In some cases, it might be appropriate for families to decide between differently focused strategies, such as those that address letter-sound relationships or those that build vocabulary. However, educators and families might also talk about whether a routine is already working well or could benefit from enhancement. For

example, a parent might identify car rides as a common routine that typically goes smoothly, and as a site where literacy-promoting strategies sometimes occur. Similarly, educators and families can consider whether or how a current routine might be refined by discussing variations in when and how often to embed strategies, such as by identifying that weekly car rides to visit extended family would be the best time to explore the new strategy, rather than daily rides to/from school. Educators might also develop guiding questions to facilitate consideration of options related to selecting the targeted routine, identifying the strategy to adopt or refine, and/or determining how to individualize the strategy for the family and child.

To facilitate discussion of multiple options, educators can also conceptualize decision-making with families as brainstorming. For example, Dail and Payne (2010) described how during family literacy nights, educators planned open-ended time for families to explore materials and develop their own ideas about how they might be used. In addition, educators can use meta-language to label choices by describing strategies as “options” or “possibilities,” further highlighting that families have the opportunity to make a decision.

Position Yourself as a Partner, Learner, and Problem-Solver

Literature review.

As speakers engage in discussion, they socially construct identities for one another through discourse (Gee, 2014). Recognizing families’ funds of knowledge aims to counter deficit-based perspectives of family resources, and position families as active participants in their children’s literacy rather than simply informants about children’s background information (Dail & Paine, 2010; Simone et al., 2019). However, researchers investigating family-educator communication have found that institutional roles and policies favored educators, ultimately constructing them as more knowledgeable than parents (e.g., Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011; McCloskey, 2016). For example, typical formats and discussion topics of preschool and elementary parent-teacher conferences (e.g., discussing assessments)

contributed to constructing hierarchical roles that constrained family knowledge and expertise. As a result, parents were ultimately positioned as recipients of educators' expertise (Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011; Howard & Lipinoga, 2010). Learning more about families may be helpful in transforming educators' approaches to partnerships, and ultimately, decision-making. For example, Peralta (2019) found that engaging in a home visit was a catalyst for teacher candidates to move from viewing parents as individuals needing assistance to viewing parents as having their own expertise.

Implications for partnering with families.

When educators position themselves as experts, efforts at partnership and shared decision-making can be impeded. In particular, families from diverse backgrounds are likely to be further marginalized when opportunities to share family knowledge and experiences are minimized. In contrast, when educators actively position themselves as partners, learners, and problem-solvers, partnership efforts are supported.

What educators can do.

Educators can take a number of steps to position themselves as partners, learners, and problem-solvers. Educators position themselves and parents as knowledgeable partners when they highlight the importance of family contexts for literacy. Educators might use questions such as "How can families continue to connect their experiences with literacy?" and "How can I partner with families to continue connecting their experiences with literacy" to guide reflection or to shape conversations with families (Simone et al., 2019). For example, Kim and Song (2019) described how a family book-making project positioned parents who were multilingual as partners in their child's literacy through steps such as encouraging families to use their preferred language and/or multiple languages. In addition, when discussing current family routines and activities, educators can affirm family strengths and discuss how families are already helping their children learn, keeping in mind that environmental strengths are family strengths (Keilty, 2019).

In addition, educators might position themselves as

partners by briefly talking about their philosophy on partnerships and their intent in helping families promote literacy routines (e.g., Cheatham & Lim-Mullins, 2018). Similarly, by presenting decision-making as consideration of multiple options through actions such as brainstorming, educators can shift perceptions toward partnership, rather than more directive roles. Educators can also counter the predominant role of expert by highlighting their interest in learning from and alongside families. For example, educators can position themselves as learners when creating opportunities to hear from families about their current practices and priorities for their child. Further, educators might present themselves as problem-solvers whose aim is to help parents identify ways to enhance current routines. Shifting perceptions of discussions can help educators draw on their specialized knowledge in a different way, while still prioritizing families' knowledge and experiences.

Conclusion

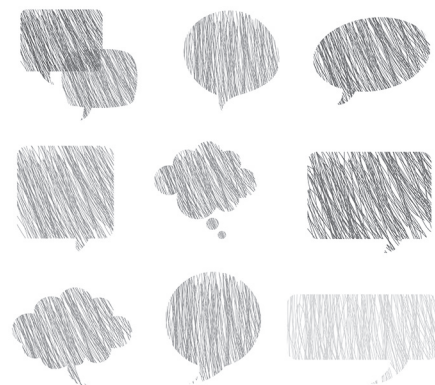
The purpose of this paper was to examine how PK-3 educators and parents communicate as they discuss family literacy routines and everyday activities. When educators attend to details of their language use, they can better facilitate shared decisions that build on family knowledge, priorities, and culture, thereby promoting children's literacy. Learning about family literacy practices and routines is a necessary first step in collaborating with families to promote literacy in everyday activities. To facilitate shared decisions, educators must build on what was learned. Being explicit about the opportunity for parents to make a decision lays foundation for more collaborative decisions. When facilitating discussion with families about plans to promote literacy, educators can be sensitive to advice-giving, which can inadvertently constrain efforts for shared decision-making. In addition, educators can offer and discuss multiple options with families, supporting a feature of shared decisions. Finally, educators can reflect on how their language use constructs identities during interactions with families to position themselves as partners, learners, and problem-solvers. By applying strategies such as these in their conversations with families, educators can foster partnerships that promote children's literacy.

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Requirements: Discounted rate applies to retired Members with 10 or more years of continuous Membership. Please include proof of retirement status.

ADD YOUR JOURNALS: **Print & Online** **Online Only**

The Reading Teacher \$18 \$14

For educators of students up to age 12

Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy \$18 \$14

For educators of older learners

Reading Research Quarterly \$18 \$14

The leading journal of literacy research

SUBTOTAL OPTION 3: _____

OPTION 4: 25-YEAR

25-YEAR Membership FREE

Requirements: Discounted rate applies to Members with 25 years of continuous Membership, regardless of retirement status.

ADD YOUR JOURNALS: **Print & Online** **Online Only**

The Reading Teacher \$30 \$24

For educators of students up to age 12

Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy \$30 \$24

For educators of older learners

Reading Research Quarterly \$30 \$24

The leading journal of literacy research

SUBTOTAL OPTION 4: _____

2. Enter your SUBTOTAL here:

My Membership is: NEW RENEWAL _____

2-year Membership (lock-in rates!) Subtotal x 2 = _____

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Enroll me in AUTO-RENEWAL. ILA will charge future annual dues to my credit card. Contact Customer Service to cancel.

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5. MAIL: ILA, PO Box 8139, Newark, DE 19714-8139 USA **ONLINE:** literacyworldwide.org/membership
PHONE: 800.336.7323 (U.S. and Canada) | 302.731.1600 (all other countries) **FAX:** 302.737.0878