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Patricia A. Edwards
Michigan State University

Kristen L. White
Northern Michigan University

Lori E. Bruner
Michigan State University

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Adopting and Adapting Michigan's Tenth Essential Literacy Practice: Collaboration with Families

by Patricia A. Edwards, Ph.D., Kristen L. White, Ph.D., and Lori E. Bruner



**Patricia A.
Edwards, Ph.D.**



**Kristen L.
White, Ph.D.**



Lori E. Bruner

Every home is a university and the parents are the teachers.
—Mahatma Gandhi

As Mrs. Hill made her 25-minute drive to school, she mentally composed her grocery list for her trip to the store at the end of the day. Over summer break, she had learned about the Family Dinner Project, a movement out of Harvard University whose goal was to encourage families to eat meals together and support their efforts to increase conversations around the dinner table. Like many families, Mrs. Hill lived in a very busy household with two working parents and children who were involved in activities. Despite their schedules, she was committed to eating dinner together this school year at least four days per week.

As she drove, Mrs. Hill began to think about how the Family Dinner Project could relate to her classroom. She had spent the past 15 years teaching first grade in the same rural school district, attended by mostly White, middle-class students. Her building was located in a small centrally-located town, but many of her families spent as much as 45 minutes in the car just to get to school each day. As she made her own commute, Mrs. Hill had the



perfect idea: knowing the importance of adult conversations for children's language and literacy development, she decided to create "conversation starters" for her students' commutes in the same way that the Family Dinner Project created conversation starters for mealtimes.

By early November, Mrs. Hill's idea had come to fruition. Each week, she sent home note cards with three different conversation starters printed on labels that a parent volunteer assembled. During conferences, many families raved about the enjoyment their entire household was getting out of these cards, which included funny topics (e.g., "What is

your favorite silly face?”), thought-provoking topics (e.g., “If you could create a new tradition for our family, what would it be?”), and reflections (e.g., “Talk about something nice someone did for you this week.”). As the year progressed, some children began sharing their own ideas for conversation starters, and several families reported creating a “filing” system to save the cards to revisit throughout the year.

It may be that while reading the vignette above you identified with the classroom teacher, Mrs. Hill. We did, too. Therefore, we invite educators within and outside the state to join us in (re)conceptualizing a new, or perhaps a familiar topic, “collaboration with families,” in order to promote literacy. In so doing, we adopt and adapt a culturally relevant teaching lens to also include collaboration with families around their children’s literacy. This important endeavor is included as one of the 10 Essential Instructional Practices in Literacy (Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators General Education Leadership Network Early Literacy Task Force, 2016a; 2016b; 2016c) that schools and districts may embrace, we hope, as a focus for professional development throughout the state.

In this article, we discuss and provide examples of how schools across grades, Pre-K through fifth, can engage parents in developing their children’s literacy skills through *information*, *awareness*, and *outreach* in ways that are culturally relevant to students and their families in particular contexts. We use the term “parents” for consistency with the Michigan Early Literacy Essentials. However, each school will want to consider who, among its population, cares for children. “Care-givers” is more inclusive of the range of people who care for children regardless of context (e.g., grandparents, elders, aunts, uncles, neighbors, foster families). We first provide background information on the origin of the *Essential Instructional Practices in Literacy and Early Literacy*. Next, we highlight the benefits of family engagement and its effects on student achievement, as well as the shared benefits for parents, teachers, and schools. Finally, we discuss how a culturally relevant curriculum can be used as a framework that schools can adopt and adapt for engaging the diverse language

and literacy practices of the families in their contexts to promote literacy. We argue that collaborating with families to ensure childhood literacy is a matter of social equity. The recommendations in this article move family engagement from high rhetoric to high practice (Epstein, 2011).

Background of the Michigan Essential Instructional Practices

On March 1, 2015, Governor Snyder appointed the Third-Grade Reading Workgroup to analyze the third-grade students’ reading proficiency in Michigan and to suggest policy for improving students’ reading for future academic and career success. For the past 12 years, the reading proficiency rates for Michigan’s third-grade students has steadily declined. National test results indicate that more than two-thirds of Michigan students fail to demonstrate third-grade proficiency in reading on standardized reading tests (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2017). Conversely, the reading proficiency of third-grade students has improved in almost every other state. To better understand this issue and to address it effectively, the workgroup reviewed similar data and programs from various states. For example, the workgroup interviewed teachers, reading interventionists, principals, superintendents, early childhood literacy researchers, and policy experts who have all had positive impacts on reading proficiency despite the challenges associated with childhood poverty. These schools, districts, and states are achieving early literacy using similar diagnostic-driven instruction and intervention methods individualized for each student.

Recognizing the need for improvement, the state developed Michigan’s Top 10 in 10 Strategic Plan, publicly making transparent its commitment to becoming a national leader in early literacy by 2025. Recommendations from the Third-Grade Reading Workgroup suggest that the early literacy work at the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) must focus on:

- Supporting educators with training to use diagnostic-driven methods with knowledge and fidelity;

- Engaging and collaborating with parents in developing their children's early literacy skills through information, awareness, and outreach;
- Providing Michigan teachers and leaders with data that compares students' status and growth over time when compared with other states; and,
- Using research-supported diagnostic and screening instruments, instruction, and interventions necessary for academic success.

As a state, Michigan is focusing on increasing students' early literacy skills. The Early Literacy Initiative is a major undertaking that the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) will work on in the coming years. This work is crucial because research suggests that if students are not proficient in reading by third grade, their chances of educational attainment are nominal (Hernandez, 2011). The MDE advocates that, to ensure proficient early literacy skills for all of Michigan's students, the state must develop and deliver an educational system that provides high-quality instruction to

all students, provide regular information on student progress, and strategically implement research-based strategies, particularly when students are not meeting grade-level expectations. The MDE also advocates that prior to children becoming students (i.e., at kindergarten entry), engaging and supporting parents and other family members in supporting language and early literacy development will provide the foundation for later academic success as well as increase the engagement of families in their children's schooling.

The following table illustrates the framework developed by MDE that serves as a guide for educators and professional development efforts along the realm of parent involvement. The tenth Essential Practice, Collaboration with Families in Promoting Literacy, is dedicated to supporting educators across three early-grade bands (pre-kindergarten, kindergarten through third grade, and fourth and fifth grades) as they partner with parents and other family members to support children's reading and writing development at home.

Table 1

Michigan Department of Education Framework for Professional Development Related to Parent Involvement

Pre-K	K-3	4-5
Incorporate literacy-promoting strategies into everyday activities such as cooking, communicating with friends and family, and traveling in the bus or car.	Prompt children during reading and writing and demonstrate ways to incorporate literacy-promoting strategies into everyday activities, such as cooking, communicating with friends and family, and traveling in the bus or car.	Support families to continue to provide reading and academic learning opportunities at home and during the summer months (i.e., book lending programs).
Read aloud to children and discuss the text.	Promote children's independent reading.	Build on students' family and cultural resources and knowledge in reading and writing instruction.

Encourage literacy milestones (i.e., pretend reading).	Support children in doing their homework and in academic learning over summer months.	Promote children’s independent reading outside of school.
Speak with children in their home/most comfortable language, whether or not that language is English.	Speak with children in their home/most comfortable language, whether or not that language is English.	Speak with children in their home/most comfortable language, whether or not that language is English.
Provide literacy-supporting resources such as books from the classroom that children can borrow or keep, children’s magazines, information about adult-supported use of educational television and digital applications, announcements about local events, and passes to local museums.	Provide literacy-supporting resources such as books from the classroom that children can borrow or keep, children’s magazines, information about adult-supported use of educational television and digital applications, announcements about local events, and passes to local museums.	Provide literacy-supporting resources such as books from the classroom that children can borrow or keep, children’s magazines, information about adult-supported use of educational television and digital applications, and passes to local museums.

The Early Literacy Initiative is a core component of supporting the implementation of College- and Career-Ready standards in Michigan, particularly in the earliest grades. The MDE is making a concerted effort to consistently focus on the foundations described above and build the capacity to support districts as they work on the key driver of student achievement—literacy.

Additionally, the MDE maintains that equitable access to early childhood instruction is supported by five core beliefs, which include “culturally relevant curriculum, materials, and practices that are incorporated into daily classroom activities” (Michigan’s Action Plan for Literacy Excellence, 2019). Collaborating with families to promote literacy as part of a culturally-relevant parent

curriculum may be familiar, challenging, exciting, or even a combination of all three, for schools and educators; thus, we offer a framework for implementing Michigan policy contextually.

A Culturally Relevant Parent and Family Curriculum

In 1995, Gloria Ladson-Billings published a landmark article introducing a pedagogical framework, “culturally relevant pedagogy” (CRP). Although Ladson-Billings coined the term CRP, culturally relevant teaching (CRT) is a similar term and the one we use in this article because it is what we most commonly hear in the schools and classrooms we work in. Upon sharing

culturally relevant teaching (CRT) with various school personnel, she regularly received the same comment that CRT is “just good teaching” (p. 159). We concur with Ladson-Billings and educators writ large; CRT is good teaching and an essential component of equitable early childhood education. Similarly, we have found that it is a helpful framework for respectfully engaging parents and families in developing their children’s literacy both at home and at school. In our 65 years of accumulated teaching experience among the three of us (Pat, Kristen, and Lori), we have found that when the home language and literacy practices of the children we have taught were valued in our classrooms, our students flourished academically and socially in and out of school, and we developed collaborative relationships with our students’ parents and families.

With 83 counties and two peninsulas, Michigan has different geographical features and populations (Figure 1). For example, while the lower-peninsula hosts urban cities like Detroit, Flint, Saginaw, and Lansing, the rural Upper Peninsula contains only 3% of the state’s overall human population (Detroit Free Press, 2018). Michigan has 12 federally recognized Native American tribes; five of them are located in the Upper Peninsula. Thus, family diversity in schools in Sault Ste. Marie includes the Native American tribe known as the Chippewa. The Native American population unique to that area is different than the Dutch population in Holland. We do not mean to stereotype the people in particular areas of the state but rather point out that the parents, families, and children attending Michigan schools are awesomely diverse! A CRT lens, then, is a



Figure 1. Map of Michigan Counties.

valuable resource for (re)conceptualizing a parent and family curriculum that schools statewide can employ to increase parent collaboration and promote literacy. We believe that a CRT framework illuminates, respects, and values the myriad ways that diverse families develop their children's language and literacies well before entering school. Furthermore, such practices are a vehicle for uniting the home and the school.

CRT as a framework, extended to include parent engagement, consists of three principles—academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1990). Ladson-Billings asserts that students who achieved academic success in her seminal study did so because their teachers attended to their academic needs and demanded excellence. In her study, Edwards (1992) found that parents, particularly African American, sought teachers who were honest with them about their children's academic progress. She thus worked with teachers at an elementary school to openly and honestly communicate with parents who were racially, ethnically, and culturally different from themselves. This resulted in improved communication between teachers and parents. Parents began to trust, believe, and gain confidence in teachers' assessment of their children. More importantly, this resulted in a positive and supportive school atmosphere.

Collaborating with families to promote literacy entails not only providing parents access to assessment data about their children's academic progress, but also explaining the data in terms that they understand. In turn, this means that classroom teachers must themselves understand the data. In addition to sharing and explaining mandated standardized test scores to parents, it is equally important to document and share evidence of children's growth in other areas. Teachers can achieve this goal through the use of anecdotal records and artifacts collected across content areas. For instance, these records can document the strategies children use as they read, write, and talk while participating in literacy events like play (Owocki & Goodman, 2002). These suggestions align with the MDE's Top 10 in 10 goals and the Michigan Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Plan, which advocates for a "whole child approach."

A whole child approach recognizes that each child is a unique learner and encourages educators to attend to interacting dimensions such as the cognitive, physical, behavioral, social, and emotional. If one dimension is not functioning optimally, then educators must work diligently to attend to it.

As literacy educators, how often do we stop and consider our role in improving the life opportunities of students who fall outside of the cultural mainstream? There are educators who think about this a lot, and Lazar, Edwards, and McMillon (2012) call them "teachers for social equity" or "social equity literacy teachers" (p. 1). They strive to teach children to read because they see their work within the broader spheres of power and opportunity. They recognize that the educational playing field is often unequal for students who live in high poverty communities. Many are students of color who have been historically disenfranchised by public education, and many come to school with diverse language abilities that are not recognized in school. These students are often under-served by low-resourced classrooms, inexperienced teachers, and culturally foreign curricula. Lazar, Edwards, and McMillon (2012) stated:

Teachers for social equity know they cannot change these things without help from many corners of society, but they do their part by: 1) seeing students' inherent literate capacities, 2) helping students realize their fullest literacy potential, and 3) challenging the policies and practices that undermine students' literacy achievement. They not only assess students' literacy abilities and use this information to inform instruction, but they also *assume a political orientation to literacy teaching where issues of race, class, culture, literacy, language, and teaching intersect.* (p. 22)

Cultural Competence

Ladson-Billings (1995) asserts that culturally relevant teaching maintains children's cultures inside the classroom. One approach to learning more about children's diverse language and literacy practices at home is to send a questionnaire asking parents to offer information about their child and familial language and literacy

practices. Note, however, that to honor the languages spoken in the home, it is important to make sure that forms are translated into the family's heritage language, if necessary. Information provided by parents can help teachers learn about families' funds of knowledge, "the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992, p. 133). Teachers can analyze and synthesize this information and use it to inform curricula and instruction in the classroom and as a way to collaborate with parents in furthering their child's literacy at home and in school. A limitation that teachers should be aware of is that when their students' home language and literacy practices do not align with their own, valuing, honoring, and respecting them means seeking ways to incorporate these practices into their teaching as well as their engagement with parents.

Critical Consciousness

Although Ladson-Billings (1995) articulates critical consciousness as ensuring that students develop a sociopolitical consciousness to critique the "cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities" (p. 162), we suggest that in order to create a culturally relevant parent curriculum, school personnel do the heavy lifting. In other words, develop a sociopolitical consciousness by examining the self, school, or school district's existing practices for a culturally relevant curriculum for collaborating with parents to further their children's literacy. Some possible questions to consider are:

- In what ways has the school assumed, albeit unknowingly, particular cultural norms and mores that include particular groups of parents and families at the exclusion of others to promote literacy events (e.g., Family Literacy Night, volunteering during the school day)?
- Is there evidence that opportunities for parent collaboration impact students' academic achievement? If so, which groups of students?
- How are children's home literacies valued, respected, and included in reading and other areas of the curriculum?

- Are the books and texts in classrooms and the school library reflective of the student population?
- Are teachers in the school or district assessment-literate? Do they feel confident in their ability to understand the explain students' standardized test scores in terms parents can easily understand?
- Are deficit terms used to describe the language and literacy practices of some children (e.g., "at risk," "struggling," "low,") while other terms privilege the language and literacy practices of other groups of children (e.g., "high," "gifted," "smart")?
- Do the written and spoken language used around the school and district reflect the languages and literacies of the student population?

Family Engagement Improves Student Achievement

The past 30 years of American school reform have focused on course curricula, instructional methods, and teacher training as ways to improve student achievement. While American public education has changed over the years, one often ignored factor—family engagement—remains critical to student achievement. Ongoing research shows family engagement in schools improves student achievement, reduces absenteeism, and restores parents' confidence in their children's education (Edwards, 2004, 2016; Epstein, 1987, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Recent research on the best practices in education suggests that parental involvement/family engagement, not income or social status, is the most accurate predictor of scholastic achievement (Edwards, 2016; Epstein, 2011). Thus, family engagement and parental involvement benefit every facet of the educational process.

The Effect of Parent Involvement on Students' Academic Achievement

Families are the keystone that holds the educational framework together. "When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more." That's the conclusion of *A New Wave of Evidence*, a report by Henderson and Mapp (2002, p. 7) from the Southwest Educational

Development Laboratory. The report, a synthesis of research on parent involvement over the past decade, also found that regardless of family income or background, students with involved parents are more likely to:

- Earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in higher-level programs;
- Be promoted, pass their classes, and earn credits;
- Attend school regularly;
- Have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school; and,
- Graduate and go on to postsecondary education.

Parental Benefits

Even parents themselves benefit when they are involved in their children's education. By involving themselves at both the school and community level, parents:

- Interact with their children more and are thus more sensitive to their emotional and intellectual needs;
- Have more confidence in their parenting abilities;
- Have a better understanding of the teacher's role and the curricula;
- Use more positive reinforcement when they learn about developmental stages;
- Are more likely to respond to teachers' requests for help at home when they stay apprised of what their children are learning;
- Have higher opinions of and feel more committed to their children's schools; and,
- Become more active in policy-making at school and in the community (Edwards, 2004, 2016; Epstein, 1987, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Benefits to Teachers and Schools

Educators have difficult jobs that are all too often thankless, but parent involvement helps ease their burden to some degree. When parents get involved, they join forces with teachers to make a formidable educational team characterized by mutual respect. Here are a few of the benefits to educators and schools when parents take an active role in their children's education:

- Teachers and administrators experience higher morale and job satisfaction.
- Parents have more respect for the teaching profession.
- Communication improves among educators, parents, and administrators.
- Communities have higher opinions of schools with involved parents.
- School programs that involve parents perform better and offer higher quality education (Edwards, 2004, 2016; Epstein, 1987, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

With all the potential benefits of parental involvement, spending time and paying attention to a child's education should be a top priority for all parents. When parents foster an atmosphere of learning and collaborate with educators, the entire educational system benefits, from students to teachers to parents themselves.

One Final Story: Information, Awareness, and Outreach

Literature suggests that parent involvement is an important factor in student academic achievement (Edwards, 2004, 2016; Epstein, 1987, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Research findings reveal that the most effective parent involvement programs use personal contact, cultural sensitivity, accommodations, communication, and a focused approach to reach parents and students (Edwards, 2009, 2016). Throughout this article, we highlighted the benefits of family engagement and its effects on student achievement, as well as the shared benefits for parents, teachers, and schools. We also examined how a culturally-relevant parent curriculum can be used as a framework that schools can adopt and adapt for engaging the diverse language and literacy practices of the families in their context in order to promote early literacy. As we conclude our conversation around these topics, we leave readers with one final story from a kindergarten classroom in mid-Michigan. This story exemplifies how one teacher, Ms. Dow, collaborated with parents to promote their children's literacy in ways that were culturally relevant to the context. Ms. Dow knew her

families and the community well, and as a result, she not only made families aware of the importance of having access to books, but ensured their access by removing the barriers. Like Ms. Dow, we encourage educators around and outside the contours of the Great Lakes state to adopt and adapt state policy to (re)conceptualize a parent curriculum that promotes literacy in culturally and contextually relevant ways!

It was the last week of August and the mid-western air was thick and hot as Ms. Dow put the finishing touches on her kindergarten classroom in preparation for Back-to-School Night. It was her third year of teaching in the district, located near the state capital, and housing many international families from around the world—including a significant number of refugee families. In previous years, Ms. Dow noticed that many of her students entered kindergarten with very limited knowledge of books: how to locate the title, where to begin reading, and even which direction to hold a book.

In addition to the school library, Ms. Dow had a small classroom library, and allowed children to take books home with them freely throughout the year. However, this year, her goal was to expand her families' access to books beyond the four walls of the school building. The public library system located in the district had a substantial number of books in many of her students' home languages, which Ms. Dow knew was critical for supporting her students' literacy development, yet was more than she could provide in her classroom. Ms. Dow knew that many of her families faced two main limitations to their access to the public library system: language barriers and a lack of a permanent address or government identification. This year, at Back-to-School Night, in addition to providing information about story times and other recurring early literacy activities in the area, she also provided stacks of library card applications. Alongside three volunteers from the school's parent organization, Ms. Dow helped new families fill out the form with the information they provided. The next morning, she stopped at the library on the way into school where staff processed all the applications for her. She returned to school later that day with a stack of brand-new library cards—ready to hand out to all her students on the first day of school.

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Author Biographies

Dr. Patricia A. Edwards, a member of the Reading Hall of Fame, is a Professor of Language and Literacy in the Department of Teacher Education at Michigan State University. She served as a member

of the IRA Board of Directors (1998–2001), as the first African American President of the Literacy Research Association (formerly the National Reading Conference) (2006-2007), and as President of the International Reading Association (2010-2011). Her most recent book *New Ways to Engage Parents* is the winner of the 2017 Delta Kappa Gamma Educators Book Award. She can be reached at edwards6@msu.edu.

Dr. Kristen L. White joined the faculty of Northern Michigan University as an Assistant Professor of Education in fall 2018. Interested in how young children are labeled as particular "kinds of readers" and embody imposed reading identities, Dr. White's research interrogates how materials in the form of prescriptive curricula and assessments, policy, and space operationalize young children's literate identity in early childhood classrooms. She can be reached at krwhite@nmu.edu.

Lori E. Bruner is a former elementary school teacher, reading specialist, and ESL interventionist. Lori's research focuses on word characteristics in early-grades text that impact young children's fluency development and how these factors can help educators support their students while learning to read. She is currently engaged in doctoral studies in Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education at Michigan State University. She can be reached at lbruner@msu.edu.



AMPLIFYING STUDENT VOICES

2019

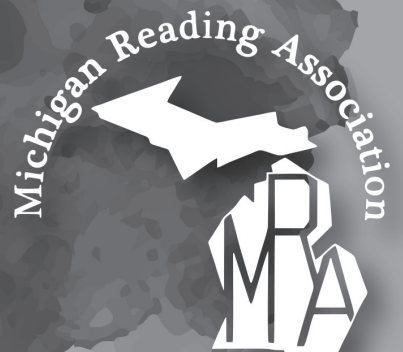
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ADD YOUR JOURNALS:	
<i>The Reading Teacher</i> For educators of students up to age 12	<input type="checkbox"/> \$18
<i>Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy</i> For educators of older learners	<input type="checkbox"/> \$18
<i>Reading Research Quarterly</i> The leading journal of literacy research	<input type="checkbox"/> \$18
SUBTOTAL OPTION 3: _____	

OPTION 4: 25-YEAR

25-YEAR Membership	<input type="checkbox"/> FREE
<i>Requirements:</i> Discounted rate applies to Members with 25 years of continuous Membership, regardless of retirement status.	
ADD YOUR JOURNALS:	
<i>The Reading Teacher</i> For educators of students up to age 12	<input type="checkbox"/> \$30
<i>Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy</i> For educators of older learners	<input type="checkbox"/> \$30
<i>Reading Research Quarterly</i> The leading journal of literacy research	<input type="checkbox"/> \$30
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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Zip/Postal code _____	Country _____	E-mail _____ Telephone <input type="checkbox"/> Work <input type="checkbox"/> Home

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