



“We Feel Connected... and Like We Belong”: A Parent-Led, Staff-Supported Model of Family Engagement in Early Childhood

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Abstract

Although researchers and practitioners have acknowledged that family engagement in children’s schooling occurs in many forms, most studies and program efforts continue to focus primarily on school-based participation, or the *school-to-home* link. Embedded within this notion of family-school partnership is the reification of a power differential between teachers (the experts) and parents (the learners) that assumes if parents only apply themselves to learn the socialization practices of the schools, their children’s outcomes will improve. However, this approach does not recognize that for many low-income, ethnic minority and immigrant families, sociocultural and language differences between families and educators make this school-to-home flow of information and influence fraught. Cultural misconceptions and hierarchical power structures often preclude educators from accessing potentially powerful information about home-based practices and routines, families’ experiential knowledge, and other aspects of children’s out-of-school lives. Such information-seeking attitudes and practices could form the basis of engaging and meaningful family engagement programming, as well as translate into culturally-sustaining curriculum that reflects children’s everyday lives in the classroom. By disrupting the existing power structure, seeking to cross cultural boundaries, and framing family engagement as emphasizing information flowing from the *home to the school*, Head Start staff and parent leaders, as illustrated in the description of this pilot program, made a shift in their expectations for how families can contribute to their children’s school readiness and success. They sought to build a culturally inclusive and welcoming environment for all. This paper will describe their work together for the benefit of other early childhood practitioners who seek alternative ways to engage with families.

Keywords Family engagement · Sociocultural diversity · Immigrant families · Preschool · Head Start

Core to its mission, the Head Start program¹ embraces family engagement as a critical part of its dual-generation approach and national role in ensuring educational equity for children living in poverty (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2015). In recent history, the K-12 education system also began to turn the spotlight up on family engagement through policy revisions to Title I funding, which now requires that all public school districts across the US hire dedicated Family Involvement staff (U.S. Department of Education 2002). As many of us working with and within these systems know, though policies can certainly

spur the change they seek to bring about, they are insufficient to sustain it, and reality often falls short of the aspirations. Day-to-day demands of teaching; lack of appropriate time, resources, and formal supports; the seeming intractability of systems; and the many divides that exist between families and educators all present myriad obstacles to fulfilling policy mandates. In the case of family engagement policy and programming, without a parallel infusion of professional development support, teachers and programs will likely continue to do “more of the same,” albeit, perhaps with increased vigor in a context of increased accountability pressure (McWayne 2015).

Regrettably, when these efforts do not yield the outcomes hoped for, factors internal to families themselves often are held responsible rather than the structures and ideologies that perpetuate the status quo. Educators are vulnerable to making assumptions about families and assigning blame to them (Crosnoe 2020). For example, a teacher might attribute

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an apparent lack of family engagement to parents' own lack of resources and time or to psychological factors (as revealed in all-too-common statements beginning, "they don't have... they don't care..."), when what is really needed is an understanding of family engagement as situated within contextual, societal, and cultural realities that create disparities for children and families who live outside the mainstream or dominant (i.e., White, middle-income, monolingual English-speaking) culture. Yet, there are other ways of looking at ineffective family engagement programs, as do scholars who situate school practices in the context of broader social power differentials across class and race (Calabrese Barton and Tan 2020; Lareau 2003; Wilson 2019). As these scholars assert, the ways in which classrooms normalize the socialization practices of dominant groups contributes to existing power differentials. Thus, the problem is not in the practices of minoritized families, but in their position within a stratified society's power structure that devalues their socializing practices. Highlighting the need to recognize how these power differentials are reified in educational settings, Yosso (2005) notes how community cultural wealth is often unrecognized, unacknowledged, and under-utilized. Mis-location of the problem leads to deficit-oriented thinking in contrast to strengths-based understanding. In addition, it focuses efforts on family engagement that are uni-directional and school-centric rather than bi-directional and family-supportive. In the former case, schools dictate what counts as family engagement. Conversely, in the latter case, meaningful family engagement is co-determined and enacted jointly by families and educators/programs.

Given this state of the practice, policy mandates for family engagement exist in tension with the capacity of teachers, families, and programs to fulfill them, while many families continue to fail to see themselves represented in the beliefs and practices of schools. There is an urgent need for re-orienting and re-conceptualizing effective family engagement (McWayne 2015; McWayne et al. 2019) and for providing specific supports to program staff to *try differently, not harder*. For example, although researchers and practitioners have acknowledged that family engagement in children's schooling occurs in many forms, most studies and program efforts continue to focus primarily on school-based participation, or the *school-to-home* link (McWayne et al. 2019). We recognize that some efforts to "get parents to the school" seek to redress power differentials by exposing parents to the ways of the school and by giving them valuable information about how to best engage their children's learning at home (Delgado-Gaitan 1991; Hill 2010). However, embedded within this school-to-home concept of family-school partnership is an assumption, made both by families and schools, that the flow of knowledge and expertise from the school to the home translates into "effective" home-based engagement. This may well be the case sometimes, but the

fact that the home-school partnership involves a power differential between teachers (the experts) and parents (the learners) is problematic for many reasons. The main loss in this primarily one-way flow of information is knowledge about the sociocultural assets that exist in children's homes and out-of-school lives. Furthermore, as stated above, significant power gaps between home and school settings can make this school-to-home flow of information and influence fraught (McWayne et al. 2018a).

A Home-to-School Approach for Grounding Home-School Partnerships

In this paper, we describe a pilot program implemented in an urban Head Start center serving culturally diverse families. The strengths-based, home-to-school approach guiding the present work was designed to help educators overcome barriers to accessing potentially powerful information about home-based practices and routines (Weisner 2002), families' funds of knowledge² (Moll et al. 2005, pp. 134–136), and other aspects of children's out-of-school lives that could form the basis of engaging and culturally-meaningful family engagement programming (see McWayne et al. 2018b). While acknowledging that there can be great value in the kinds of school-based activities and outreach typically represented in early childhood programs, this approach attends to the significant needs that still exist with respect to developing educators' ability to establish intentional, enduring structures for connecting to the rich resources of children's homes and communities for purposes of enhancing their practice with diverse learners (Hong 2019).

In partnership with an urban Head Start program, we set about to support Head Start staff in considering different ways of engaging with families, such that their practice could build upon the everyday knowledge, expertise, and resources that immigrant families have and are eager to share in order to make the school experience more relevant and meaningful for their children. Our basic thesis was that a home-to-school approach is needed if we were going to accomplish this goal (McWayne et al. 2019). Whereas the traditional school-to-home approach is reflected in mainstream notions of family engagement that tend to focus on school-based participation or home extension activities of a curriculum, our home-school connections approach was different in that it emphasized the *home-to-school* flow of information. To be sure, this required nothing short of a paradigm shift. Yet, by framing family engagement as emphasizing this re-direction of information flow, Head Start staff made this shift in their expectations about how to engage families while building a culturally inclusive and welcoming environment for all families.

Core Principles of a Home-to-School Approach

In essence, a home-to-school approach calls for re-conceptualizing the parent-educator relationship. In this project, we based the shift in mindset and practice around three core principles that we referred to as “mantras,” because they served to focus us and inform every aspect of our work: *Parents are Equal Partners*; *Learning Builds on Familiar Knowledge*; and *Culture is What We Do Everyday*. These core ideas are derived from our larger project’s overarching approach to professional development based on the process of co-construction (see McWayne et al. 2020a). Co-construction is conceptualized as a process of *mutual and reciprocal engagement by researchers, teachers, coaches, and parents* to develop curriculum that empowers teachers and incorporates home and community funds of knowledge. The process of co-construction implemented was based primarily on key assumptions derived from models of collaborative university-community partnerships (see Fantuzzo et al. 2006)—that every member of the working team has expertise to offer and that relational dynamics need to be non-hierarchical. The principles are also based on sociocultural conceptualizations of joint endeavors that underscore the significance of shared goals and mutually responsive discourse to build shared understandings (Cole 1996; Rogoff 2003; Werstch 1985). Communication and shared efforts always involve adjustments between participants (with varying degrees of asymmetry) to stretch their common understanding to fit with new perspectives in the shared endeavor. Fidelity to these assumptions ensures that the processes as well as the outcomes build on the strengths of individual members of the working group and that the product that emerges is one that is jointly created and greater than the sum of its parts.

We think of the family-school relationship as a true partnership among experts (*Parents are Equal Partners*), whose purpose, in this project, was to learn about children’s everyday lives and cultural practices (*Culture is What We Do Every Day*), and then use this information to co-create more inclusive family engagement programming and classroom activities (*Learning Builds on Familiar Knowledge*) (see McWayne et al. 2020b, for more on this approach).

By *Parents are Equal Partners* we envision a relationship among equals, where teachers contribute their expertise in curriculum and learning, while parents are uniquely positioned to share about their children’s home routines/customs and families’ own knowledge. Although teachers can tap some information about home practices by asking children themselves, parents can share richer

and more in-depth information. Family engagement of this sort becomes a source of ideas for teachers, and in this approach, the number of ideas counts more than the number of “heads” attending a school event (Mapp and Hong 2010). In fact, parents do not need to be physically present at school to contribute their expertise. They can do so from home (as illustrated below) in myriad ways consistent with an early childhood education approach.

Learning Builds on Familiar Knowledge refers to the purpose of this home-to-school reconceptualization as it makes it possible for teachers to learn about a diverse range of home-based practices, connect children’s familiar knowledge to classroom routines and learning activities, without necessarily speaking children’s home languages (an unrealistic expectation in the growing number of multilingual classrooms across our nation). Thus, we see the potential for *all* teachers to build on children’s familiar knowledge by respectfully observing, seeking information, and co-constructing knowledge with the families of children in their classroom. This reconceptualization provides new hope for teachers in school districts across the US, and the potential for creating a more welcoming environment for many families who, as recent immigrants, hail from a wide range of countries on every continent.

The mantra *Culture is What We Do Everyday* reflects an understanding of culture as the ideologies and belief systems shared by a cultural community that are represented in daily actions and routines adults are involved in with their children (Weisner 2002). Simply put, culture is embedded in all that we do; families’ and children’s everyday activities are cultural in nature. Therefore, learning about the familiar day-to-day experiences of children with their families becomes a concrete and direct way of accessing the experiential knowledge of children who come from cultural communities that are different from a teacher’s (McWayne et al. 2020b). In order to accomplish the objective of linking new learning to what is truly meaningful to children and fostering a sense of belonging in the classroom for every child, we must leverage the diversity in children’s everyday lives for learning and develop different strategies to access this information from families.

A home-to-school approach that incorporates all three core principles (mantras) does require a new conceptualization of parents as sources of critical information, and not merely as reinforcers of what teachers do in the classroom, as well as the recognition that children learn best when they can connect what happens in the classroom to their experiences outside of it with meaningful others. These ideas formed the basis for the collaboration between researchers, parents, and Head Start staff described below.

Illustration of A Parent-Led, Staff-Supported Model for Family Engagement in Head Start

Context and Program Setting

This pilot project was part of a larger professional development and curriculum development effort conducted with forty classrooms across an urban Head Start program that participated in a randomized controlled trial (RCT) study. The participating program in this aspect of the work served as a pilot site for the home-to-school collaboration approach, to then inform efforts in the larger project, but was not a part of the RCT (for more information on the larger RCT study, see McWayne et al. 2021). We were interested to document how home-school collaboration, based in the three core ideas described above, would evolve in this particular center.

Some description of this program and its children and families is warranted. The Head Start program for the present pilot project in 2018–2019 (the year this project was implemented) served 164 children across seven classrooms. Fourteen percent of children experienced a full-day program, and 86% experienced a half-day program. Six percent of children were two-year-olds at time of enrollment, 37% were 3-year-olds, and 57% were four-year-olds. Seventy-six percent of families with children enrolled had incomes below 100% of the federal poverty line or were receiving public assistance (four of these families were homeless). The remaining 24% of families had incomes that fell within 200% of the federal poverty line. With respect to race and ethnicity, according to the program's annual survey data (i.e., Program Information Report), 23% of families identified as Asian, 47% as Black or African American, 35% as White, 2% as biracial, and 3% as other. Twenty-one percent of these families reported their ethnicity as Hispanic. In a majority of homes (71%), a language other than English was the primary language spoken. Twenty-two percent of families spoke a Middle Eastern or South Asian language, 16% an East Asian language, 12% Spanish, 10% a Central or South American indigenous language, 9% a Caribbean language, 1% an African language, and 1% indicated other.

Getting Started

To begin, the home-to-school approach and the accompanying three mantras (i.e., *Parents are Equal Partners; Learning Builds on Familiar Knowledge; Culture is What We Do Everyday*) were introduced to the director, education supervisor, and two family advocates. During these initial meetings, the staff expressed that they were eager to

implement a parent-led, staff-supported approach within their program as they were looking for ways to more effectively engage with their Head Start families. They were particularly looking forward to involving parents directly in the planning and implementation process. After agreeing to the broad goal, these program leaders then shared the approach with the other Family Engagement staff and asked them to communicate the information about the opportunity to be involved with their respective classroom parents. Parents then spoke their interests to their Family Advocates and volunteered to attend an informational meeting to learn more about the project from us. At the end of this informational and recruitment process, four Head Start staff (two who were immigrants from Morocco and China, respectively, and two who were US-born and White) and four parents (three who were immigrants from China and one parent who was an immigrant from Brazil) consented to join our collective effort.

Starting with an initial orientation to the home-to-school approach in mid-January, the project was aimed to launch and implement during the spring term (from late January to mid-May). During an initial orientation meeting, the four parents (termed, *Parent Leaders*), three Family Advocates, and one Education Supervisor attended. The home-to-school approach was again introduced and the four research team members emphasized that parents and children's day-to-day experiences are valuable resources for classroom curriculum. Family advocates and the education supervisor emphasized how they wanted to learn more about families' lives and stories. Because children's learning builds on their familiar knowledge, we explained that parents can contribute to their children's learning as equal partners by sharing such information. After a short presentation, parents talked freely and shared several ideas about how to bring children's home lives into the school building. The group discussed specific ways that teachers could learn about children's homes: (1) through a Family Day, where families would be invited to their child's classroom to share their family's traditions and occupations; (2) through a Family Collage, where the family members could create pictures of their neighborhood, weekend activities, and what children see and experience every day; and/or (3) through a Family Journal, where the family could write in a journal about what they do with their children everyday.

The question was then posed to the Parent Leaders: "How can you involve a larger group of parents at the center in this initiative?" Parents and staff immediately thought about the program's Coffee Hour, a monthly occurrence that happened to be scheduled for the following week. They agreed that this Coffee Hour provided an appropriate time and means to engage other parents, as the coffee hour was already scheduled, advertised, and was part of the existing program's structure. The group

posited that it was a space where interactions could occur naturally rather than like other types of formal meetings, which might be uncomfortable for some parents. The issue of language diversity was raised, as this program served a linguistically diverse population. Parent Leaders thought that parents often chose not to participate in Coffee Hour meetings because they did not feel comfortable speaking English. Then, as a group, they came up with an idea: to create “Home-to-School Information Sheets” around a specific topic (see Fig. 1).

In considering what would be a fruitful first topic to explore together, the group engaged in an extended conversation about “family traditions” and decided to make it the first topic at the next coffee hour. The term “traditions” was defined to include meaningful aspects of family life beyond the more common national or religious celebrations often seen represented in schools or family engagement efforts. By broadening the definition of traditions, researchers intentionally nudged parents to move beyond the “tourist” approach to culture towards the project’s mantra that *Culture is What We Do Everyday*.

The group set to work on co-creating this first Home-to-School Information Sheet, with the goal that it would be distributed at the Coffee Hour to parents in attendance. Parent Leaders volunteered to describe the project and the home-to-school approach to other parents with support from staff and the research team, who offered to translate

the Home-to-School Information Sheets into several languages represented at the center (e.g., Chinese, Portuguese, Arabic, Spanish). See Fig. 1 below.

The First Coffee Hour

The first coffee hour was deemed a success by Head Start staff and Parent Leaders. The family advocates and education supervisor expressed that they were surprised by how many parents participated in the initial event and acknowledged that Parent Leaders’ efforts to engage other parents had made the difference. One family advocate mentioned that when parents saw other parents presenting as they walked by, they became interested in and joined the Coffee Hour (see Fig. 2). Another family advocate, not involved directly in the project, reflected surprise to see a roomful of parents intensely engaged and “having fun.” In general, Parent Leaders’ reactions were consistent with this, and they reported enjoying involving other parents. Parents in attendance also reported concrete personal benefits from this activity. One parent commented, “I was very shy due to my language. I don’t speak English that well. But the Home-to-School Information Sheet helped me to *show* other parents what I did rather than have to *explain* what I did with my child. It was more effective, and I was happy to share my story.” Parents who attended the Coffee Hour also appreciated having flexibility to complete the Home-to-School Information



Fig. 1 Informational fliers advertising the Coffee Hour topic were posted in the front lobby of the center, and parents were encouraged by their family advocate to attend. At the end of the meeting, attendees were encouraged to take a Home-to-School Information Sheet and

complete it with their child in their home language and/or through the use of pictures (photos, magazine cut-outs, drawings, etc.). In this round, the focus was on family traditions, defined as regular activities or routines the family does together



Fig. 2 Parent Leaders present to other parents during the monthly Coffee Hour, a time which previously had been mainly a one-way informational gathering of very few parents. Parent Leaders describe and ask parents for their participation in the pilot program

Sheets in their home language, if this was more comfortable, and the option to use a variety of visuals—e.g., their own or their children’s drawings, magazine cut-outs, or photos.

Parents in attendance were then asked to take extra Home-to-School Information Sheets to at least three other parents they knew in the program who could not attend the Coffee Hour, because the group wanted to see if they could reach an even larger group of parents. In this way, the family participants in the first Coffee Hour created a

snowball effect, and the activity became a program-wide activity. Soon, Home-to-School Information Sheets became ubiquitous at the center. Based on what one family advocate observed, more and more parents asked about the sheets (whether they attended the coffee hour or not). Over the next couple of weeks, the sheets began rolling in, and the Parent Leaders and Head Start staff were excited to see the response. They decided that making the sheets available program-wide would be beneficial and created a display in



Fig. 3 These Home-to-School Information Sheets were made accessible in clearly visible and high-traffic areas of the center

the lobby of the center for all families to have access to the activity (see Fig. 3). Staff posted completed parent worksheets in hallways, which encouraged other parents and their children to want to share their home information. Parents and children returned their sheets to the child’s classroom teacher, their family advocate, or the education supervisor to add to the displays.

Not only were parents excited to share more about themselves, but children were eager to share their stories in the classroom and became liaisons of the activity in many families. For example, if parents forgot to bring the sheets back, children brought home the pages to fill out with their parents; then, children brought them back to the classroom and proudly shared them with their teachers and peers. Children’s engagement prompted teachers to make “sharing time” part of their daily classroom routine (see Fig. 4 below).

Importantly, this first Coffee Hour demonstrated to the group that *indirect* involvement was possible and the means accessible. Even though parents might not be able to attend due to their work schedule or other constraints, they could

still participate in the program activity and their participation was valued.

Building on Initial Efforts

This additional success fostered further excitement among the group, and the Parent Leaders and Head Start staff decided to add another topic to their information-seeking. In a planning meeting, Parent Leaders provided rich information about navigating different cultural communities between home and school (e.g., summer trips to their home countries), and launched a new theme, “Family Activities across the Seasons.” This theme also gave parents an opportunity to share experiences about different climates and ways of life in their homelands around the world. Home-to-School Information Sheets were once again shared across the program and returned directly by families at drop-off or pick-up, or by children to their classroom teachers. Following the seasons topic, Parent Leaders wanted to share their favorite recipes or foods from their cultures. Parent Leaders and staff discussed together how to co-develop the next Home-to-School



Fig. 4 Children are depicted sharing their completed Information Sheets with their teachers and peers during Morning Meeting

Information Sheets to access this information, and they proceeded as before, and were met with a similar response both times.

The group then decided to take things a step further. In a subsequent planning meeting, the group thought together about how what they were learning from families and children could connect to what was coming up next in their curriculum. The education supervisor shared that in addition to the student show-and-tell that was occurring during Morning Meeting, after reviewing the sheets, some teachers immediately made it part of their classroom activities. For example, the information from the sheets on “four seasons” and “favorite cultural dish” were topics that fit well with their spring semester cross-curriculum themes: Planting and Plants We Eat. Teachers were able to use the sheets that children brought from home to describe different seasons and seasonal activities related to planting and food. See Fig. 5 below for sample completed Home-to-School Information sheets.

By the beginning of May, having only begun in late January, over 130 sheets were collected for a student body of 110 at the time (this number of children enrolled reflects attrition that occurred from time of enrollment the prior fall to the spring term). Although some families completed several sheets, this was a surprising total number collected and represented a majority of the children enrolled. Parent Leaders

attributed the high participation to a few strategies: asking parents about everyday activities they do with their children or together as a family; encouraging the use of visual media as an option instead of only writing; and creating opportunities for parents to complete worksheets at home with their children if they could not attend the Coffee Hours in person. At the end of May, all worksheets were assembled into a bound “Community Book” that the center displayed at the front desk for everyone to see. The following fall, a copy of the Community Book was placed in each classroom for teachers to utilize based on different topics in the curriculum.

Parent and Staff Reflections on the Pilot Program

At the end of the school year, Parent Leaders shared their experiences during an in-service professional development workshop for teachers across Head Start programs in the city who were part of the larger RCT study. Overall, they expressed how the Coffee Hour activity provided a tremendous opportunity to connect parents and Head Start staff. Below is a summary of the reflections they shared with the larger group:

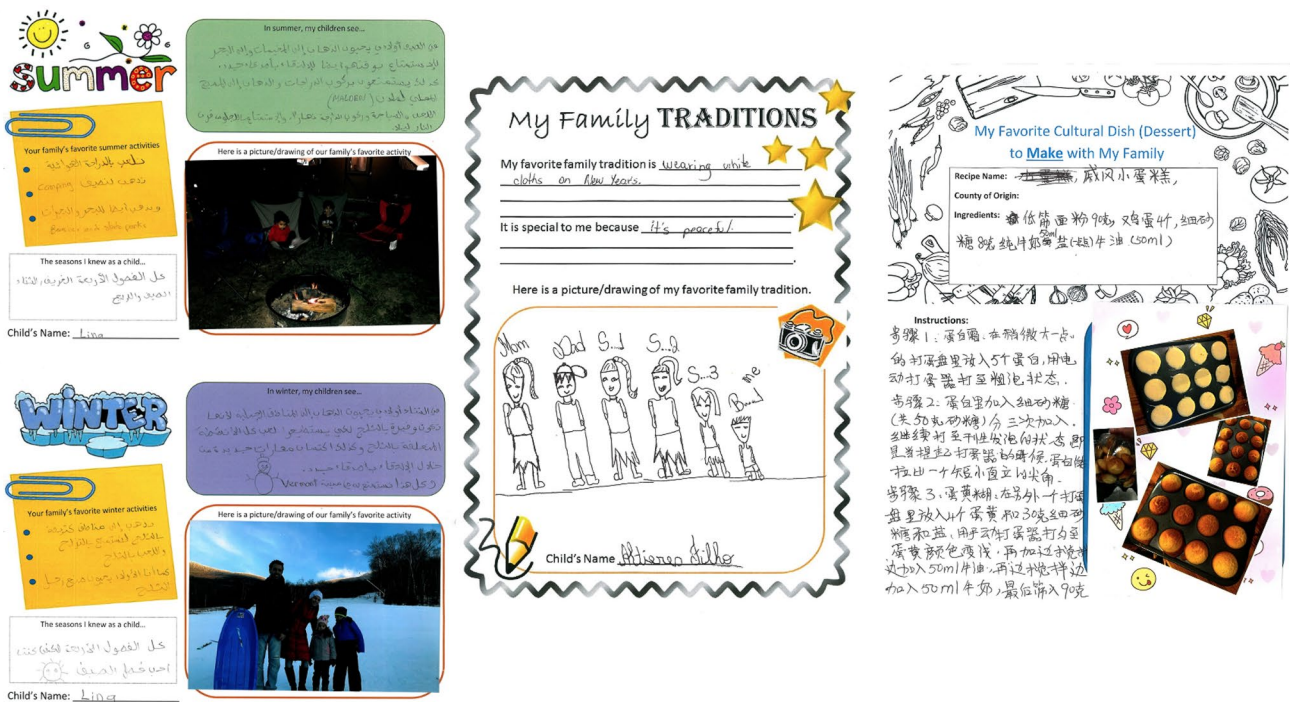


Fig. 5 Depicted below are sample Information Sheets, jointly created by parents and staff and completed by families and their children, describing family traditions, seasonal family activities, and favorite cultural dishes

(1) The Home-to-School Information Sheets gave teachers the opportunity to learn more about children and each family's everyday practices, regardless of family work schedules and/or the ability to attend the Coffee Hour and/or other program events. Furthermore, teachers felt supported by parents in their outreach efforts and saw how their students became curious to learn about each other's home lives. They posted the homemade depictions of daily family practices on classroom walls and hallways for everyone to see, which further reinforced the value of their home-to-school work and built a more inclusive community within classrooms and the program as a whole.

(2) Teachers and parents reported that children became more excited about their schoolwork, as they were eager and proud to present to their classmates the Home-to-School Information Sheets they completed with their parents at home. Children eventually became ambassadors of the home-school connection for parents who could not make it to Coffee Hour. One teacher mentioned, "Other classmates became interested in doing the activity sheets [synonymous with Home-to-School Information Sheets] in their own homes with their parents [after seeing their classmates sharing their stories in class], which helped teachers connect more children's stories to the classroom."

(3) Home-to-School Information Sheets opened a door for some parents to engage with the school system for the first time, through a visual activity that did not require English fluency. One parent participant shared, "As immigrant parents, sometimes we feel a bit shy to interact with teachers, other parents or staff as we are sometimes afraid to speak English. However, sharing the activity sheets does not require to speak too much English and we could still share our stories." Parents found the Home-to-School Information Sheets a fun, creative, and accessible way to share their stories.

(4) Parents who attended the Coffee Hour appreciated the new sense of connection with the larger parent community that emerged from participating in a well-attended, activity-driven, parent-led event. Those who attended the meetings also valued the opportunity to practice their English skills which, in turn, helped them to connect with other parents outside of their own language group. One parent said, "Before, we used to drop off our children and go home without talking to anyone. Now, we know a lot more parents as we learned about each other by sharing our personal stories at the Coffee Hour. We feel more connected to other parents and feel like we belong in the community."

In addition, one Family Advocate shared the parent-led, staff-supported model, alongside members of the research team, at a regional education conference. The feedback

received throughout the day from audience members showed that the home-to-school approach resonated with many of the attendees who were teachers or administrators from a variety of early childhood programs across the area, many which serve immigrant communities.

Discussion

What we have presented here, by way of illustration, is an alternative way of framing family engagement work that is more inclusive of minoritized families from diverse linguistic, socioeconomic, and ethnic/racial backgrounds. It is a whole-program approach – where family engagement is not just the responsibility of the teachers, family engagement staff, or parents alone – that embodies the notion of *shared responsibility* (Sheridan and Kim 2015). It assumes capacity and strengths among all those involved and builds on existing program structures (e.g., Coffee Hour) and resources (e.g., staff, parent volunteers) (Fantuzzo et al. 2006). Additionally, it is an approach that empowers Parent Leaders and peer-to-peer social supports (Levitt et al. 2005) and engages young children in the family-school connections (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005). Perhaps most importantly, the home-to-school approach as implemented in this program demonstrates that family members' indirect involvement is possible and valuable. In this way, the approach seeks to define representation beyond a simple "head count," as is typical in many family engagement efforts (Mapp and Hong 2010). The experiences with parents and program staff described here show that a home-to-school approach can add a meaningful form of family engagement that moves beyond traditional, school-centric notions about best ways to engage with minoritized families (see Calabrese Barton and Tan 2020; McWayne et al. 2019).

The distinction between "home-to-school" and "school-to-home" may seem more semantic than substantive. After all, in conversation with their children's teachers and other program staff, it is common for parents to share information from the home about changes and events that can affect children's learning—e.g., family moves, travel, illnesses or family loss, new siblings, neighborhood conditions. Although a home-to-school approach recognizes this as important home information that allows educators to keep an eye on children's social-emotional adjustment, the "home-to-school" flow of information that we describe here is of a different nature.

Through simple means of seeking a home-to-school flow of information, program staff made a subtle yet profound shift in their expectations about how to engage families and created a more culturally inclusive early childhood education program. For example, program staff collaborated with parents to ask slightly different questions and for a different

purpose than is typical, because they consider the information families can provide to them to be relevant for their own work (*Parents are Equal Partners*). In addition to asking, “How has your child’s morning been so far?” program staff asked: “What is your child’s favorite family activity? Meal at home? Bedtime story? Person to spend time with?” The first question provides information about the child’s well-being that day, while the second set of questions elicits data about family practices that can be used to make connections within the program. Specifically, asking about children’s day-to-day experiences is a concrete, direct, and efficient way to learn about children’s familiar knowledge to connect that information within the classroom curriculum (*Learning Builds on Familiar Knowledge*). Often, preschool curricula assume that all children are familiar with the same things; for example, a science unit on fruits that begins with apples and pumpkins in the fall assumes that foods that are familiar among mainstream, middle-class families are familiar to all children. However, this might not be the case across diverse communities (Pufall-Jones and Mistry 2019). In a home-to-school approach, a teacher might seek to learn about what children consume at home to incorporate a diversity of plants and foods in their curriculum. In this way, teachers are building culturally relevant curriculum grounded in children’s everyday lives (*Culture is What We Do Everyday*; Weisner 2002). This approach to educational equity turns the tables on who has cultural capital by honoring the cultural knowledge and experiences of children and their families so often marginalized by mainstream society, including in early childhood programs (Lareau 2003; Yosso 2005). Three important implications follow from this approach to family engagement.

When a Program Intentionally and Specifically Welcomes Cultural Variation into the Classroom, It Supports All Children’s Learning

As already stated, children learn more effectively when their prior experiences and familiar knowledge are reflected in the school setting. For White, middle-income children, much about school is familiar. But for non-White, immigrant, and/or low-income children, the typical US classroom may contain many unfamiliar objects (e.g., ‘water table’), routines (e.g., ‘circle time’), and social expectations (e.g., raising your hand to request a speaking turn). In the approach illustrated here, early childhood education programs have a unique opportunity to serve as a cultural, two-way bridge between home and school. Educators can make their own assumptions and routines explicit to parents, while also seeking information about home, community, and the cultural assets upon which authentic curricular connections can be built. The advantage of the home-to-school approach as evidenced in this pilot program was that, in addition to

building trusting relationships between parents and staff—a considerable attainment in and of itself—, teachers began to see how they could use cultural information and families’ funds of knowledge to enrich, extend, and renew their curriculum. Furthermore, they noted increased engagement and motivation when children had opportunities to talk in the classroom about materials they had produced at home with their parents. Thus, in this *home-to-school* approach there is a shift in the direction of information, where everyday routines, experiences, family and neighborhood life flow into the classroom, and can become concretized in curricular ideas and activities, as well as serve as building blocks for more meaningful interpersonal relationships with and among families.

When Indirect Forms of Family Engagement are Offered and Valued, Classrooms Benefit from the Unique Contributions a More Diverse Group of Families Can Make

All too often, the expectations for engaging families feel forced to teachers and, literally, foreign to families. In addition, the field has tended to privilege more direct and school-centric forms of school participation, such as volunteering in the classroom, fund-raising, and the like. There has been much acknowledgment recently that *relationally-situated* and *culturally-situated* engagement efforts are needed. Relationally-situated engagement efforts involve activities planned between educators and families through joint engagement that result in “trust building” (Sheridan and Kim 2015). Culturally-situated engagement efforts ensure their relevance to children’s home and community lives (McWayne et al. 2019). The family engagement effort illustrated in this paper shows the complementarity of a relationally-situated and culturally-situated approach that can occur when parents and staff work together. Although the initial relationship-building took place among a small group of parent leaders and program staff, teachers quickly started to see the benefits of this effort to their classroom practice. Critically, the parent leaders imagined ways that more families could participate without having to be physically present in the Head Start program. By creating multiple opportunities for engagement that were accessible to a broader group of families, overriding common barriers such as language and literacy, by the end of the four-month period the program had almost 100% participation from families.

Teachers Need the Support of Other Program Staff and Existing Program Structures to Meaningfully Engage with Diverse Families

Teachers often feel that unrealistic expectations have been placed on them with no real guidance or structural support

to foster or sustain their efforts. Just as teachers need on-going, regular supports to promote best practices in teaching, they also need on-going supports to effectively and meaningfully engage with diverse families (McWayne et al. 2018b). Program leaders must protect personnel time and physical space for these activities. One possible avenue for doing so is integrating family engagement and curriculum efforts, rather than treating them as separate silos. When investment in family engagement is seen as an investment towards improving curriculum and instruction, it is easier to see the potential of many existing opportunities within program structures to engage families. In this illustration, Coffee Hours provided an appropriate structure for the parent-led, staff-supported initiative. Another structure in Head Start programs includes Policy Councils at the grantee level and Parent Committees in every program. These shared governance bodies can be instrumental to endorse innovative family engagement practices and engage teachers with other program staff directly in reimagining and co-constructing practices that increase educational equity in their classrooms and in the field of early education as a whole.

Challenges to Implementing a Home-to-School Approach

Though a home-to-school approach to engaging families holds considerable promise for promoting more inclusive classroom experiences, qualifications of this approach are important to consider. The present illustration was part of an on-going effort developed with Head Start programs in a large urban center in the northeastern region of the US (McWayne et al. 2021). Head Start, with its two-generational commitment and focus on family engagement as part of its core mission, is perhaps a unique early childhood education context. Furthermore, what works well in a densely populated urban area might not translate as well in a rural program, where families are not as geographically proximate; certainly, in a home-based program, family engagement efforts would need to look different. However, we contend that the fundamental concept of a home-to-school approach is transportable regardless of region, program type, or demographic group, and can be adapted for any context, because it is a mindset rather than a specific set of procedures.

Another challenge to the implementation of such an approach relates to staff and parent turnover. In the case of this pilot effort, the natural turnover of Parent Leaders (due to children aging out of the program) and the unexpected turnover of the director, education supervisor, and a key family advocate, all at once, meant that the work did not continue the following year. Because the home-to-school approach requires a mindset shift, continuity of commitment among the leadership and support staff is key. Had

the project had another year with this group, we planned to work toward sustainability by incorporating the teachers more directly with the effort. This raises another point for consideration: for systems (programs) to change existing practices, especially those that require significant shifts in mindset and practice, the support of an outsider can be catalytic. In the example we have shared, we served as research partners bringing a new way of thinking to the program. Thus, we served as the initial catalysts and in many respects the initial sustainers of the pilot work. A concrete example of this is reflected in the fact that the program staff did not initiate group meetings on their own but rather relied on us to schedule them. Admittedly, this was a short-term project, that evolved over a four-month period. Had we had another year to involve staff at all levels of the program, which we believe is a critical component for sustainability of any new approach, we expect we would have begun to see more structural ownership over the approach within the Head Start program.

Relatedly, we acknowledge that we began the partnership with supervisory education staff and the staff responsible for engaging families, rather than directly with teachers. In a concurrent effort described elsewhere (McWayne et al. 2020b, 2021), we were working directly with teachers to implement a home-to-school approach for creating culturally inclusive science, technology, and engineering curriculum in the context of a randomized controlled trial. The lessons we learned from this pilot project informed the larger effort. In the future, we seek to merge the lessons learned from both approaches (i.e., parent-led and teacher-led) to provide recommendations for family engagement efforts that are program-wide, sustainable, and transportable. This work is currently underway.

Finally, an additional potential challenge is the presence of families representing several language groups in a center. In the present case, program staff could help to translate materials and interpret at meetings. Moreover, between the center staff and parents themselves, the Head Start program had considerable language resources, which might be specific to this particular setting.

Implementation of a Home-to-School, Parent-Led Approach in Other Settings

In addition to the considerations outlined above, there are clear steps a program could follow to commence a similar approach in their own setting. We offer these steps (see Table 1), not as a prescription, but as a general guide to get started. Importantly, shared goals and procedures need to be co-developed by key stakeholders in a program (teachers, families, other staff and leadership) and adapted to fit

Table 1 Steps for implementing a parent-led, staff-supported home-to-school approach

Step	Desired outcome(s)
<i>Setting the stage:</i>	
Ensure support from the program's leadership—center director, education director, etc	Oversight so the effort remains a program-wide one and is not just subject to the initiative of one or two teachers or staff members (although it may begin that way)
Identify relevant program staff who are motivated to engage directly with families and provide protected staff time for the work	A dedicated core group to see the initial work through. A workgroup committed to program change toward inclusivity. Ideally, this group includes parent leaders who are new to, as well as those who are already familiar with, the early childhood program and those who represent a variety of backgrounds
Identify and recruit Parent Leaders	
Select the physical space for joint activities and discussion to occur	A private, dedicated space for the work, free of interruptions
Jointly consider what a home-to-school approach could look like in your program and brainstorm ways to accomplish it. To begin, take inventory of existing parent activities (e.g., Coffee Hour, Curriculum Nights) and consider how they might be infused with a home-to-school approach	Specific ideas for accessing information from families about children's out-of-school lives in both direct and indirect ways (McWayne et al. 2020b). Likely increase in participation and engagement in existing Head Start family engagement activities
<i>Launching the home-to-school approach:</i>	
Set a relatively short timeline and achievable initial goals	A clearly articulated plan and initial ideas for implementing it, reflective of all stakeholders
Engage in broader direct and indirect outreach to families (e.g., snowball outreach in our case). Consider opportunities for displaying home-to-school information for all parents to see at pick-up and drop-off times (e.g., post photos, worksheets in hallways and on walls outside classrooms)	More families become 'participants' in the program, and indirect participation is valued. Expanding awareness of this new form of family engagement so more family members and teachers will be interested in participating. Increased child pride and belonging when they see their families represented
Brainstorm ways to connect what is learned about children's out-of-school lives to the classroom curriculum	Culturally-sustaining curriculum and whole-program involvement (e.g., teachers and children)
<i>Ensuring reflective practice and sustainability:</i>	
Review results, identify challenges, and try out new ideas based on initial outcomes and feedback	A refined plan for moving forward in partnership. A growing sense of shared responsibility across the program
Set a longer-term plan for continuing the work, including recruiting new Parent Leaders for the following year	Concrete plans for sustainability of a home-to-school approach

the unique needs and resources of the program. For more on the guiding principles and co-construction approach employed in the larger project, see McWayne et al. (2018b) and McWayne et al. (2020a).

Conclusion

The parent-led, staff-supported model of family engagement illustrated in this paper reflects the power of changes brought about when parents and program staff take ownership of an approach and take the lead in translating the approach into practice, adapting it to their own particular community context. It is a story about the power of relationships to transform school spaces into sites of inclusion, empowerment, and belonging.

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Authors' Note

1. The Head Start program is our nation's largest federally funded effort to intervene on behalf of low-income children's school readiness (Zigler et al. 2002). The Head Start program originated in 1965 as part of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, a larger effort to mitigate the effects of poverty in the US by providing children ages three to five years old with a range of services. The Head Start program espouses a whole child, two-generational approach to accomplish its aims. Through this approach the program seeks to bolster children's development by providing health, nutritional and educational services to children and their families.

2. Funds of knowledge refers to immigrant families' everyday knowledge, expertise, and resources that can be understood and incorporated to make curriculum more relevant and more meaningful for children.

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