

Why is Family and Community Engagement and Leadership Important?

Engaging families and communities in their visions of education is necessary to creating and sustaining culturally-thriving and academically stimulating places for learning. A wave of research demonstrates that discipline-specific learning - like science education - is more meaningful and engaging to learners when it directly builds from their prior knowledge and ways of knowing and connects to their everyday lives in meaningful ways. Learning occurs in and across the many places Learners go to across a day, month, and year both in school and out. This includes the accumulated forms of expertise and ways of knowing about the natural world of learners' cultural communities.. Connecting the knowledge and practices of diverse families and communities to learning enables learners to recognize themselves and their families as doing science, and disrupts the ways in which science is often inaccurately portrayed as primarily emerging from western intellectual traditions. This expansive view of science is not only accurate and more robust but is central to equity. However this can be new for most educators because many educators have not had the opportunity to engage with science in these expansive ways either. This means engaging families and communities in partnership is critical to transformative and equitable science education..

Many learning environments, such as schools, are required to incorporate family and community engagement in their programs as part of their state and federal funding mandates, yet they tend to rely on outdated and inequitable forms of partnering that can actually disengage many families and communities. This is rooted in a history in which schools were used to assimilate racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse families into the middle-class, White, and heteronormative ideal - this process is referred to as cultural genocide. Cultural genocide seeks to extract and replace knowledge, practices, and values of heterogenous families with dominant ideals. Additionally, families are often made to feel disempowered, racialized, and deficient when interacting with schools. As such, many families refuse to participate in schooling or informal learning environments, but engage in learning and education in their own ways.



- This framework
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- 1. identifies **several models of family engagement** that support or hinder familial & communal thriving and learning across places; and
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- 2. proposes **key shifts** in family engagement that can support transformational partnerships towards familial and communal thriving and learning across places.
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How to use this framework

Learner Sense-Making: Use this framework to elicit family knowledges and practices in instruction. Design activities that purposefully elicit learners' and families' expertise, lived experiences, personal interests, and community practices. This may include facilitating spaces for families to share their interests or knowledge about a particular phenomenon, or space for families to learn together about the histories of places.

Collaborative Practice: Use this framework to co-create a plan with your learning community for intentional outreach to families and communities and opportunities for meaningful engagement at organizational and programmatic levels. Schools and other learning environments have a history of soliciting volunteers as unpaid labor to supplement their needs (i.e., fundraising, collating paperwork, grading homework, etc). Volunteering should contribute to vibrancy of the whole learning environment and be meaningful for the families who volunteer.

Planning and Implementation: Use this framework to design activities and supporting tools for indoor and field-based learning that directly builds on and extends prior knowledge, familial expertise, and wonderings.

Educator Reflection: Use this framework to examine how power, privilege, cultural difference and racialization are occurring in interactions with families and communities as well as how generative moments are occurring and can be supported.

Co-Design and Assessment: Co-plan with other educators and families to transform social systems of power in ways that center knowledges and practices from different cultural communities. Design and use formative assessment tools that help you understand how the diverse perspectives that learners are incorporating in their sense-making of socio-ecological phenomena.

Connections to expert practice:

Increasingly, scientists and policymakers are enacting community based models for ecological management and city planning that build upon the local, traditional, and Indigenous knowledges of families and communities. Families and communities are most attuned to and impacted by fluctuations in socio-ecological systems, and as such have developed reflexive and culturally-situated learning and feedback processes that can be leveraged in participatory monitoring and decision-making. Current school-based, and other formal learning environments, models of family engagement, however, rely on outdated compliance models that do not prepare learners and their families for engaged citizenship in the sciences and in society.

Family and Community Engagement Model

How can we cultivate meaningful engagement and leadership for familial and communal thriving and learning across places?

This framework is intended to support educators, educational leaders, families, and community partners consider the range of partnership models that inform their educational practice. Each model in the diagram below represents different practices, relational qualities, and goals and are steeped in power and historicity in unique ways. Likely, no one partnership model will be sufficient to achieve cultural thriving and learning across places but will require several interacting models across individuals, organizations, and institutions. Use the diagram below to consider your own (or your organization's) partnership models, then use the key concepts that follow to think about how these models represent your personal and organizational values for partnership.

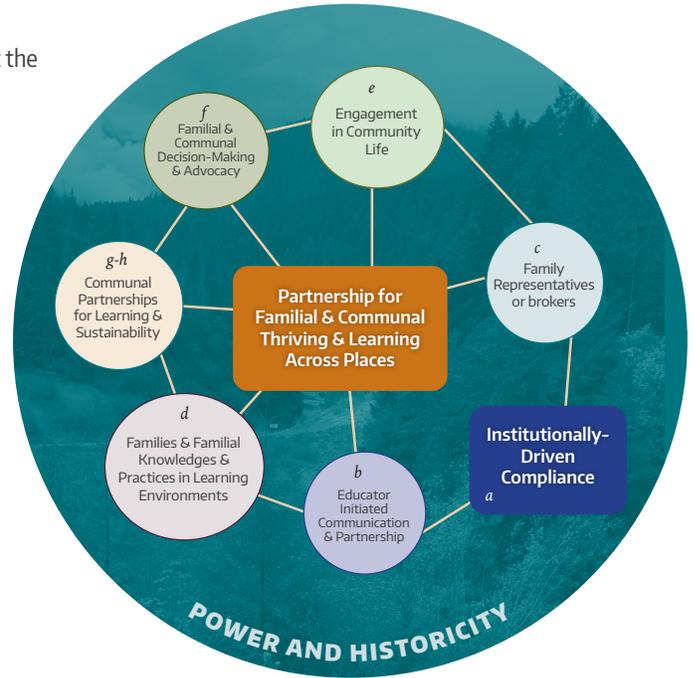
Dimensions Exploring Paradigms, Positions, & Practices



- a. Communications and partnership practices center on familial compliance and policing of institutionally-driven expectations and norms. These institutions, including but not limited to school institutions, reflect powered and historicized dynamics that privilege middle class and western norms. *For example, much of family engagement is driven by school-based compliance that is antithetical to thriving.
- b. Interactions with families tend to focus on “gaps” in familial knowledge or capacity, and seek to fill in those gaps with relevant knowledge or services. Beginning with a genuine desire to know more about families, their cultural knowledges and practices, and how learning can contribute to their thriving are ways to initiate partnership in dignified ways.
- c. Several key families advocate for other families and broker relationships between schools/organizations and families to address systemic barriers, problem solve issues, or offer services in learning environments or events. Sometimes these are representative of cultural and linguistic communities within the school or organization.
- d. Families and communities are engaged in classrooms or visibly represented in the learning and learning environment. Educators and educational leaders know the areas of expertise of the families and their communities in their program/classroom and understand how they can/want to be engaged in the learning setting. Curricula and pedagogy reflects the range of familial and communal knowledges of learners.

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- e. Educators and staff attend community events or go to and learn about the places where families go on their own. Often, educators do not live in the places and communities where their learners live. This can inhibit meaningful or deep connection to the place-based knowledges, practices, and issues that shape learning. Developing communal relationships and engaging in place-based design of learning can support more robust partnerships.
- f. Leadership teams in schools and other formal learning organizations have family and community representation that is reflective of the diversity of the school/organization. Power and historicity is routinely addressed in these deliberation and decision-making spaces to counter historically accumulated power imbalances based in intersectional injustices (e.g., racism, classism, gender normativity, etc).
- g-h. Partnerships with local community centers, cultural organizations, out-of-school programs, civic organizations, and informal collectives of families, are developed and sustained to support learning across the places learners live.



Partnerships with Cultural Organizations and Community Leaders

Many cultural community organizations - both formal (e.g., nonprofit) and informal (e.g., collective of families) - have deep expertise in supporting the cultural identity development and learning with families. Further these organizations often engage in a wide range of content learning from community and culturally based perspectives. However, this may not always be readily articulated because non-profit systems have often positioned intellectual or content specific activity as distinct from cultural activity. Finally, many have educational programs geared to young learners that can be partnered with for both informing instruction in learning environments and field experiences that push beyond singular field trips that engage in visiting or show and tell pedagogies only.

Partnerships with Science, Outdoor, or Garden Organizations and Community Leaders

Many out-of-school programs, community organizations, garden programs, and more (!) have deep expertise in outdoor learning, science learning, and local socio-ecological issues affecting local places, lands, waters, and communities. Further these organizations often understand the complexity of local social systems that science content interacts with. This expertise is invaluable in Learning in Places.

Connections to the Learning in Places Rhizome:

Complex Socio-Ecological Systems: All communities engage in scientific sensemaking of the natural world - though they may not refer to this as “science.” Decisions about socio-ecological systems impact all communities, and most often disproportionately impact marginalized communities negatively. Socio-ecological systems learning and decision-making can expand opportunities for families’ and communities’ concerns and solutions to be centralized in education.

Nature-Culture Relations: Cultural communities have unique nature-culture relations that reflect their knowledges, beliefs, and interactions with the natural world. For immigrant and refugee families, their nature-culture relations may reflect their lived histories in other places. Making heterogeneous nature-culture relations visible and consequential to learning also supports deliberation and equitable decision-making skills.

Field-Based Science Learning: Families have localized and culturally-specific ways of observing social and natural worlds, as well as have criteria for when, where, and how to accomplish goals. For example, many families have robust ways of knowing when to plant/harvest foods and medicines, read weather patterns, and give directions based in field-science practices. Learning about and intentionally connecting to these outdoor activities and practices that families and communities already engage in can make science more meaningful and reflective of learners’ knowledges, practices, and identities.

Power and Historicity: Interactions between families and most educational institutions and organizations are raced, classed, gendered, and powered. These relations have been historically accumulated and are implicit in interactions. Being intentional about learning from and with families is a critical step to addressing power imbalances. Trust, reciprocity, and humility are recognized characteristics of healthy partnerships and should be considered ongoing goals that require constant reflection and redesign to ensure just and equitable partnering practices.



- “All science learning can be understood as a cultural accomplishment.
- Children and adults the world over explore their surroundings and
- converse about the seeming causes and consequences of the phenomena
- they observe, but they are raised in environments with varied exposure to
- activities (e.g., fishing, farming, computing) that relate to different science
- and engineering domains. What counts as learning and what types of
- knowledge are seen as important are closely tied to a community’s values
- and what is useful in that community context [22-25].”
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National Research Council, 2012, p. 284

Key Conceptual Shifts in Educational Practice:

Towards Culturally Thriving Family Engagement Paradigms

Cultural thriving is understanding that each learner, family, and community deserves dignity and educational opportunities for cultivating their communities ways of knowing, being, and doing. This kind of thinking repositions education within a broader drive to support healthy families and communities - as best defined by those communities. Families play an agentic and central role in co-creating culturally thriving learning environments in formal and informal learning environments.

From Institutional Compliance Family Engagement Paradigms

Schools have, historically, engaged families to support school-based agendas and demands, including but not limited to attendance policies, behavior and discipline management, and supporting students' academics. Many informal learning environments mirror this problematic paradigm, by setting the agenda and learning objectives that position families as in need of their services. To note, there is a complex set of systemic pressures (e.g. funding) that make this the normative approach. Increasingly, families are expected to perform school-like behaviors and activities at home, such as helping with homework and setting academic goals or to participate in academically-focused informal learning such as visiting museums, putting children in out-of-school programs, etc.. These practices mirror Western-centric (i.e., heteronormative, White, single-family household) practices and behaviors, further marginalizing nondominant families.

Towards Dignified Family Engagement Perspectives

Educational dignity is the assumption that learning is a process of individual and social transformation that all people engage in throughout their lives, in all communities and contexts, and as undergirded by values, cultural norms, religious beliefs, and the like. Dignified family engagement looks like respectful, reciprocal, and meaningful ways for families to shape school or organization-wide and classroom-specific learning opportunities.

From Deficit Family Engagement Perspectives

Deficit thinking is the assumption - often erroneous- that families and community members are unable to provide rich learning opportunities or that they struggle to make decisions that best benefit learners, particularly with respect to academic success. Deficit thinking, unfortunately, is pervasive in schools and many institutions and organizations that function to fill in "gaps" in family or caregiver knowledge or resources. This may look like a family night where families learn more about specific practices they can do at home to support their child's learning.

Towards Transformational Family Engagement Relationships

Transformational relationships seek collaboration in ways that co-create something new or alter the status quo. All participants bring their unique expertise, experiences, and identities as equal and valued. At times, however, this may mean that power capital between individuals or groups of individuals must be addressed and therefore some expertise, experience, or identities may perceive a loss of power or status in transformative relationships.

From Transactional Family Engagement Relationships

In transactional relationships, schools and other education-related organizations provide services to learners and their families in exchange for familial support and participation in activities. Families are then considered passive receivers of knowledge and tools to support their learner at home. This type of transaction puts educational organizations and their actors in the driver's seat, deciding what families need and how they can be involved in learners education. In some cases, for example, schools have suggested that children whose parents do not support the school in sanctioned ways do not then need or deserve high quality education (Nakagawa, 2000).

Towards Cultivating Heterogeneous Family Engagement Practices

Practices are cultivated that seek to build with and expand opportunities for deep learning in ways that connect to the heterogeneous knowledges and practices of learners, learned in family and community contexts. Educators and families build dignified learning environments that support the cultural identity and disciplinary development of learners, while also recognizing and working to change the deep inequities in education that have privileged singular expertise and knowledge.

From Assimilation and Acculturation Family Engagement Practices

Issues of equality are often framed as individuals not having access to or knowing how to perform dominant knowledge, practices and values. In order to address this issue, some suggest that learners and families assimilate or acculturate to dominant, education-based ways of knowing and being. For example, "parent academies" often serve to help parents navigate institutional systems as they are (i.e., as inequitable). Assimilation is the process of replacing learners' and families' heterogeneous knowledge, practices, and values with dominant ones. In acculturation, diverse families learn and participate in both dominant and diverse practices.



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Suggested Citation

Learning in Places Collaborative. (2020). *Family and Community Framework for Engagement and Collaboration*. Bothell, Seattle, WA & Evanston, IL: Learning in Places.