

## RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE SUMMARY

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### Collaboration Opportunities through Dialogue with Diverse Voices

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This research to practice paper summarizes a qualitative study on an EHS program that utilized a narrative observation process, referred to as *Journey of Discoveries*, to examine collaboration between parents and teachers. *Journey of Discoveries* creates a pathway of collaboration for EHS teachers and parents by capturing children's learning and development through the sharing of narrative observations. *Journey of Discoveries* was an effective collaboration approach resulting in: (a) connection, (b) partnership, (c) building of relationship, and (d) the value of teacher and parent shared understanding.

*Keywords:* Early Head Start; collaboration; partnership; school readiness; learning stories; *Journey of Discoveries*

Early Head Start (EHS) is a family-focused program that provides comprehensive and community-based services to address developmental goals for children from birth to three years of age, including services for prenatal families. Early Head Start is based on the assertion that all children have explicit needs, and children from low socioeconomic families, in particular, can benefit from a comprehensive developmental program (NHSA, 2012). In addition, EHS offers support to parents in their development of child-rearing roles, involvement in school activities and work-related issues, and participation in training programs, while linking families to community resources (NHSA, 2013). An important service to EHS families includes family engagement where the family is the central force in helping prepare children for school and life (ECKLC, 2014). Family engagement involves family members, as leaders, making decisions in their role as primary educators of their children (NCPFCE, 2014).

To support school readiness, it is important that educators understand parental practices and parents' expectations of their children's academic success (Seginer, 2006). Research shows that parents and family members are more likely to become engaged in young children's development and learning when they have positive and trusting relationships with supportive teachers (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). However, teacher perceptions of their relationship with children and parents can impact a child's development (Howes, Phillipsen, & Peisner-Feinberg, 2000). Additionally, the warmth, the level of responsiveness, and sensitivity of the parent can also support healthy development (Chazan-Cohen Raikes, Brooks-Gunn, Ayoub, Kisker, & Fuligni, 2009; Grossmann, Grossmann, Fremmer-Bombik, Kindler, Scheuerer-Englisch, &

Zimmermann, 2002; NICHD 2003; Roggman, Boyce, & Cook, 2009). The role of parents is essential in the school readiness process and educators need to collaborate with parents and work together on the behalf of young children.

Yet, research indicates that educators often do not recognize parent perspectives about education (McAllister, et al., 2005; Robinson-Zanartu & Majel-Dixon, 1996; Tveit, 2009). Teachers who do not have a shared understanding about school readiness cannot effectively collaborate with parents regarding school readiness. Consequently, there is a critical need for teachers to collaborate with parents on the education of children. Moreover, there is limited research that demonstrates *how* educators and parents can collaborate in the school readiness process to ensure student academic success. Often educators want to unite with parents in the education of children, but there is inadequate understanding of how teachers can create opportunities for parents to have an authentic voice and join in collaboration in the school readiness process. It is important that Head Start educators understand parents' perceptions and give parents the opportunities to have a voice in the education of their children, in order to support healthy development and school readiness skills.

This qualitative case study examined an EHS program use of a narrative observation approach, referred to as *Journey of Discoveries*, to document children's learning and development. The *Journey of Discoveries* is used by the EHS program staff to engage parents in school readiness through written and/or audio recorded narrative observations of children's learning experiences. The *Journey of Discoveries* is an innovative observation approach modeled from New Zealand's learning stories formative assessment method and based on the cultural context of the EHS program (Carr, 1998; Carr, 2001; Carr & Lee, 2012). Following the learning stories model, *Journey of Discoveries* observation approach focuses on making visible children's strengths, interests, achievements, their interactions with adults, peers, family, and the influence of their culture, community, and family heritage (Carr & Lee, 2012).

The *Journey of Discoveries* narrative observation approach was used by the EHS program in conjunction with an existing child assessment instrument tool (California Department of Education, 2015). The child assessment instrument is utilized as an observation tool to provide educators with a means to assess children's learning. The *Journey of Discoveries* was used in conjunction with the child assessment tool as examples of contextual evidence to support the assessment ratings while engaging parents as leaders in children's learning.

This study examined the EHS program use of *Journey of Discoveries* and the impact on teacher and parent collaboration efforts to enhance family engagement. This qualitative study investigated the EHS program implementation of this new narrative observation approach to document children's learning as a pathway for family engagement in the school readiness process.

This study is intended to assist EHS program staff as well as local, state and national policy makers, to consider assessment practices that include diverse parent voices and perspectives on children's learning experiences. In light of increased focused attention on Head Start child assessments and learning outcomes, the *Journey of Discoveries* observation approach has the potential to impact policy, reform, and foster authentic dialogue while engaging parents as leaders in children's learning.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Third Space

The conceptual framework of Third Space was used for this study to understand how EHS teachers and families can engage in authentic dialogue through shared written narrative observations of children's learning. This conceptual framework is based from Gutiérrez, et al. (1999) idea that educators can work to promote family engagement in a child's learning process by creating a Third Space. The authors defined Third Space as zones of development that expand student learning. The Third Space creates a neutral place where teachers and EHS parents unite, focusing on the child at the center and celebrating growth and development. Third Space offers an alternative paradigm by changing the arena and increasing the probability of respectful, responsive, and reciprocal interactions between parents and teachers. Through partnership, educator and student analysis of discourse and literacy practices can foster a culture of collaboration where hybrid activities, roles, and practices can lead to productive context of development (Gutiérrez, et al., 1999). Gutiérrez, et al. (1999) propose educators need to be more attentive to the idea of developing Third Spaces in school settings and applying the concept of Third Spaces to the school curriculum and pedagogy, with more intention towards incorporating the student's home culture, prior knowledge, and lived experience.

According to Barrera and Corso (2003) educators need to believe that a Third Space exists. To engage with EHS parents in the school readiness process, teachers must accept that there is no one version of reality, but rather multiple realities (Barrera & Corso, 2003). By engaging with families and sharing multiple voices and perspectives in a neutral Third Space, EHS children are viewed as capable and competent learners. Third Space helps frame the idea of the *Journey of Discoveries* as opportunities for parents and teachers to find an alternate way to meet in a neutral setting through the sharing of narrative child observations. *Journey of Discoveries* was developed to support an EHS program assessment practice, to strengthen teacher and parent collaboration, and to offer the opportunity to see children's learning and development from different perspectives through a Third Space.

## METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research method of a single-case study design (Yin, 2009). The purpose of this investigation was to conduct a case study of three EHS programs use of the *Journey of Discoveries* observation approach and the possible impact on collaboration between teachers and parents. The study interviewed participants from the three EHS programs which consisted of seven EHS staff, including one site supervisor, two home visitors, and four teachers, and eighteen parents.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Finding revealed four central themes, demonstrating collaboration occurred through use of the *Journey of Discoveries*. The four significant themes were identified as (a) connection, (b)

partnership, (c) building of relationship and, (d) the value of teacher and parent shared understanding.

### Collaboration Through Connection

EHS staff and parents referred to their experience using *Journey of Discoveries* as a means for deeper connection, thus, fostering collaboration through the connection that occurred between staff and parents. The *Journey of Discoveries* also revealed collaboration through family engagement in close, personal ways. Opportunities for collaboration became available through *Journey of Discoveries* as staff was able to engage families connecting to their culture and lived experiences. For instance, one EHS staff said,

I think it also shows the parents how we feel about them, the things we write about, the words that we use...shows them our connection to them (T1 at Baby).

I [the teacher] find myself wanting to share the *Journey of Discovery* [with the parents], “Oh, let me tell you”...And then they [the parents] want to read it [*Journey of Discovery*] or they want to hear more about it. So, it’s communication, it’s definitely opened up (T1 at Baby).

### Collaboration Through Partnership

At each of the EHS sites, teachers, home visitors, site supervisor, and parents viewed partnership occurring through collaboration. Partnership included the collaborative efforts that took place through sharing ideas, planning, working, and reflecting using the *Journey of Discoveries*. Furthermore, partnership was considered as being fully present in the moment. This type of partnership fostered respect and care for one another.

Is [it is important] to have parents be on-board as partners with you. And to plan together, to wonder together, to rejoice together. And when parents maybe have concerns, you know, they’ll bring them to me. Or, or if I have concerns, I bring them to them, and it’s a very open-ended relationship. Partnership is how I like to look at it (HV1 at Bambino).

### Collaboration Through Building Relationships

Collaboration occurred through the building of relationships. One EHS staff referenced collaboration transpiring through careful construction of relationships, HV2 at Bebé shared, “Collaboration is a bridge. It—is a—is something we can connect” (HV2 at Bebé). Collaboration can be interpreted as a process that connects EHS staff and parents together, bridging and connecting the partner members together.

It’s like holding hands and being in a circle, so it all goes hand to hand (P1 at Baby).

## The Value of Teacher and Parent Shared Understanding

Both EHS staff and parents valued their experience using the *Journey of Discoveries*. Furthermore, *Journey of Discoveries* was found to create mutual feelings of value and shared understanding about their lived experiences and provided a deeper understanding of the challenges parents face in their daily lives.

Because I'm listen [ing] [to] what they [the parents] tell me [through the *Journey of Discoveries*]. I share that kind of experience [at] the same time...of course, that open [s] one new space between us. You're creating bonding, you know, that kind of affection, or respect, or values, or understanding (HV2 at Bebé).

## CONCLUSION

The *Journey of Discoveries* offers a broader understanding of collaboration between parents and teachers. *Journey of Discoveries* is a representative model of partnership and a novel approach to establishing open, two-way communication between parents and educators, where young children's learning is valued and paramount. This study revealed that EHS teacher and parent collaboration can occur through *Journey of Discoveries*, and it appears to be a promising practice that can lead to enhanced family engagement. Connection, partnership, building of relationships, and the value of teacher and parent shared understanding were central themes identified in this study. Findings indicate *Journey of Discoveries* is an innovative model that captures children's learning and development by generating new pathways for teacher and parent collaboration in the school readiness process.

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