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## **Partnership with Families: Reflective Lesson Planning**

*Dr Josephine Bleach*

Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland  
Dublin, Ireland, 2019

### **Introduction**

Children's outcomes are a product of both home and school with the quality of learning in the home interacting with the quality of teaching in the school in shaping children's development. High quality adult interactions and a challenging and stimulating learning environment, at home and in the services, are central to young children's learning (ELI, 2012). Families play a pivotal role in their children's learning from birth. Home is the place where language, social skills, moral values and citizenship are taught (Macbeth, 1994). Working in partnership with families to provide a learning environment in which young children can develop to their fullest potential is central to good teaching (Bleach, 2010).

This learning activity examines how teachers can work in partnership with families and engage them in supporting their children's learning and development, both at home and in the service. It is part of the Making Literacy Meaningful project, funded by the European Union under the ERASMUS+ Programme, which is developing practically-oriented knowledge in the area of language and literacy development, with a specific focus on addressing the needs, challenges and opportunities resulting from multilingual and multicultural classrooms. More information is provided in our MOOCs

<http://literacymooc.eu/courses/teaching-in-multilingual-classrooms/>; <http://literacymooc.eu/lessons/reading-comprehension/> and website <http://euliteracy.eu/>.

### **Collaborative Learning Opportunities**

Providing enjoyable and interesting opportunities for sharing pedagogy will help improve the quality of the children's learning environment and the adults' interactive styles. However, understanding the different roles families and teachers play in children's lives is critical, if these opportunities are to be effective. The teacher's role is that of a friendly guide rather an expert critic. They have no remit to tell families how to rear their children or delegate to them the obligation to socialise their children to the rules of the school. The most effective approach is for the teacher to listen to families by giving them an opportunity to talk about and reflect on their children's home learning. Then, drawing on what was said,

the teacher can discuss his or her own pedagogy. Ending the contribution with an open question: 'What do you think?' gives the families the opportunity to continue the discussion.

Families have a wealth of information about their children and can make a valuable contribution to assessment practices in schools (NCCA 2009). Learning stories, portfolios and displays can help teachers keep families informed of how their children are doing in school, what they are learning and what is causing them difficulties. Explaining the links between the children's learning and the activities they are engaged in will be important. Families should also have the opportunity of telling their own stories of children's learning with teachers encouraging them to observe how their children interact with and explore their home environment. Involving families in assessment practices builds their capacity and gives them the language, knowledge and skills to discuss their children with other professionals, thereby enabling smooth transitions for their children when they attend other services.

Family-School learning opportunities can be developed under the following three headings:

- *Family Involvement in the Home Curriculum*: Suggesting and/or providing activities that families and children can do easily at home, which will promote a positive home learning environment e.g. spotting shapes on the way home; playing games; reading books; drawing pictures together; discussing current affairs
- *Family Involvement in Schools*: Inviting families in to the school to attend events; observe, talk, read and play with children; prepare and help with activities
- *Home-School Communication*: Involving families in the assessment processes; discussing with families the principles and processes that underpin learning and teaching

The Docklands Early Numeracy Programme (ELI, 2012) is an example of how teachers and families can work together to support children's learning. Each term, play-based activities (Figure 1) and events are developed to support children's learning in a particular area of Maths. As quality interactions (NCCA, 2009) extend not just a child's vocabulary, but also their cognitive, social and emotional development, the home-based activities are designed to encourage families to have conversations with their children around a chosen numeracy topic. When, for example, the curriculum priority was 'Shape', children and families discussed and explored different shapes in the home environment using prompt cards (Figure 1). Opportunities are also provided for the families to participate in school-based activities. Families found that the project helped them to understand what they could do at home to help their children improve their numeracy skills, while teachers felt that it brought staff and families together. To quote one participant, *'They really grasped the concept, reinforced at home and in school. Maths was great fun'* (ELI 2012, 29).

## Activities to Try Out at Home



**Shape language:**  
When children learn language they learn early maths skills which supports their understanding and builds their confidence.

### Exploring and Thinking

Allow your child lots of opportunity to actively explore their environment. These opportunities will support them to develop spatial awareness. Describe the different shapes that they see as they are exploring. As your child is exploring this experience will support them to develop positive dispositions and attitudes towards learning. Try out a shape hunt in your home or when you are outside.



### Communication

Sing songs to your child to support language development and build awareness of the words used to describe shape. Sing the songs on the activity card and use actions. As you sing and use actions you are building children's language through play and supporting your child to make

### Identity and Belonging

Messy play allows young children to make their own marks and symbols, supporting your child to feel valued and allow them explore paint and make marks on paper using their hands. Create handprints of your handprint symbol and one of your child's handprint symbol.



### Well Being

Support your child's well-being by allowing them have lots of play opportunities. Visit your local library and ask the Librarian to recommend books with shapes. Read to your child and point out the shapes you see within the pictures.



(Figure 1: Home Learning Prompt Card)

## Planning for Partnership

Partnership does not just happen. It requires continuous reflection, action, learning and change. For teachers, the ability to reflect on and evaluate one's practice is a key element of developing a professional identity. A good starting point for developing partnership with families is to use the action-reflection cycle (McNiff, 2010; Bleach, 2013) (Figure 1).

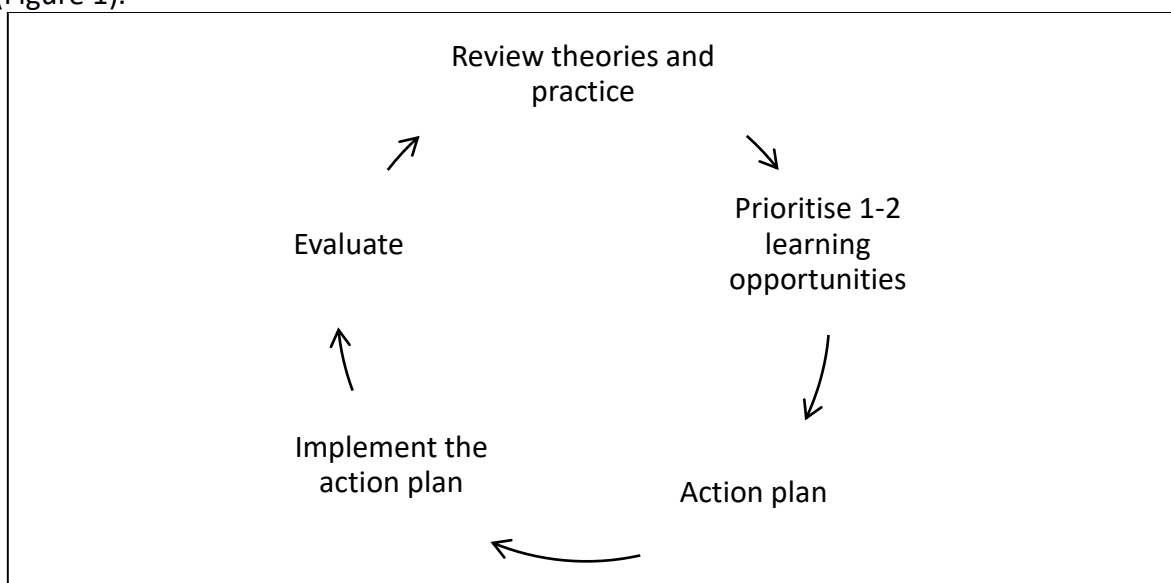


Figure 1: Action Reflection Cycle – adapted from Bleach 2013

The key points of the action-reflection process are as follows:

### *Review*

- Start the action-reflection process by reviewing the theory and practice of partnering with families along with your learning objectives and methodology. Consider various ways you could partner with families. List the approaches that you think would work well and explain why. What are the challenges involved and how could you address them?
- Read *Aistear*, the Irish Curriculum Framework on involving families using the following link:  
[http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum\\_and\\_Assessment/Families/Early\\_Childhood/Aistear\\_Partnership\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Families/Early_Childhood/Aistear_Partnership_guidelines.pdf).

### *Prioritise 1-2 learning opportunities*

- Write a list of all the possible strategies and learning opportunities that you think would work for you taking into consideration the context in which you work and the time available. Make sure that you think about the three categories of family involvement
  - *Family Involvement in the Home Curriculum*: e.g. playing games; reading books; drawing pictures together; discussing the learning activity
  - *Family Involvement in Schools*: e.g. engage families in a learning activity with the children in the classroom and/or on an outing
  - *Home-School Communication*: discussing with families the principles and processes that underpin learning and teaching
- From your list choose one or two strategies, which you think would work best for you in your classroom at the moment. These strategies should involve regular, structured engagement with families.
- List your goals and expected learning outcomes for these activities. These goals should take into account both the needs of the child and the national curriculum and have a focus on the key developmental areas of language, cognition, literacy and numeracy.

### *Action Plan*

- Devise an action plan to implement the strategies you have chosen. The learning opportunities, both home and school-based, along with the relevant resources required to implement these opportunities, should be detailed.
- Informal and formal collaborative learning opportunities should be included. Informal activities will consist of taking opportunities as they arise to talk positively to families about their children's learning. Formal opportunities e.g. Zoom Ahead with Books Project (<http://euliteracy.eu/>), shared reading, numeracy weeks should be scheduled as part of the plan

- List how you will enable and support families to get involved. Many families need a lot of encouragement to engage with the school.
- Having drawn up your plan, reflect on what you are hoping to achieve with this plan. Check that it is realistic considering the context in which you work and the time available to both you and the families you work with. Revise your plan if necessary.

#### *Implement your Action Plan.*

- Put your plan into practice. The first steps will be engaging with families by inviting them to take part. Care will be needed to ensure that families understand what is being asked of them. Teachers will need to explain the activities in simple language and avoid professional terminology and technical terms as much as possible.
- Remember that things do not always go according to plan so stay positive. The quality of relationship building and reflection during implementation is of greater importance than the initial plan. Not only does it improve future plans, but it teaches everyone that there are no experts, only a community of learners working together to improve the educational and life chances of children.

#### *Evaluate*

- After each learning opportunity, ask the families and children what they thought of the experience. Record their comments and your own reflections. What worked well? What did not work well and needs to be changed? Consider if you are still on track to achieve your goals and outcomes. If not, what changes are needed to both the plan and the next learning opportunity?
- When the full plan is implemented, read your reflections on each learning opportunity. List the main things you have learnt from implementing the plan. Compare your learning from this activity with the theories of partnership. Record how your thinking and practices have changed since you began the activity.

#### **Conclusion**

For many teachers, working in partnership with families to support children's learning in the way above is new. For teachers and families to work effectively together, it will need to be embedded in school policy with principals actively encouraging all staff to engage families in their children's learning, both at home and in the school.

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