



# Preservice Teachers Engage Parents in At-Home Learning: “We Are in This Together!”

Lori McKee, Anne Murray-Orr and Evan Throop Robinson

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## Article abstract

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## **Preservice Teachers Engage Parents in At-Home Learning: “We Are in This Together!”**

Lori McKee  
*St. Francis Xavier University*

Anne Murray-Orr  
*St. Francis Xavier University*

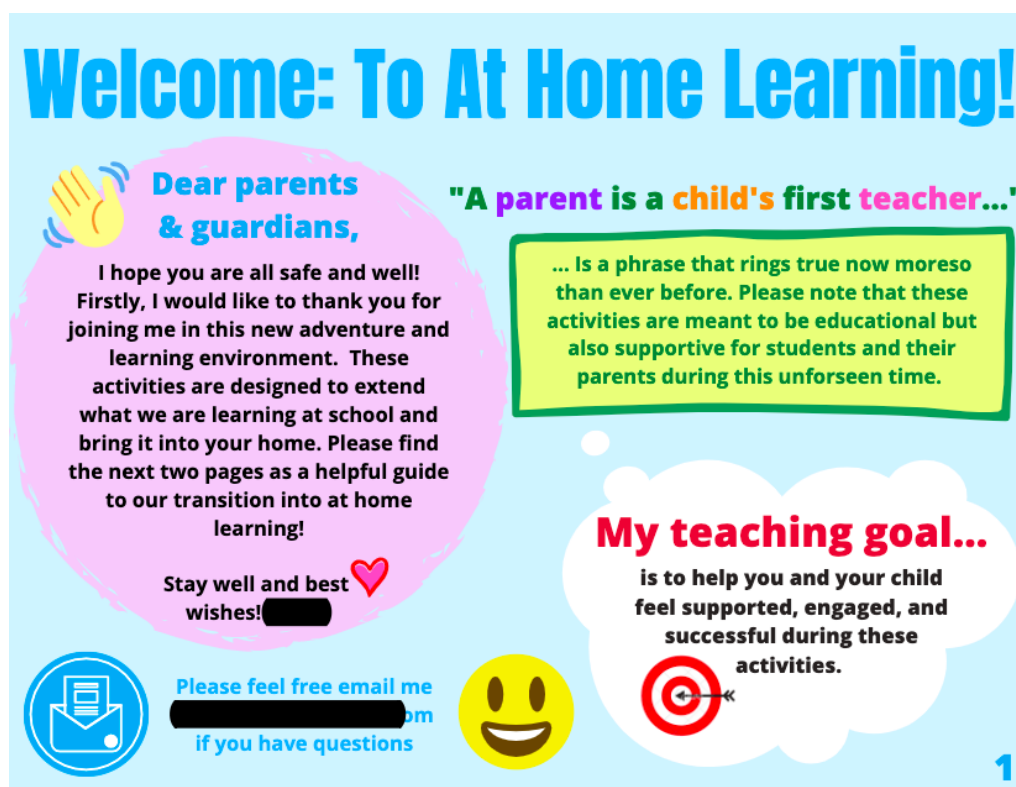
Evan Throop Robinson  
*St. Francis Xavier University*

### **Abstract**

During pandemic school closures, preservice teachers designed activity plans to support the at-home learning of children in early elementary grades and recognized parents as vital to supporting their children’s learning. This article uses data from a multiple case study of preservice teachers’ planning during an alternate practicum. Drawing on models of family vibrancy and parent engagement that arise from funds of knowledge and parent knowledge theories, we highlight how preservice teachers included parents in reciprocal and democratic ways that honoured diverse family’s contexts and their knowledge of their children. Results illustrate the importance of asset-oriented, flexible pedagogies that include meaningful parent partnerships both during and beyond the pandemic.

Figure 1

Marie's letter invitation for parent participation in at-home schooling



"Welcome to at-home<sup>1</sup> learning!" read the headline of the activity plans (Figure 1) preservice teacher (PST) Marie designed to support at-home learning during the pandemic closure of schools in Spring 2020. Marie created these activity plans for Grade 1 and 2 students and their families as part of an alternate teaching practicum that focused on lesson planning and reflection. Through her colourful activity plan format, punctuated with clipart hearts and smiley faces, Marie welcomed parents<sup>2</sup> into the "new adventure and learning environment" of at-home learning. In her greeting, Marie recognized the stressful context of the lockdown for parents, honoured the vital role that parents have in supporting learning, and identified her role as supporting the child as well as the parents. Other PSTs of early elementary students (Kindergarten to Grade 2) echoed Marie's sentiments and recognized a need to include parents in their activity plans because the young children in their classes required support to access, read, understand, and complete at-home learning activities. The PSTs were unsure how to include parents in their activity plans as the pandemic was affecting families differently due to uneven access to resources. The PSTs envisioned their role as supporting parents and students in at-home learning. In her activity plans, Claire invited, "Please feel free to reach out if you or your child have any questions. We are in this together!"

<sup>1</sup> We use the term *at-home learning* to include all learning activities designed by the preservice teachers in the alternate practicum in Nova Scotia. These activities were not only virtual; they also included analogue materials.

<sup>2</sup> Like Pushor (2013), we use the term *parent* to refer to "any person who is engaged in the responsibilities and actions of parenting, whether that person is a biological or non-biological caregiver of a child, whether the caregiving arrangements are formal or informal, permanent or temporary, sole or shared" (p. 11).

In this article, we consider how preservice teachers (PSTs) planned for parent engagement (Pushor, 2012) and honoured parents' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 2005) as integral to the at-home learning activities PSTs designed at the beginning of the pandemic. We examine the range of ways that PSTs included parents in their activity plans for young children in their alternate practicum assignments. Through this examination, we identify implications for promoting parent engagement (Pushor, 2012) in a post-pandemic era.

## **The Pandemic Context**

This study was conducted during an alternate teaching practicum at a Faculty of Education (FoE) in rural Nova Scotia, Canada, in Spring 2020. As with many locations across Canada, in this region, schools closed suddenly on 15 March 2020 (Nagle et al., 2020) when a state of emergency was issued and communities went into lockdowns. In this section, we describe the context for teaching in Nova Scotia and the ways it affected PSTs' work during their practicum from 23 March to 1 May 2020.

This pandemic had particular implications for teaching in Nova Scotia. Amid much uncertainty, inservice teachers hurriedly prepared and followed emerging guidelines related to "emergency remote teaching" (Nagle et al., 2020, p. ii), which began on 6 April 2020. In the transition to at-home learning, there were concerns about children's access to educational services due to the unequal access to technologies and internet across this largely rural province. The Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (NSDEECD) responded and created analogue learning activities and distributed them provincewide through a bi-weekly newspaper circular "to ensure that all students ha[d] access to quality learning experiences" (NSDEECD, 2020, p. 1). Thus, "at-home learning" in the province was diverse in delivery, with some students accessing learning activities electronically and others relying on the analogue activities. The first at-home learning package provided by the Department invited parents to support their children's schooling in new ways saying, "We ... recognize that parents' roles in this learning partnership have changed.... [Educators and parents] can work together to help students stay engaged in learning" (NSDEECD, 2020, p. 1). Although the Department expressed that it valued parents, it did not define the new roles parents should take or how to forge or adapt what it termed partnerships between the home and school in the pandemic context.

This context also held implications for PSTs in the FoE at the small Nova Scotian university where this study took place. With schools closed, PSTs could not begin their teaching practicum in classrooms on 23 March 2020 as planned. In addition, the NSDEECD determined that the unpredictable, shifting, and stressful context created unsuitable conditions for inservice teachers to mentor PSTs and disallowed PSTs from engaging with inservice teachers and/or their students and families. In response, the FoE created an alternate practicum focused on lesson planning and reflection. Details of the alternate practicum assignments are described in the methodology.

The FoE did not require PSTs to include parents in all activity plans (as some students could complete work independently) but encouraged PSTs to identify whether and how parents would be a part of at-home learning. Specific guidance about parent involvement from the FoE included that "out-of-school plans should include all materials necessary for students (and parents/guardians, as appropriate)" and "messages to parents/guardians should be rooted in an acknowledgment that parents/guardians are the first teachers, have knowledge and skills that have pedagogical value, and recognize the strengths that families bring to children's learning" (Faculty of Education, personal communication, March 2020, n.p.).

The FoE also encouraged PSTs to “recognize and honour the context of families in their planning” and “to consider what is realistic for people to do at home” (Faculty of Education, personal communication, March 2020, np) in the pandemic. This guidance reflected the high rate of child poverty in the province, the third highest in Canada (Frank et al., 2020), and recognized the ways at-home learning could disproportionately affect families who are racialized (Nova Scotia, n.d.) or living in rural parts of the province. Relatedly, this FoE guidance reflected the unequal access to digital technologies and internet access in this province, where 70% of homes and businesses province-wide had access to high-speed internet in 2019, with rural areas, including in the areas surrounding the FoE, having less access to internet than in the cities (Develop Nova Scotia, 2019). Thus, the FoE encouraged PSTs to consider families’ unequal access to technologies and the different ways the stressful context of the pandemic might impact teaching, learning, and living.

The FoE designed the alternate practicum to parallel some of the work Nova Scotian inservice teachers were engaging in during the emergency shift to at-home learning. As a result, the NSDEECD’s guidance to inservice teachers and the newspaper circulars distributed provincewide likely influenced PSTs’ alternate practicum work. In addition, PSTs were likely influenced by their own entanglement in the pandemic context; they were isolated from family and friends, and the data is replete with examples of PSTs expressing fear over the wellbeing of themselves and their students. We recognize that the emergency context was inseparable from PSTs’ work in the alternate practicum. We believe there are relevant post-pandemic implications for teachers wishing to work with parents to support early childhood learning. We next outline our theoretical location and the models informing this article.

### **Theoretical Location: Teachers and Parents Working Together in a New Context**

The conditions of the pandemic created a new context that required teachers and parents to work together in new ways to support early childhood learning (Grades K–2). This context required teachers to rethink how they planned to support children during at-home learning; in many instances, the role of parents in supporting learning was foregrounded. The same rethinking was necessary for PSTs in their alternate practicum, as they had to consider how to engage parents in their young children’s learning in this new context which affected families in different ways due to the pandemic’s disproportionate effects on people who are racialized, experience poverty, and/or live in rural parts of the province. The theoretical framework of this article arises from our focus on this need for PSTs to change their approaches to planning.

The pandemic context brought the domains of school and home together in novel ways as learning activities designed by the teacher were implemented by parents within their home. It has long been understood that early childhood learning is not limited to classrooms but occurs in different locations. We draw on Epstein’s (2011) theory of overlapping spheres to conceptualize how learning in early childhood takes place in the overlapping spheres of family, school, and community. This theory appreciates that early childhood learning extends beyond classroom spaces and enables us to consider how, within these overlaps, school and family learning can co-exist. The spheres of home and school can be “drawn together” when teachers include parents in early childhood learning activities (Epstein, 2011, p. 390). We extend this theory to posit that the pandemic context may have created conditions for the spheres of home and family to be “drawn together” in new ways as PSTs designed learning activities to take place at home.

We draw on theories of funds of knowledge (FoK) (Moll, et al., 2005) and parent knowledge (Pushor & Parent Engagement Collaborative II, 2015) to conceptualize the ways

teachers might include parents in their activity plans. FoK theory takes an asset-oriented view that “focuses on students’ competencies” (Volma & Gilde, 2021, p. 2) rather than on students’ deficits. This well-known theory emphasizes the rich diversity of FoK that students gain from their families and communities as “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning” (Moll et al., 2005, p. 72). Further, FoK theory “makes a plea for building on the skills and knowledge that students acquire in their families [and] communities” (Volma & Gilde, 2021, p. 1). In this way, FoK theory advocates for appreciation of diversity in economics, cultures, and family structures and calls teachers to plan activities in ways that celebrate and extend from the differences within. FoK theory is central to our article as PSTs planned activities for children that relied upon parental support but did so in ways that invited parents to use their unique FoK to adapt the learning activities as needed to reflect their varied home contexts.

Parent knowledge theory also informs this article as parents took on different roles in their children’s schooling during the pandemic. Pushor and Parent Engagement Collaborative II (2015) state that parent knowledge, which draws directly on FoK theory, is “the particular knowledge held and used by someone who nurtures children in the complex act of childrearing and in the complex context of a home and a family” (p. 15). They argue that this theorizing of parent knowledge is valuable for educators, enabling them to “see possibilities for honouring parent knowledge, for using it alongside their own knowledge, in the schooling of their children” (p. 14). Just as FoK theory recognizes diversity with children and within families, Pushor and Parent Engagement Collaborative II recognize parent knowledge as diverse and reflective of the unique cultures, experiences, and contexts of parents. This theory is relevant for this article because PSTs intended to work in relationships with parents, which honoured their FoK (Pushor, 2012), and invited parents to use their particular knowledge to make decisions to support their children’s participation in the learning activities PSTs provided during the pandemic.

### ***Models of parent engagement and family vibrancy***

The theories above underpin two models that enable us to explain key features of how PSTs planned to include parents in the activity plans they designed for grades K–2 in the pandemic. The models of parent engagement and family vibrancy highlight the central role of parents and their knowledge in supporting children’s learning and identify the importance of communication between parents and families.

The *parent engagement model* suggests a reciprocal, democratic, and personal way of teachers and families working together to support early childhood learning. Pushor (2012) explains “engagement offered the lived expression of a mutual desire by educators and parents to be in relationship with one another and with children, reflecting an enmeshed or webbed sense of their care and commitment for and with one another” (p. 469). This relational stance on parent engagement promotes a *familycentric approach* (Pushor & Parent Engagement Collaborative II 2015), where “teachers and families jointly set goals for children’s education and learning both at home and at school” and “support families’ efforts to create a learning environment beyond the program” (NAEYC, n.d., n.p.). Barnes et al. (2016) identify that relational parent engagement can be supported through a parent-centred approach to communication, whereby teachers recognize and adapt to the diversity of parents’ needs and communication preferences. This requires teachers to consider the ways that parents’ time, work schedules, finances, and cultural preferences for participating in school activities and/or communicating with the school might influence parent participation (Barnes et al., 2016). The NAEYC (n.d.) agrees and identifies that teachers of young

children should “engage families in two-way communication” (n.p.) that uses different media and formats to invite families to imagine ways to extend their children’s learning beyond the classroom and “share their unique knowledge and skills” (n.p.). Two-way communication contrasts with traditional, “school-authorized” (Preston et al, 2019, p. 556) communication that focuses on a one-way flow of information from the teacher to the home in formats selected by the teacher and at times identified by the school (e.g., parent–teacher conferences) (Epstein, 2011). A focus on promoting the needs/desires of the school (Preston et al., 2019) is inherent in such communication, whereas culturally sensitive two-way communication (Barnes et al., 2016) creates spaces that more evenly distribute power in determining ways to support early childhood learning. The importance of two-way communication in supporting parent engagement informs this article because we consider the potential of the PSTs’ activity plans as a means of communicating with parents.

The *family vibrancy model* (Preston et al., 2019) also recognizes a more democratic conceptualization of teachers and families working together. This model is an asset-oriented approach that “encompasses the belief that every parent, regardless of socioeconomic status, language abilities, ethnicity, religion, employment status, status in life, etc., supports his/her child’s education to the best of his/her ability” (Preston et al., 2019, p. 556). Further, “the family’s vibrancy—such things as the family’s linguistic, cultural, vocational, artistic, social, emotional, spiritual, and ethnic dimensions—are important, valuable resources” (p. 549). The recognition and valuing of the family’s resources or FoK (Moll et al., 2005) “affirm that all families have abundant and valuable experiential or lived knowledge that educators can and should use to support and enrich school–home relationships and parent involvement in school” (Preston et al., 2019, p. 549). Recognition of a family’s vibrancy and FoK can shape the ways teachers invite parent engagement and suggests two-way communication, where both teachers and/or parents can initiate engagement and communication (Barnes, et al., 2016), while at the same time requiring differentiated understanding of parent engagement to meet “the diverse needs of vibrant families” (Preston et al., 2019, p. 559).

Informed by our theoretical location, we inquire into instances where PSTs created familycentric spaces for parent engagement (Pushor & Parent Engagement Collaborative II, 2015) and where parents could use their knowledge and lived experiences (Preston et al., 2019) to make decisions about the learning activities of their children (Pushor, 2017). The family vibrancy model recognizes the complexity and multi-dimensionality of parent involvement in their children’s learning in early elementary grades in ways that are shaped by cultures, economics, languages, and circumstances (Preston et al., 2019). We extend this model as we recognize that navigating the new context of the pandemic created uncertainties as well as possibilities for identifying meaningful ways to support parent engagement (Epstein, 2020).

## **Literature Review: Parent Engagement During the Pandemic**

In this review, we highlight emerging literature on how parents and teachers are working together to support children’s learning during the pandemic. The literature offers differing guidance due to the unprecedented context, but recognizes the importance of parent involvement and identifies a need for enhanced communication and inclusion of accessible resources in learning activities. We review literature discussing the ways teachers included parents in at-home learning and highlight studies focused on supporting early childhood learning during the emergency closure of schools when possible.

The literature identifies the importance of teachers engaging parents in at-home learning activities for young children in the pandemic. Some studies highlight more formal procedures for

engaging parents, and some highlight more flexible approaches. Firmanto et al. (2020) promote an organizational model that “involves parents actively taking the role of tutors for their children at home while the school prepares learning materials with detailed processes and a structured schedule” (p. 100) to support kindergarteners’ achievement on skills-based outcomes. In this formalized model, purported to support “family-school partnership” (p. 100), “learning was supervised and monitored by the teacher through online modes” (p. 101). In contrast, Paul (2020) recognizes parents’ knowledge as integral to supporting at-home learning and suggests educators nurture parent engagement by expanding activity plans to allow parents to make adaptations as needed. Paul (2020) advises that teachers design learning activities using materials often available in the home and “[suggest] alternate materials so all families can easily participate” (p. 11). Epstein (2020) agrees that teachers should consider the materials accessible in the home and highlights the disparity of access to technologies between families. As a result, Epstein (2020) suggests that teachers design activities that can be completed with “old-time tools (e.g., pencils, pens, crayons, markers, paints, and other materials)” (p. 89). This flexibility in materials creates the conditions for parents to make choices in implementing the learning activities with their young children.

The literature also highlights that teachers’ communication with parents has been essential in supporting at-home learning in the pandemic. For example, Epstein et al. (2021) surveyed 15 school district leaders who supported “300 school-based Action Teams for Partnerships” (p. 2), focusing on the ways school districts “were responding to COVID-19 challenges to strengthen and sustain their partnership plans” (p. 1). The survey identified that the pandemic “required teachers to ... expand communication with all parents” (p. 15). Although teachers’ communication with parents had previously been mandated, this took on new urgency as teachers communicated to identify the needs of the family, including access to food and to technologies for supporting at-home learning (Epstein et al., 2021). This complexified the role of the teachers, who were already “overwhelmed by the immediate plans for remote learning, Zoom teaching, and responses to students with no computer at home” (Epstein et al., 2021, p. 6). Communication was often one-way (from school to home) and took place through phone conversations, emails, video conference, e-newsletters, and paper packets initiated and directed by the teacher, although there was also some two-way communication as “educators and parents designed new ways to communicate using high-tech and low-tech” (p. 16). This builds on Epstein’s (2020) work that identified that “teachers must be especially creative to communicate clearly with parents and students who have no computers” (p. 89).

Although the literature on parents and teachers working together to support early childhood learning in the emergency closure of schools is in its infancy, studies concur that parents play a vital role. Cooper et al. (2021) agree and identify that “parental and familial engagement will remain an important focus of a robust school recovery plan after COVID-19” (pp. 97–98).

## **Methodology**

The study took place within a two-year post-degree Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program at a Faculty of Education (FoE) located in a small university in rural Nova Scotia, Canada. As noted above, during the emergency school closure in Spring 2020, PSTs could not return to their scheduled practicum and instead participated in an alternate practicum implemented by the FoE. The alternate practicum was comprised of three phases of assignments that included:



- designing a series of lesson/activity plans<sup>3</sup> for in-school instruction (for pre-pandemic conditions in the grade they had been assigned for practicum);
- re-designing the activities to support learning at home; and
- reflecting on their rationale for the ways they (re)designed these activities.

The detail and length of these assignments varied in relation to PSTs’ year in the program; Year 2 PSTs created more detailed plans than Year 1 PSTs (Throop Robinson et al., in press).

This study focused on these assignments, as completed by 26 elementary PSTs during this alternate practicum. These PSTs had received some instruction about parent engagement infused in their coursework (Epstein, 2013). They had very limited interaction with the parents of their students during the previous practicum in Fall 2019. Therefore, the learning activity plans PSTs developed in the alternate practicum were designed with intentions to open two-way communication with parents whom they did not know and for circumstances they did not fully understand. The assignments within the alternate practicum were not shared with families due to the NSDEECD’s decision not to allow PSTs to work with inservice teachers, children, and families. Although all PSTs completed the assignments in the alternate practicum, participation in the research study was voluntary.<sup>4</sup>

This study draws on qualitative multiple case study methodology (Yin, 2014) and uses document analysis methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). There are two cases in this multiple case, and each is bound by the differentiated assignment given to Year 1 and Year 2 PSTs in the alternate practicum (Yin, 2014). Data sources included PSTs’ lesson planning materials (i.e., written lesson plans, images, hyperlinks to web-based materials, and digital resources), as well as PSTs’ written reflections. Data were categorized by grade level and by subject matter of the lesson plans. Data analysis was inductive. Each researcher independently read data within each case to identify emerging themes and then reanalyzed data across cases to verify emerging themes. The researchers shared the themes they had each identified with one another, looking for areas of resonance and dissonance, and identified that parents featured strongly in the lesson plans created for children in early elementary grades. In this article, we focus on the data from the 10 participants (six Year 1 PSTs and four Year 2 PSTs) who designed lessons for Kindergarten to Grade 2 (Table 1). We share examples from PSTs’ activity plans designed for at-home learning and their reflections on this planning process.

Table 1: PST participants

Case: Year 1		Case: Year 2	
Pseudonym	Grade	Pseudonym	Grade
Angie	Kindergarten	Susan	Kindergarten
Donna	Kindergarten	Rayna	Kindergarten
Carol	Kindergarten–1	Marie	Grades 1–2
Karla	Grades 1–2	Claire	Grade 2
Molly	Grade 2		
Nancy	Grade 2		

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<sup>3</sup> We use the terms lesson plans and activity plans interchangeably.

<sup>4</sup> We gained University Research Ethics Board approval prior to recruitment, and participants were recruited after practicum had ended and when they were no longer in courses with the authors.

## Findings

Through data analysis, we identified four interrelated themes as reflecting the ways PSTs planned to engage parents by honouring their FoK (Moll et al., 2005) in their activity plans. These themes include:

- 1) working toward new relationships with parents in the challenging context of the pandemic;
- 2) offering support and explanation to parents to complete the learning activities;
- 3) taking a flexible pedagogical stance that invited parents to adapt the activity plans as needed and as they were able to support their children; and
- 4) opening opportunities for parents to share ideas with the teacher.

Each theme illustrates the ways the PSTs honoured parents' FoK in their activity plans and reflections and attempted to engage parents through relational approaches. In this section, we describe each theme in turn and use excerpts from the data to illustrate these themes.

### *Creating opportunities for relationships with parents in a challenging context*

PSTs recognized that the pandemic created a new context for teaching, learning, and relationships with families. Within this context, PSTs identified the importance of parents in supporting at-home learning, with Claire reflecting that “parents/guardians will be key players in this out of school learning.” PSTs also recognized that parents' roles in supporting at-home learning would reflect their unique experiences in the pandemic. Donna identified that “some parents/guardians are essential workers facing childcare complications, others have been laid off and are now trying to figure out how to make ends meet, while others' lives remain unchanged. Every family is facing their own stressors.” In this way, PSTs considered that complications arising from life during a pandemic shaped the ways in which parents could participate in at-home learning activities with their child.

This new context for teaching, learning, and relationships influenced the PSTs' design of learning activities. Angie identified the need to consider the child in the context of the family when planning for at-home learning, saying that when teachers design

out-of-school learning experiences for their students, they must reflect deeply on the students who are in their class. This includes thinking about each student's areas where they excel or struggle, their home life and what they need from us as educators.

PSTs considered that part of honouring home context included recognizing what learning materials families had available in the home and planning activities accordingly. Rayna reflected:

A reality for many students who live in rural Nova Scotia is they are living in poverty. This means they may not have a lot of access to technology. Even if families happen to have devices, they may not have enough to share between siblings, or they may not have great internet connection.

Honouring the home context includes honouring parents' roles in supporting learning at home. Donna acknowledged that parents had always been a part of supporting their child's learning in

her letter to parents introducing learning activities, saying, "You were and always will be [your child's] first teacher. You have the knowledge and skills necessary to foster learning within your child." In her letter to parents, Carol explained that the activity plans she prepared in accordance with the NSDEECD guidelines were only a part of the learning experienced in the home:

Students should receive at least five hours a week of scheduled learning and educational time, but it is important to note that education and opportunities for learning can and should continue to extend far beyond these out-of-school learning plans and experiences.

In this way, Carol valued the learning that was already taking place in the home.

PSTs understood that families were affected differently by the challenges associated with at-home learning and would be able to support their children to a greater or lesser degree depending on their family context and in different ways. PSTs wanted to find appropriate ways to work with parents to support their young children's learning. Marie explained, "I decided to create a partnership with parents ... because I wanted to create a collaborative learning environment." Donna envisioned this partnership as tentative and evolving, as she wrote her letter to parents explaining, "I don't have all of the answers, but I will support you [parents] and every student in my class to the best of my abilities." PSTs' attempts to reach out to parents showed their desire to cultivate a relational approach with parents, which suggests that they worked to try to imagine the different perspectives and experiences of parents during this challenging time. PSTs wanted to mitigate the stressful impacts of at-home learning by engaging with parents collaboratively.

### ***Offering support and explanation of learning activities to parents***

With the multiple complexities parents were facing within the pandemic in mind, PSTs designed activity plans that offered support and explanation to parents. Some PSTs planned to offer this support by delivering learning activities to families in different ways, including activity drop offs, postal mail, email, and digital platforms (e.g., SeeSaw or Google classrooms if available) to ensure access. PSTs identified that clearly communicated activity plans could support parents in participating in activities within the stressful context of the pandemic and curated the information they planned to share in relevant ways that could be understood by parents. Marie explained how she selected the information to share with parents:

I ... tried to take off my teacher hat and decide what information was the most important, practical, and helpful in this transition. Parents need to know specific things like how to do it, what we are doing, how long it will last, where we should learn, what we need, and how it relates to what they are learning in school.

As part of the activities designed for at-home learning, PSTs shared the rationales of activity plans and connections to the curriculum outcomes. For example, Susan explained, "I think it is important for the parents to understand why we are doing [these learning activities] ... in a 'big picture' way." Although a few PSTs included learning outcomes directly from the curriculum documents in their plans for parents, most PSTs recognized that the language of the curriculum documents would not be meaningful for parents and mediated this obstacle in different ways.

Some PSTs embedded descriptions about activities while also introducing and explaining key terms in the subject area. For example, in her Mathematics lessons, Rayna explained to parents, "This activity helps students see a number can be broken apart. We have six food containers. If three are full, and three are empty, we still have six! This concept is referred to as part-part-whole."

Susan translated provincial curriculum outcomes into what she termed “parent friendly outcomes” using accessible language to support parents in understanding curricular expectations and the relevance of outcomes for the pandemic context in a learning activity in the subject of Health:

Students will learn about the range of emotions that we as humans all share.

- Students will investigate a variety of emotions such as: happy, sad, worried, angry, frustrated, confused etc.,
- Students will look at different emotional responses to certain events and situations (i.e., being left out of a group, COVID-19 scares).

PSTs shared the rationales for learning activities and their connections to curriculum outcomes in different ways that were each designed to include parents in respectful ways and support young children’s learning.

### ***Inviting parents to adapt the activity plans***

PSTs designed learning activities to promote flexible family involvement and invited parents to adapt the plans as they were able to and as needed. Rayna explained, “The lessons I created are meant to be playful, easy to understand, engaging and something families could take and expand on.” PSTs invited parents to innovate while also coaching parents about the skills that had been introduced in the classroom. In her Mathematics activities, Rayna identified:

- At this age students are working on numbers up to ten. Start small. If you notice your child is understanding five really well, then move to six and work your way up.
  - If your child really loves this game play it often.
- HAVE FUN!!! Children learn best when they are playing!

Susan also coached parents by providing examples of questions parents might ask to support young children’s learning while constructing a diorama of a community for Social Studies:

“Are all families the same?” ...“What is your favorite part about this community and why?”, “How do the people act in this community?” The amount of questions that could be asked are endless, but it would be very beneficial to touch on aspects of different groups, how people would act in those groups and why.

Susan’s suggestions about guiding questions were designed as catalysts for parents to design their own questions.

Other PSTs included different activity options in their plans and invited parents to select the option that would work best in their home. Angie included two options for every activity that would respond to the learning goals identified: one option reflected the way that the activity was done in the classroom, and one was more flexible and reflected the home environment. For example, when describing the “morning message” activity to support early reading, one option included a template for use at home that replicated the classroom practice, and the other option invited parents to use a newspaper or flyer to “read the print ... circle familiar words, capitalized words, and punctuation.” Both options supported early reading skills, and parents were invited to select the option they deemed was more supportive to their child in the home environment. Susan also included an array of activity choices, explaining, “Students and parents can be creative and use whatever method is easier and more enjoyable for them personally.” PSTs also provided

options for parents to simplify or complexify the learning activities provided. For example, Donna suggested that the children help with baking or cooking to explore volume and capacity and explained, “You can do this while mixing juice concentrate and water or putting water into oatmeal, milk into cereal. It can be as simple or as complex as you like.”

In their flexible activity plans, PSTs honoured parents’ FoK by inviting them to innovate and adapt learning activities to support learning at home.

### ***Attempting opportunities for two-way communication***

PSTs’ attempts to open spaces for two-way communication were fraught with challenges because the alternate practicum was comprised of lesson planning activities and reflections, which did not involve sharing these plans with families. Still, PSTs recognized the need for communication and envisioned ways they might open spaces for this with families.

Some PSTs focused their plans for communication with parents on assessment and invited parents to contact them about the children’s learning. In her plans, Claire invited parents to send in completed work for her to assess, saying, “Activity sheets will be handed in to myself, either by email, or by leaving them in the drop box at the school once you have completed all 10 lessons.” Karla invited families to “Snap pictures or write/draw your findings!” and send them to the teacher for assessment. In her reflection, Marie explained that she “decided to make the parents and students my partners in assessment, using self-assessments, check ins, and a checklist to ensure my students were meeting the outcomes” and invited parents and children to provide comments about the child’s learning identifying “something to improve on” and “something they did really well.” These plans for communication imagined a back-and-forth between PSTs and parents by inviting parents to respond in a variety of ways.

PSTs also opened spaces for two-way communication beyond the assessment of children’s learning, spaces where parents could determine when and how they communicated with the teacher on other aspects of their experience of at-home learning. These invitations for communication appeared throughout the activity plans as PSTs invited parents to be in touch with them as needed to support learning, with some PSTs including their email and phone contact information. As highlighted in the introduction to this article, Claire invited, “Please feel free to reach out if you or your child have any questions. We are in this together!” These attempts to be in conversation with parents stemmed from the desire to honour parents’ FoK by asking them, in a relational rather than an evaluative way, what they noticed about their children’s learning, what was going well, and what was challenging.

## **Discussion: Possibilities for Parent Engagement in a Post-Pandemic Era**

In this study, we had unique opportunities to examine the ways that teachers planned to include parents in early childhood learning activities in the context of school closures in Spring 2020. Our focus on PSTs in the alternate practicum yielded opportunities to consider lesson planning and reflection in ways that could not be possible with inservice teachers, who were implementing lessons in an evolving and stressful setting. The nature of the alternate practicum assignments afforded opportunities to examine activity designs as well as the PSTs’ intentions and pedagogical design choices in an emergency context. Although PSTs’ plans illustrate attempts to engage parents while respecting the very challenging, diverse circumstances families were in at the onset of the pandemic, hindsight reveals that these circumstances were often far worse than PSTs, and many others, knew. However, there are relevant possibilities for parent engagement that may be

gleaned from this study. In this discussion, we consider the instances of PSTs honouring parent knowledge (Pushor & Parent Engagement Collaborative II, 2015) and family vibrancy (Preston et al., 2019) as a lens for envisioning possibilities for teachers to work with parents in a democratic way in a post-pandemic era. Building on the work of Pushor and Parent Engagement Collaborative II (2015), we forward these possibilities in recognition of the importance of parent engagement in early childhood learning in times of relative stability, emergency (Throop Robinson et al., in press), and recovery (Cooper et al., 2021). We promote the need for a family vibrancy model (Preston et al., 2019) not solely as a response to the emergency conditions of Spring 2020 but as a lens for viewing “possibilities” (Pushor & Parent Engagement Collaborative II, 2015, p. 14) for relational parent engagement in a post-pandemic era. We pose three possibilities as invitations for educators (PSTs and teachers) to consider and adapt for their settings in a post-pandemic era:

- Consider the child’s learning in classrooms as always in relation to learning in other spheres (Epstein, 2011);
- Honour family vibrancy and circumstances (Moll et al., 2005, Preston et al., 2019); and
- Promote democratic, relational engagement between educators and parents (Pushor, 2012).

In the discussion that follows, we expand on each of these invitations, offering grounding from the theoretical framework with examples from the PSTs. We reimagine these examples for a new context of teaching and learning in a post-pandemic era.

### *Consider the child’s learning in classrooms as always in relation to learning in other spheres*

Parent engagement in a post-pandemic era calls on educators to consider classroom learning in relation to learning at home (Epstein, 2011; 2020). In the early days of the pandemic, the spheres of home and school (Epstein, 2011) were drawn together into closer relationship as schooling activities took place in the home environment. Traditional boundaries between home and school were blurred (Pushor, 2012). These spheres were drawn closer yet in early elementary grades as PSTs recognized the heightened need for what Marie termed “a partnership with parents” since young children could not independently complete the activities designed by the teacher. PSTs took a familycentric approach (Pushor, 2017) to planning as they imagined the child in the context of their “home life” (Angie) and envisioned themselves as providing support to students *and* families, as Donna and Marie explained.

As schooling returns to classrooms, there is potential for the larger overlaps between school and home to disappear and for these spheres to retreat from one another, returning to their pre-pandemic positions. Following Epstein’s (2011) theory that meaningful opportunities for partnership with parents can draw spheres of home and school together, we posit that PSTs’ efforts to create such opportunities could provide ideas for planning learning activities for the post-pandemic classroom. For example, Angie’s familycentric approach (Pushor, 2017), envisioning the child in their particular home context when creating activity plans, could forge links between home and school, creating opportunities to honour families’ FoK (Moll et al., 2005) within the classroom. Similarly, Donna’s and Marie’s visions for supporting children *and* families blur traditional boundaries between home and school, opening opportunities to engage relationally with parents (Pushor, 2015) as partners in their children’s learning. This awareness of the need to engage parents through multiple methods was essential for PSTs’ planning during the pandemic. Although PSTs could not talk with parents in the same room, they planned to communicate in other ways. We see these attempts as expressions of a desire to develop relationships with parents

that moved beyond asking parents to check that homework was done (e.g., Epstein, 2011) toward an authentic two-way communication (Barnes et al., 2016). These attempts offer room for parents to flexibly adapt activity plans and add their own ideas, as the examples of Rayna, Angie, and Susan illustrate in the findings. In addition, the findings show Marie’s and Claire’s plans for options for receiving materials from, and interacting with, teachers. We encourage teachers to find ways such as these to cultivate ongoing two-way communication with parents and to keep parent partnerships at the forefront of their practice in post-pandemic classrooms. We urge teachers to recognize the diverse learners and families in their classes and seek ways to learn about and with families to cultivate a relational learning environment.

### ***Honour parents’ diverse FoK and circumstances***

Parent engagement in a post-pandemic era should involve honouring the vibrancy of families (Preston et al., 2019) by valuing family’s FoK and their diverse circumstances (Moll et al., 2005). Within the alternate practicum, PSTs like Carol recognized parents as “key players” and placed value on learning beyond the classroom (Preston et al., 2019). Carol recognized that children’s learning opportunities extended beyond activity plans, and Donna identified daily household activities like mixing juice from concentrate and making oatmeal as opportunities for learning. In addition to recognizing the home as space for valuable learning, PSTs also acknowledged that the pandemic shaped learning opportunities and the ways parents could support their children. PSTs anticipated that the pandemic would affect families differently, with some struggling financially, with childcare, and/or with health. Further, PSTs anticipated inequities with access to learning materials, specifically technologies (Epstein, 2020; Epstein et al., 2021) due, as Rayna observed, to the unstable internet and high rate of poverty in this rural context. In response, PSTs primarily designed activities using non-digital “old-time tools” (Epstein, 2020, p. 89) that they believed would be available in the homes. While the assignment instructions from the FoE reminded PSTs that parents “have knowledge and skills that have pedagogical value” and guided PSTs “to recognize and honour the strengths that families bring to children’s learning,” we note the innovative ways PSTs designed activity plans that reflected a belief that “every parent supports his/her child to the best of his/her ability” (Preston et al., 2019, p. 549), even when intersections of poverty, rurality, racialization, and pandemic pressures constrained what was possible.

The importance of the family vibrancy model (Preston et al., 2019) for engaging families and their diverse circumstances and FoK (Moll et al., 2005) will endure in educators’ practices in a post-pandemic era. Although pandemic conditions may subside, pedagogies that honour parent knowledge (Pushor & Parent Engagement Collaborative II, 2015) as having “pedagogical value” (Faculty of Education guidance, personal communication, March 2020, n.p.) will continue to be central to enabling relational parent engagement (Pushor & Parent Engagement Collaborative II, 2015). Within their activity plans and communication with parents, teachers can integrate and celebrate the learning that happens every day in the home and outside of formalized learning activities, as Donna and Carol did. They can design activity plans that take an asset-oriented view of families and account for the diversity of resources available to each family (Preston et al., 2019). This view of parents and families underscores the importance of designing learning activities that are responsive to children and families and are informed by the learning context; a one-size-fits-all approach to parent engagement or pedagogical design is limiting. Given the enormous impacts of the pandemic on some families, particularly those from minoritized groups, who may have experienced job loss, economic insecurity, illness, loss of family members, mental and physical

health challenges, and other traumas, the importance of being responsive to the particular children and families in one's classroom is greater than ever.

### ***Promote democratic, relational engagement between educators and parents***

Honouring parent knowledge (Pushor & Parent Engagement Collaborative II, 2015) in a post-pandemic era requires teachers to work toward democratic relationships with parents (Pushor, 2012). Within the alternate practicum, PSTs demonstrated attempts to “work in relationship” (Pushor, 2012, p. 469) with parents and their children. The FoE's guidance to PSTs supported this work by reminding PSTs that “parents/guardians are the first teachers.” Marie and Donna embedded this recognition in their activity plans, with Donna endeavouring to create “a partnership with parents.” Similarly, Claire invited parents into partnership as she explained, “We are in this together!” PSTs intended to work in a democratic and relational way with parents to support young children's learning (Preston et al., 2019). PSTs attempted to dismantle the hierarchies between teachers and parents described in the literature (Preston et al., 2019) as Donna explained to parents in a letter, “I don't have all of the answers” and welcomed parent input, and Marie explained that she “tried to take off [her] teacher hat” to consider what families might need in this new context for learning.

Democratic parent-teacher relationships require opportunities for parents to share their knowledge (Pushor & Parent Engagement Collaborative II, 2015). In recognition of parents' diverse FoK (Moll et al., 2005) and the different effects of the pandemic on each family, PSTs attempted to nurture these relationships by designing activity plans that offered parents and their children a balance of support and choice. PSTs provided support for parents through the creation of what Susan termed “parent friendly plans” that were designed “not [to] add to the current stress load.” In these plans, PSTs provided clear information to support parents in understanding curriculum outcomes (Susan) and what children can do “at this age” (Rayna). Linked to this support were PSTs' invitations to parents to make decisions about the materials used, activity scope, and duration. Although PSTs had not read Paul's (2020) article about planning learning activities for young children in the pandemic, they designed activities with options that, like Paul's, encouraged parents to choose the activity that used materials they had available. In her activity plans, Susan invited parents to “be creative and use whatever method is easier and more enjoyable.” PSTs also invited parents to innovate, such as when Rayna explained that her activities were “meant to be playful, easy to understand, engaging and something families could take and expand on.” Activity plans that provided support and choice honoured parents as capable and knowledgeable partners (Pushor, 2012) while recognizing that not all parents could engage in at-home learning in the same ways.

Although PSTs were not able to speak with the parents in the alternate practicum and “jointly” set learning goals (NAEYC, n.d., n.p.), their intentions were clear: that all parents should have opportunities to speak into the activity plans and make decisions about how they would enact them. PSTs saw parents as more than a tutor responsible for implementing the plans (Firmanto et al., 2020). Instead, in their planning, PSTs positioned parents in ways that both reflected the curricular goals of the school (Epstein, 2011) and welcomed parents' diverse knowledges and lived experiences (Pushor, 2015). It is likely that the ways parents and teachers work together will continue to change as the pandemic evolves and as new contexts arise, but promoting democratic relationships with parents will continue to be a significant factor in children's learning (Epstein, 2011; Preston et al., 2019; Pushor & Parent Engagement Collaborative II, 2015). In a post-pandemic era, we invite teachers to recognize the diversity of parents' FoK and lived experiences



and provide a range of opportunities for all parents to share their knowledge and make choices about learning activities and the ways to enact them. Further, we invite teachers to value parents' observations of their children's learning as informing classroom learning activities. These attempts to work in a democratic and relational way (Pushor, 2012; Pushor & Parent Engagement Collaborative II, 2015) with parents may draw the spheres of home and school closer together (Epstein, 2011).

## Conclusion

We offer the examples of PSTs' attempts to promote parent engagement (Pushor & Parent Engagement Collaborative II, 2015) and honour family vibrancy (Preston et al., 2019) during the pandemic as opportunities to envision new possibilities for working with parents in a post-pandemic era. We have noted the challenges the pandemic has exacerbated for families, with some families experiencing far greater hardship than others, creating barriers for them to engaging in their children's learning. We recognize this reality and that the examples drawn from our data are imperfect and focused on the specific context of alternate practicum assignments designed to support at-home learning in the pandemic. Despite these considerations, we find that these examples nonetheless highlight the importance of teachers taking a pedagogical stance that promotes democratic partnership with parents (Pushor 2012; Pushor & Parent Engagement Collaborative II, 2015) in the emergency context of Spring 2020 and beyond. We invite teacher education programs to identify how they might prepare PSTs to work with families (Epstein, 2013) in ways that promote parent engagement and honour family vibrancy (Preston et al., 2019), recognizing the complexity of parental involvement and the importance of providing multiple ways for all families to be engaged. We invite provincial departments of education to provide more focused guidance for teachers on working in partnership with parents. We invite teachers to embrace a "curriculum of parents ... [in which] the lives of the teacher, children, and the significant people in the child's life are all central in, and inform, the teaching and learning" (Pushor, 2013, p. 10). We—teacher educators, provincial departments of education, teachers, and parents—are in this together; that is, collaborative efforts are needed to forge new paths toward democratic partnerships between teachers and parents that benefit children's learning.

## Author Bios

Lori McKee is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia, Canada, where she teaches teacher education and graduate courses in early childhood and literacies. Her research interests are located within the field of curriculum studies and focus on intersections of literacies, pedagogies, and teacher professional learning. She is currently a collaborator in an interdisciplinary project entitled *Reading Pedagogies of Equity* (R-PEP).

Anne Murray-Orr is a Professor in the Faculty of Education at St. Francis Xavier University, teaching B.Ed. and M.Ed. courses in literacies in the elementary grades and working with families and communities in early elementary classrooms. Her current research projects include exploring preservice teachers' multiliterate identities, middle school teachers' use of culturally relevant and sustaining literacy practices, and the impacts of graduate programs designed for early elementary teachers.

Evan Throop Robinson is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at St. Francis Xavier University. He is a former elementary school teacher and continues to work in the classroom through research activities in mathematics with young children as well as support and supervision for elementary preservice teachers. He collaborates on the Moving Achievement Together Holistically (MATH) project to provide culturally relevant and sustaining learning experiences using verbal and spatial reasoning processes for children from historically excluded communities.

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