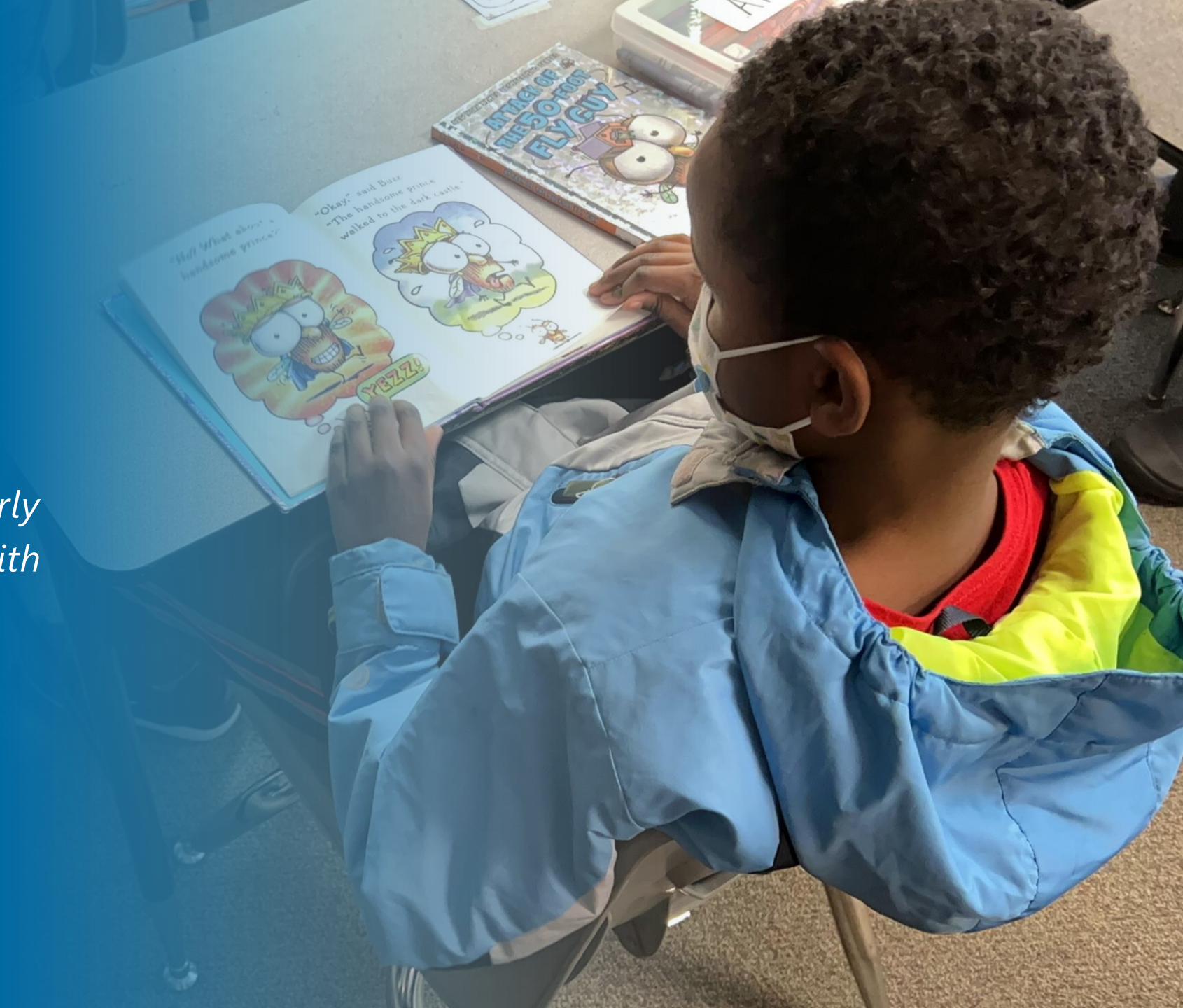


Sustaining Black family home literacy practices:

*Insights from AAMA's Early
Literacy Collaborative with
students, families, and
educators*



Sustaining Black family home literacy practices: Insights from AAMA's Early Literacy Collaborative with Students, Families, and Educators



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Abstract. Findings from the family co-design and student learning sessions outlined in this research report are from the Early Literacy Collaborative (ELC) by Seattle Public Schools (SPS) Office of African American Achievement (AAMA). AAMA's ELC focused on two SPS elementary schools and set out to center justice-focused approaches in identity-affirming, culturally-aligned learning environments, as defined by Black students and families. This work is grounded in a community call to leverage family and community assets, increase culturally responsive instruction, and build parent power (Our Voice Our Vision, Cooley, et al., 2021). This research report serves as a summary of the process, resources, and findings from the 2021-22 cycles of inquiry with students, families, and communities. It outlines the context and process of coordinating with schools, students, and families, and how claims and findings were generated. Findings include claims from students and families around how to deepen school-based literacy experiences, a compilation of home literacy practices, and resources generated from the ELC process. The report concludes with a summary of the finding's implications and reflection prompts for different community and school-based audiences.

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Contents

Introduction

- About this Report
- Early Literacy Strategies
- Call to Action

Methods

- Engagement
- Methods & Design
- Analysis

Findings

- Themes & Practices
- Effort Artifacts

Conclusion

- Implications
- Reflection questions
- References



Introduction



About this Report

The student, family and educator co-design and learning processes outlined in this brief are from the Early Literacy Collaborative by Seattle Public Schools' (SPS) Office of African American Achievement (AAMA). AAMA's Early Literacy Collaborative (ELC) focused on two SPS elementary schools and set out to center justice-focused approaches in identity-affirming, culturally aligned learning environments, as defined by Black students and families. This work is grounded in a community call to leverage family and community assets, increase culturally responsive instruction, and build parent power ([Our Voice Our Vision](#), Cooley, et al., 2021).

See [Initiative Brief](#) for process overview and engagement tools for your school community or department

Office of African American Male Achievement

AAMA was launched to reconstruct SPS and cultivate the strengths of Black boys and teens. AAMA provides strategic alignment, community partnership, student supports and research – improving the system by ensuring students furthest away from educational justice thrive.

 seattleschools.org/departments/aama

Research & Evaluation

R&E collaborates with educators, students, families and community partners – supporting strategies by uplifting the stories of our communities through qualitative and quantitative data.

 seattleschools.org/departments/rea

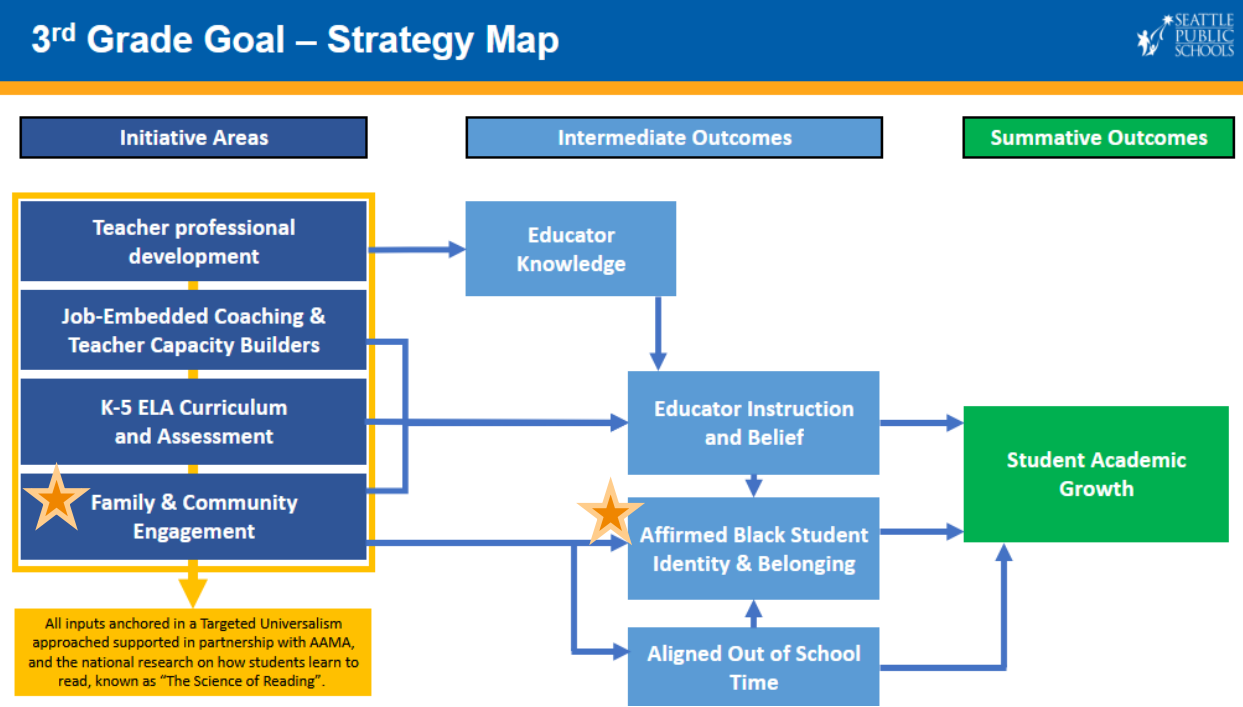
Family Partnerships

Through consultative, coaching, and capacity-building initiatives, Family Partnerships expands school and district capacity to engage with families – improving learning, development, and well-being of each student.

 seattleschools.org/departments/family-partnerships

Strategies in Early Literacy

The Early Literacy Collaborative (ELC) is connected to the district's Third Grade [Reading Goal](#), a K-5 effort grounded in the Science of Reading (see strategy map below), through how it informs a goal outcome grounded in Black student identity and belonging. The ELC also contributes to a goal initiative area that engages families and communities to feel more supported, understood, and as partners in their student's literacy education.



District Initiative Connections

The ELC family co-design and student learning sessions created a deeper level of feedback on sustaining Black student and family literacy practices in the communities of two of the 13 schools prioritized for the 3rd grader reading goal. More broadly, they can contribute to district literacy initiatives that are revising curriculum to center elements of identity and criticality featured in Gholdy Muhammad's (2020) Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy framework.

Beyond the relationships and connections built between families and with educators in these spaces, findings from the Early Literacy Collaborative are also poised to inform third grade goal progress and educator professional learning cycles in the 13 priority schools and beyond.

Literacy is more than just reading at school



Literacy is a collective process and practice that comes most to life when students, families, educators, and leaders are integrated into the work together.

Literacy is not only school-based reading, writing, and problem-solving, but also home- and community-based literacies grounded in culture, history, and language.

Continuing to bring students, families, community members, educators, and leaders together around literacy is an ongoing goal, towards further "developing new routines that prioritize the expertise of families and communities marginalized by educational systems" (Ishimaru et al., 2022).

Methods



Effort Goals

AAMA's ELC engages 3rd grade Black boys and their families at two schools in co-design and learning cycles alongside educators. This effort aims to increase direct literacy supports by uplifting home routines and environments that sustain joy in learning and strong racial and literacy identities.

Emergent Co-design and Learning Session Inputs

- **Student learning sessions** on literacy approaches and school relationships
- Family **co-design** on culturally responsive literacy practices
- Family **engagement support** and literacy knowledge

Initial Outcomes

- Home-based literacy routines in instruction
- Improved routines for family engagement
- Expanded literacy support to students
- Connections to educator professional learning routines in ELC and 13 priority schools

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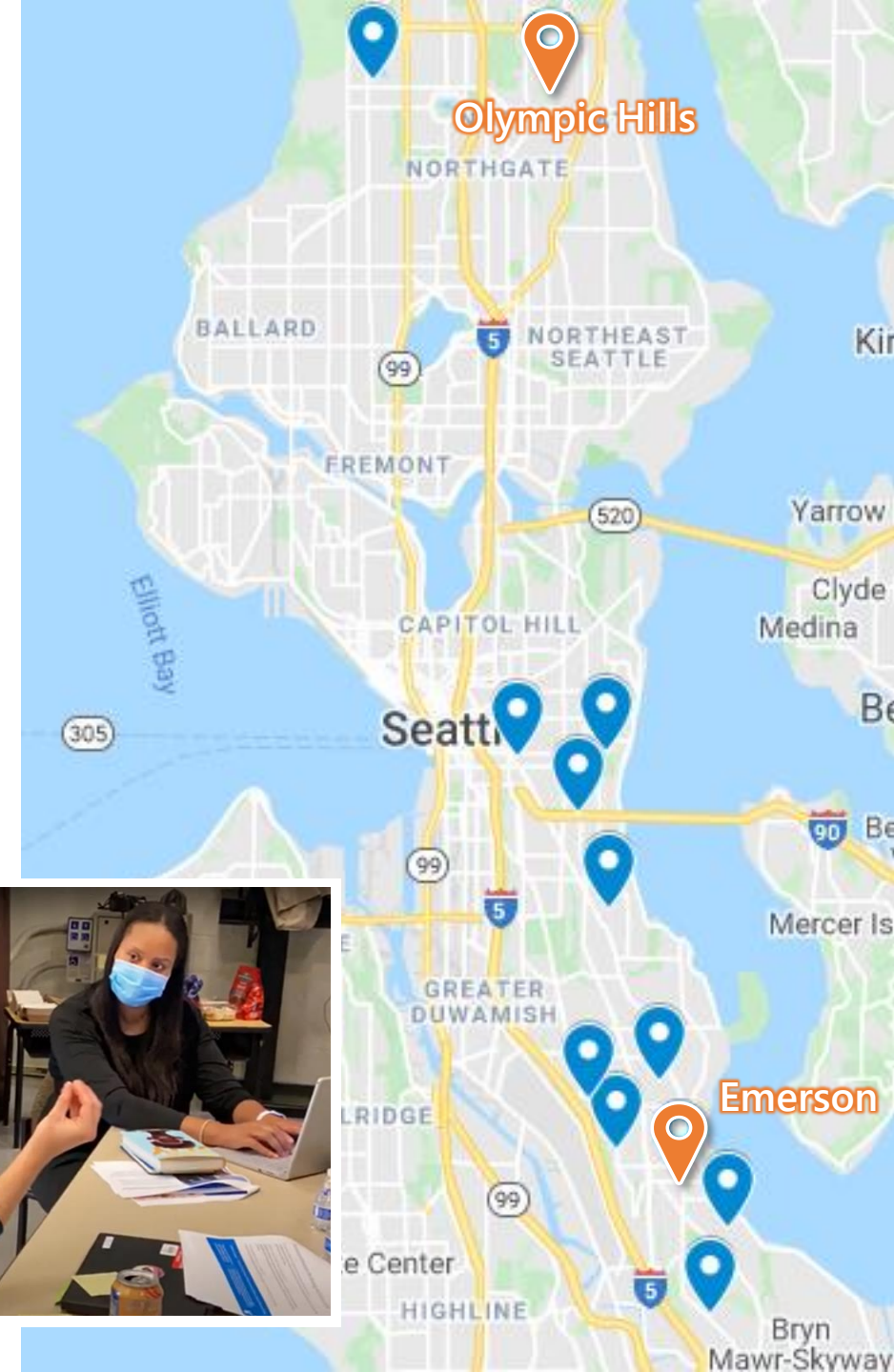
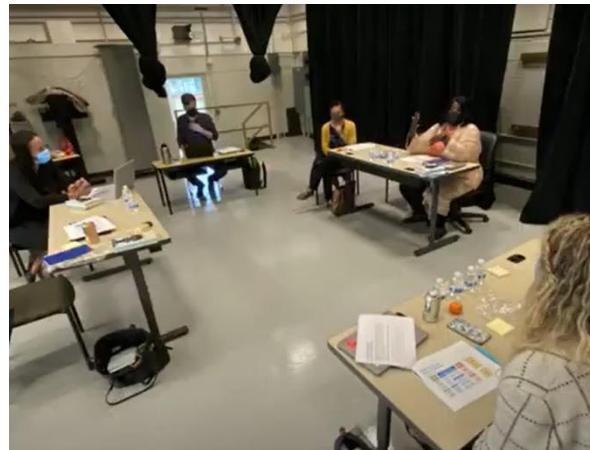
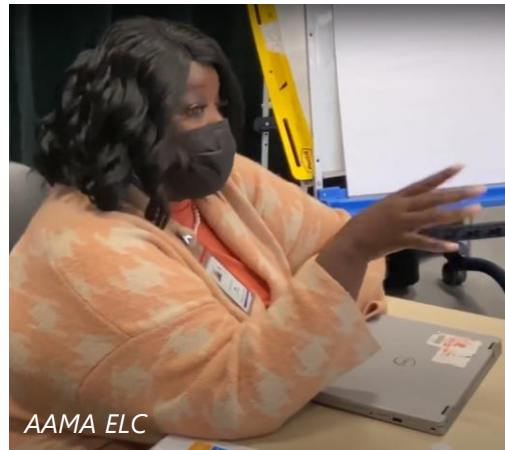
Together, we are in solidarity with you, committed to the long journey of transformation and power shifting. We are here for our Black students who represent the African diaspora. We are here for a healing and student-centered conversation that honors the insights from our families. The Office of African American Male Achievement is grateful for the opportunity to support stronger bridges between homes, school, and collectively envision what an educational environment looks like for our students to thrive.”

- AAMA Facilitator

Engagement

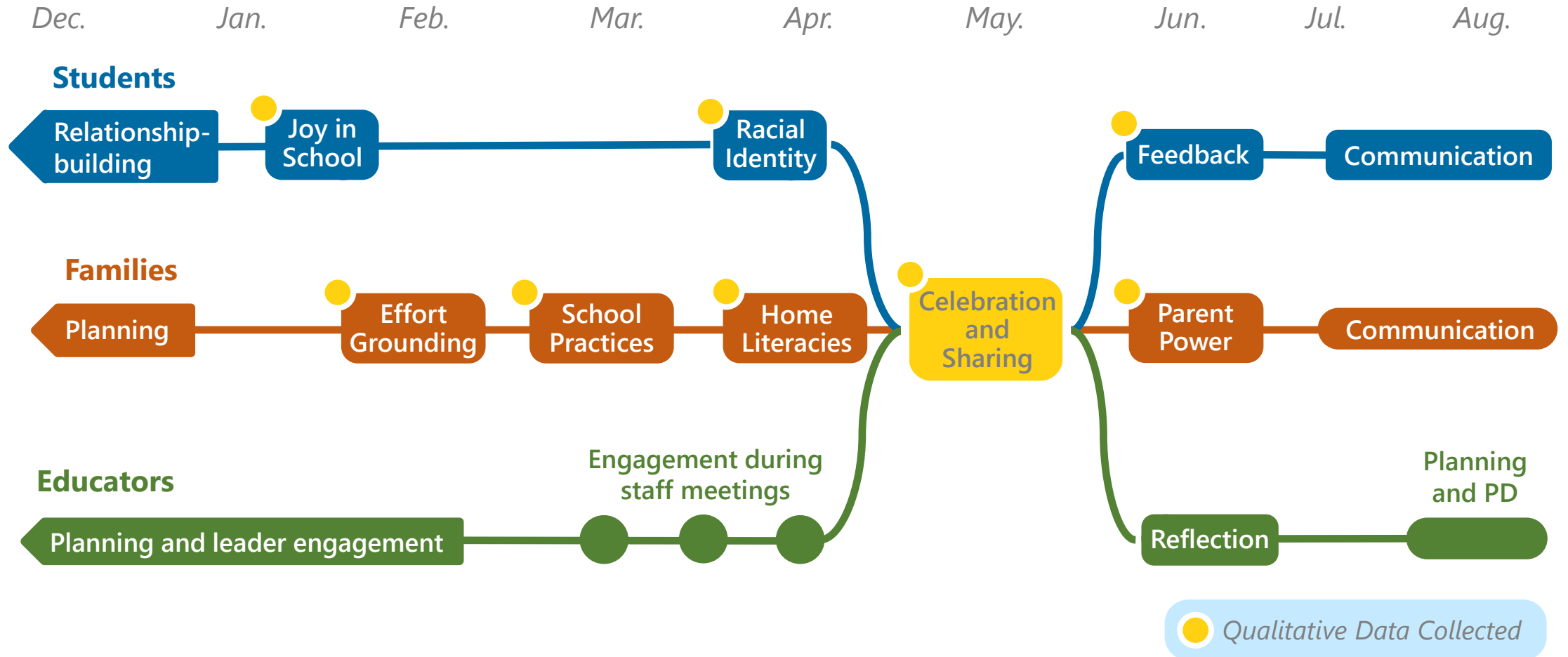
In August 2021, two of the 13 schools prioritized for the third grade reading goal were selected as ELC partners based on school leadership, racial equity work and strong relationships enabling us to engage deeply during a year of transition back to in-person.

Team AAMA coordinated with school leaders, educators, and community members to develop a right-size timeline for schools, families, and students that allowed for both community-building and collective learning within and across the groups.



2021-22 Engagement Timeline

A nine-month timeline depicting the ELC student, family, and educator engagements



Driving Questions

Early Literacy Collaborative efforts with students, families, and educators were driven by the following two guiding **research questions**:

- What learning experiences, family and community resources, and educator practices support the development of critical early literacies, particularly for boys of African descent?
- How can educators partner with families and communities to foster joyous, critical literacy across a school system?

Student Learning Sessions

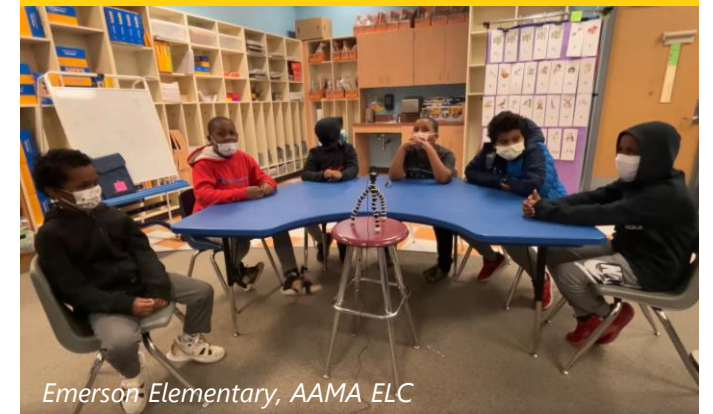
For the student learning sessions, 27 third grade boys of African descent at Olympic Hills and Emerson participated in three 30-minute focus group sessions held over the course of the spring hosted by two AAMA facilitators. Student self-identified racial and ethnic identities included African American, African, Ethiopian, Ethiopian American, Somali, Filipino, and Chinese.

These learning sessions were designed to offer space for students to reflect on their experiences with literacy at school, and particularly through the lenses of culture, language, and history. Student reflection questions, some of which can be reviewed in the appendix of our ELC [Initiative Brief](#), were designed to mirror the questions being asked of parents in the family co-design space.

“

The reasons that y'all are here today is because in our school districts, we are focused on third grade reading and as adults, we think we know how to do it best, but we know that y'all know – y'all know what's popping, y'all know what's going to be cool, what's going to work. So, we'd just like to ask y'all a few questions and we want y'all's fiery, fiery truth, whatever your truth is: just tell us.”

- AAMA Facilitator



Emerson Elementary, AAMA ELC

Family Co-Design

The family learning series was conducted by the Office of AAMA as a family-driven participatory co-design. A co-design is a method for addressing educational problems of practice by collectively designing innovations that address them (Roschelle & Penuel, 2006). It brings together community, educators, and researchers in a way that addresses top-down power dynamics in education and invites a collective approach into addressing areas of social equity (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Ishimaru et al., 2018; Bang et al, 2010). This family co-design was focused on identifying and sharing home literacy practices, and culminated in a session that brought in educators from both schools to learn from family expertise and practices.

Due to community COVID levels, the family and then family-educator gathering space was hosted online and attended by families of 3rd grade boys of African descent at both schools, AAMA facilitators, Research & Evaluation support, and district leaders and instructional staff. Over the 5 monthly gatherings lasting for between 75-90 minutes each, 25 parents from backgrounds including multigenerational African American and East African communities participated, with some families attending for all sessions and some for just one. Language breakout room and translation support was provided in Amharic, Tigrigna, and Oromo as needed.

“

We're here to learn from families, build community and uplift home traditions, approaches, and settings that have been particularly nurturing and supportive for our Black boys to inform strong practices in the classroom, cultivate sustaining connections among parents and among families and educators, and generate artifacts and lessons that can be shared and integrated across the system."

- AAMA Facilitator



Family flyer excerpt, AAMA ELC

Analysis Process

Data was generated through audio and video recordings of student and family sessions, and coding was conducted in **three phases**. In the **first** phase four researchers (also participants in the co-design) created codes that captured as close as possible both participants' main ideas and the ways in which they said them (Saldaña, 2013). In the **second** phase we revised our codes as a team by comparing and finding consensus around frequent themes that were emerging. The **third** phase of coding was used to make claims using about those key themes. The claim-making process also included sharing back findings to participating Black families and AAMA facilitators at each successive co-design meeting for feedback and confirmation.

Throughout our analysis process we sought to bring a **humanizing approach** to research by vulnerably sharing our own perspectives on examples of cultural literacies and giving respect to the contributions of families and students who were also vulnerably sharing their educational and cultural realities (Paris & Winn, 2013). One way we worked to humanize our analysis process was to **co-construct knowledge of literacy practices with families and students** by making visible and uplifting the linguistic, cultural and historical knowledge of Ethiopian, Somali, and other Black East African youth and families alongside African-American youth and families. Doing so is consistent with how others have used co-design processes to make more visible knowledges that may not always be named or included (Hall and Tandon, 2017).

“

If you start with the right question, with 'how do you want to be welcomed or represented in this space?' You're looking for more than the information you're trying to share, but looking at people as people.”

- ELC Facilitator

“

It is our job as educators to not just teach skills, but to teach students to know, validate, and celebrate who they are.”

- Dr. Gholdy Muhammad

Findings



Research Question: What learning experiences and family and community resources support the development of critical early literacies, particularly for boys of African descent?

Culturally-grounded instruction about Black identity, history, and language

Families of African American and especially East African children desire culturally-grounded approaches to teaching and learning about their identities, history, and home language(s) as a way to sustain culture

"So if they can keep their language and their background, their culture, kids can know who they are, where they come from, and they can have that self-confidence."

East African mother at Olympic Hills

Many students and families expressed the relevance of culture and its role in sustaining their students' schooling experiences. For African-American families, named approaches included the importance of representations of Black culture and history in school curriculum. Ethiopian families offered the example of traditional coffee ceremonies as a literacy ritual where culture is taught and translated.

Increased opportunities to learn from and with Black educators and community members

Opportunities to learn with community members like oral story tellers, elders, parents, Black teaching staff, and older peers strengthens student racial and academic identities

"I really want more Black counselors for other students... Like [educator], I was able to relate with you, same skin color I guess and background ... I don't want a Black kid to go do something alone when someone could help, so that's what I really want."

African American former student at Emerson

Students and families expressed the value and need for further Black educator representation in their students' school experiences. They also shared stories of the value of intergenerational histories and the interactions that keep those histories alive. Students shared about their different identities and hopes with AAMA facilitators and peers, and in that process called for more learning experiences with older peers.

Research Question: What learning experiences and educator practices support the development of critical early literacies, particularly for boys of African descent?

Identity affirming content and conditions

Black boys learn well when they are offered content and conditions that are shaped by their agency and affirm their diverse cultural experiences, identities, and interests

"When he came and he was sharing, he was so excited. And so I'm finding that I need to let him lead and show me. And show me how to support him, so that was exciting."

African American mother at Emerson

"My perfect learning environment would probably be outside because if it's inside it's too loud, but outside is more quiet."

African American student at Emerson

Both students and families shared examples of how powerful interest-driven learning can be. Families shared how important it is for their children to be learning about elements of their culture that may only be underscored at home. Students expressed how much they appreciated appropriate time and space to read, as well as desires to learn more their and peers' cultural identities.

Steady communication between families and teachers

Communication between families and teachers that includes affirming, neutral, and growth-oriented feedback allows families to support student progress in both home and school contexts

"And from some cultures, a lot of parents get super nervous if they see there's a text from a parent or from the teacher ... I mean, again, it just comes back to not grouping families into one idea, but talking to them in the beginning of the year, and asking, "What do you prefer? And what's best?" So yeah, thank you for saying that."

Classroom teacher at Olympic Hills

Many families expressed the value of regular and open communication with teachers through desires for more of it, appreciation for what they had, acknowledgment of positive and negative interactions, and praise for specific teachers' ability to communicate not only with them but with their child.

Research Question: How can educators partner with families and communities to foster joyous, critical literacy learning across a school system?

Providing humanizing spaces for Black students and families to convene in

There is desire for more collective and intentional Black family-led spaces to build relationships and sustain culture in and out of school settings

"Meeting in person with plans to meet in the park, have kids know each other. It can be a weekend that kids meet, do show and tell, take it to school so that they can share these with kids."

East African mother at Olympic Hills

Families, staff members, and AAMA facilitators each had moments of explicitly reflecting on the value of holding space for Black students and families to engage in learning together. Some of those reflections included requests for spaces like the ELC to continue or expand, particularly with further parent and student involvement.

Affirming Black cultural and linguistic identities

To elevate families' role in schools, families need to regularly hear and experience that their voices, cultural practices, and lifeways are relevant and of value to their students' school

"There was a father who said, 'I don't even know if I should be taking up this space to share,' and I said, 'Oh, this is the healing that needs to happen. You take up space, it's OK to share your culture, it's OK to share what's successful at your home because without that expertise, we'll remain the same.'"

AAMA facilitator

"I learned a lot about just making sure that I'm intentional with what I do ... and making sure that there's this bridge that's crossing from how things may be happening in Africa and their culture there, and in particular, over here."

Emerson educator

In offering a definition of literacy that included families' experiences, knowledge, and wisdom, more than once families expressed uncertainty that how they practiced literacy at home was relevant to the literacy practiced in school. We learned that asking questions about families' cultures, languages, and histories invited storytelling around literacy practices that expanded on school-based definitions and allowed for appreciation of the diversity of identities present.

ELC Emerging Re-Definition of Literacy

Black struggles for literacy are a historical fact, and this space is a continuation of that legacy. In this space **we define what literacy practices look like**. For us, expansive definitions of literacy are more than school-based writing, reading, and problem solving, and include elements based in **culture, history, and language**.

Family literacy practices might look like...

- Family stories of migration, traditional recipes, and songs
- Hip-Hop as a medium to teach about self and society
- Ikub (Ethiopia) or Hagbad (Somalia) as a culturally sustaining practice that teaches Black youth traditional collective credit circles to sustain financial and emotional wellness.

“

One of my students was embarrassed about not knowing about injera. So we got the teff from a store and tried to talk to them about the process of making injera.”

- Parent and educator at Olympic Hills

Teff is a cereal grain native to northern Africa that is used to make injera, a fermented flatbread traditional to Ethiopia, Eritrea, and parts of Sudan

Literacy practices named by Black families and students

1. Literacy in reading and writing

Black representation in literature

"Elray Jakes is the book. And he loved it so much because they were based on a Black boy is around his age. I think it would be nice to have opportunities to read more books like that." – Parent at Emerson

Creating dedicated non-distracting reading time and space

"Wanting it to be quiet and space where you can read and get focused, but also just having that time to do it." – Parent at Olympic Hills

Selecting stories that have multiple mediums to engage with

"We will find a book that we can watch, we can read and then watch a movie, and compare and talk about it. And also have time during the day that we sit and both read together." – Parent at Olympic Hills

Using the library as a regular source for literacy exploration

"We do love going to the public library. I would just let him get whatever books he wants and now he gets like 50 at a time." – Parent at Emerson

Using the bookstore as an interdisciplinary resource

"She likes to go to stores with her child and do comparison shopping ... so not only literacy, but math skills!" – Parent at Olympic Hills

2. Literacy in culture and language

Elevating of cultural and historical family practices and rituals

"At Emerson there are lots of Amharic and Tigrigna speakers. Culture, traditional clothing, food, should be included in the classroom. It is a source of pride. It is educational. It will motivate them." – Parent at Emerson

Parents sharing home-based cultural literacy practices

"We are going to define a coffee ritual as a home literacy practice. We're going to give you an example on how to teach coffee, so mainly as a transferable cultural practice and also the coffee practices." – Parent at Olympic Hills

Efforts to grow access to Amharic and Tigrigna bilingual books

"I try to bring Amharic books translated into English. Or Tigrigna textbooks. When I tell them about this it is a special feeling." – Bilingual IA at Olympic Hills

Affirming students' use of and practice with each of their home languages

"The importance of being able to use their both languages and learning and the beauty of both of those languages, like it's okay, that they can read at home in our home language or in English." – Parent at Olympic Hills

Literacy practices named by Black families and students

3. Literacy in school and community relationships

Exchanging supportive literacy experiences with teachers

"What [students] bring from home as well, shows up ... so just activities like that, where we can see the kids in their comfort zones and take away from that to then infuse into lessons or activities at school."

– Parent at Olympic Hills

Students choosing the literacy content they're most interested in

"Probably asking the students what they're interested in, or taking a vote on what we should learn on."

– Student at Emerson

Modeling reciprocal relationships with communities

"Respectful communication really tells a lot about ... how we're communicating with our communities and involving everybody and being inclusive, and kids gain a lot from seeing that too"

– Parent at Emerson

Love as a literacy to practice

"Showing love to our kids, our students, and making sure that is evident in educator interactions with our students ... that they feel like they can do it"

– Parent at Olympic Hills

4. Literacy in family history and practice

Storytelling as a container for personal and family histories

"[My grandfather's] stories that I'll be able to share with her, about our family and why we're here basically and how that has changed our lives."

– Parent at Olympic Hills

Multicultural, multigenerational conversational spaces

"Multicultural conversations with our families, with the elders of our families, with the youngers of the families and having everybody mixed in together, sharing knowledge and background."

– Parent at Emerson

Family rituals that draw on literacies learned from elders

"The generational connection was the coffee ritual from grandparents down to the grandchildren ... it connects the generations very beautifully."

– Parent at Emerson

Engaging students' active non-reading cultural literacies

"About dancing and how you interact with dance in the families. We talked about spiritual, going to church and learning about your cultural background there."

– Parent at Emerson

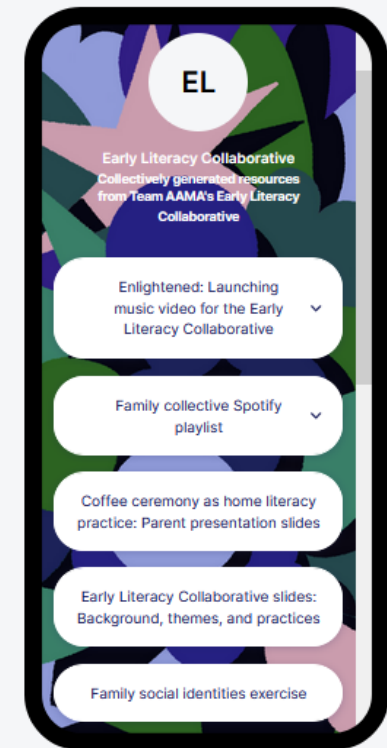
Tools and resources generated from the ELC

- A music video, "[Enlightened](#)," to launch the Early Literacy Collaborative
- Resources generated from and collected for the Early Literacy Collaborative (see image to right)
- Slides from a parent presentation to educators on the literacy and cultural practices in Ethiopian coffee ceremonies
- A messaging-app channel for families to keep connecting on
- Plans to keep coordinating in-person and virtual gatherings with families
- Coordination around Early Literacy Collaborative-informed professional learning for educators in the 13 priority schools with Family Literacy Connectors and Early Literacy Coaches

“

Thanks so much. Today we are going to share our preview: we are going to define a coffee ritual as a home practice literacy. We're going to give you an example on how to teach coffee, so mainly as a transferable cultural practice and also coffee practices – how we can teach culture, history, and language.”

- Parent at Olympic Hills



Conclusion



Summary

In the context of the Early Literacy Collaborative, students, families, educators, and researchers came together to collaborate and co-produce knowledge that is culturally rooted in the identities, histories, languages and local contexts of Emerson and Olympic Hills families and teachers.

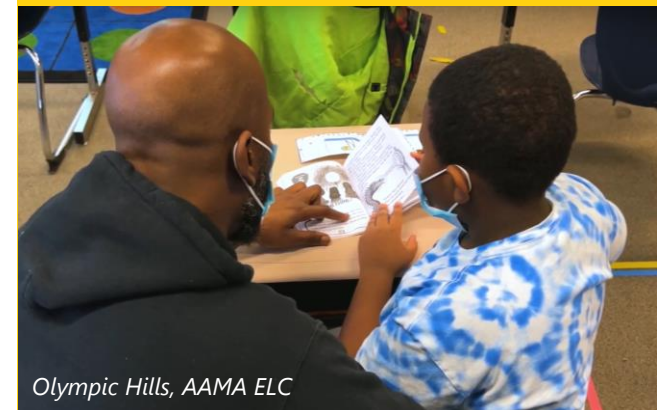
Findings generated from the five-month long learning series and conversations with Black families and students include claims around: (a) culturally-grounded teaching and learning about Black culture, history and language, (b) increased opportunities to learn with and from Black educators and communities, (c) identity affirming content and conditions, and (d) steady communication between family and teachers. The ELC developed an emergent re-definition of literacy, surfaced home-based literacy practices, and brought educators into conversation with parents' practices and hopes for their students' literacy and schooling experiences.

As detailed in the ELC [Initiative Brief](#), we also found that the process of convening families, students, educators, and researchers benefitted from key practices of collaboration, humanization, and healing that helped to facilitate generative co-design work. Findings particular to the ELC process included (e) the value of schools providing humanizing spaces for Black students and families to convene in and (f) the necessary affirmation that Black cultural and linguistic identities are of value and relevant to student schooling experiences.

“

I'm really excited to bring some of these things I'm plugging in right now into next year's professional learning plans over time.... Basically, all these ideas that have surfaced, I'm really appreciating hearing them, and trying to get them documented for myself, so that then I can make sure I communicate with others when the time is there, when the time is right. So I really appreciate everybody, thank you.”

- Educator at Emerson



Olympic Hills, AAMA ELC

Implications and Reflection Questions

In the Early Literacy Collaborative, students and families of African descent at the center of SPS's targeted universalism approach offered educators and the school system tangible routes (including literacy practices, texts, and hopes) to supporting students with feeling more engaged in reading and school. The ELC created conditions of family transformative agency, as well as implement recommendations generated from the districtwide call to action [Our Voice, Our Vision](#) centered on leading from family voice, creating safe and welcoming learning environments, and developing identity-affirming instructional approaches (Cooley et al., 2021).

As a student, family, or community member, your perspective and insights are crucial. Your lived experiences with culturally-rooted literacy practices (like Ethiopian coffee ceremonies) and culturally rooted texts (like the video and poem "Two Sets of Notes") are valuable sources of wisdom and learning for students and schools. Communicating family and community assets and building parent power can direct schools towards ELC-related outcomes like choosing Black texts, providing students quiet and sustained reading environments, and offering families routes for communication that are responsive to the academic and social needs of Black youth. You can ask yourself: *What are critical and joyous literacy practices that Black youth, families, and community members can introduce and implement in schools? What relationships with teachers and community members offer me opportunities to further develop my transformative agency at school?*

“

So, I'm just thinking about how that relationship is so important, to get to know these kids and what they like and what moves them and not making assumptions. So that has come to my mind a lot. And I mean, it always has, I think just relationships are key.”

- Parent-Educator at Olympic Hills

Implications and Reflection Questions

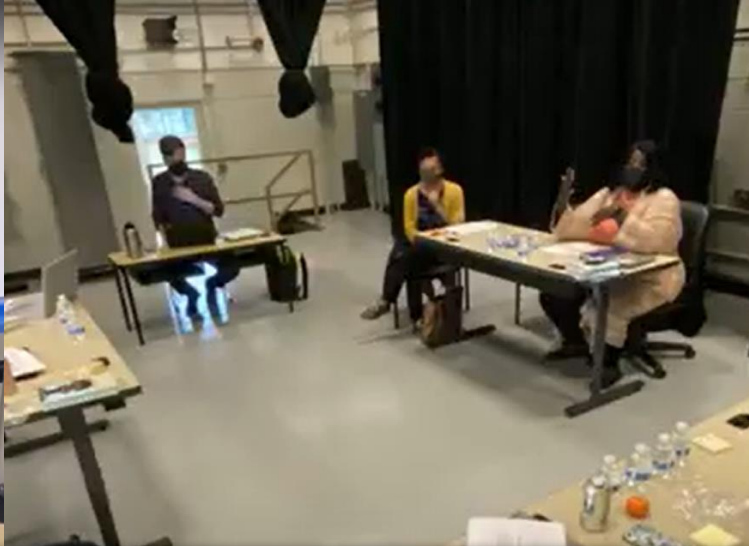
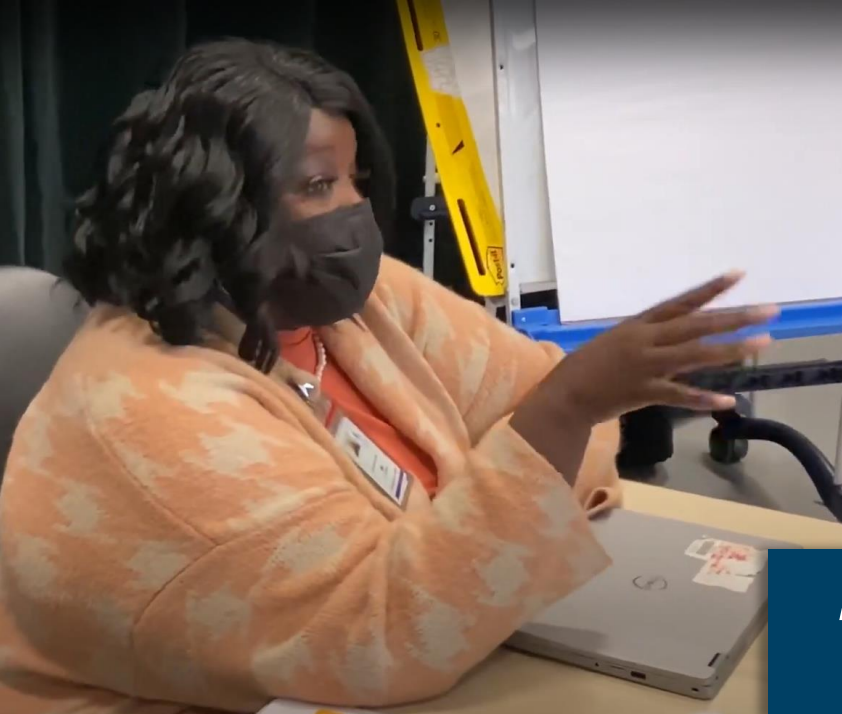
As an educator, you can support the creation of spaces for students and families to be in community with one another and in collaboration around learning. Students requested more opportunities for agency in selecting books and curriculum content based on their interests, and families desired more regular and open communication with teachers around ways to support students. Families and students each expressed the value of involving broader community (peers, elders, other educators) to support student engagement and learning. You can ask yourself: *What can I learn about the cultures, histories, and languages represented in Black and other youth of color in my classrooms? How can I help students learn from Black elders, peers, and other educators? What communication or collaboration routines with families might result in more meaningful relationships between me, my students, and their community?*

As a school or district leader, you can learn with Black families who often have experiences of being excluded in the U.S. public school system by creating a supportive, identify-affirming, healing-centered space for educators and Black families to authentically engage with one another, towards cultivating a safe and joyous learning environment for their children. School and district leaders can take leadership in this through actions like sponsoring educators who can facilitate such work and creating schoolwide routines that uplift Black experiences for more than one month a year. You can ask yourself: *What is missing from the standards and pedagogies traditionally used in schools that is now needed for the holistic development of student literacy? How can home-based literacy practices, re-definitions of literacy, or family partnership routines inspire further growth in my community?*

“

I'm excited to get to learn from what was shared in this space, so we can just continue to do better for your children. They deserve to be seen, to be heard, to see themselves in the classroom, it's what we want to do. And thank you for everything that you've shared in being here, it makes a significant difference in helping us continue to grow and learn.”

- Educator at Emerson



Thank you!



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