



Principal leadership for parent-school-community engagement

What gives some Principals the edge on parent-school-community engagement?

Principal leadership for engaging parents and community in
disadvantaged schools: Four case studies

Phase II Horizon 2016-2017 of the Parent Engagement in Schools (PES) project, titled 'Principal leadership for parent-school-community engagement', received funding from the Queensland Department of Education and Training Horizon Education grant scheme and in-kind support from The University of Queensland and P&Cs Queensland.

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Disclaimer

This document has been prepared for DET. It is not a statement of Queensland Government policy. The case studies in this publication were based on interviews, focus groups, survey data, and school documents collected in good faith from the individuals and schools involved. No responsibility is accepted by DET or the researchers for any errors or omissions contained within this publication. No liability will be accepted for loss or damage arising from reliance upon any information contained herein.

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¹ The phases in this research are: Phase I Parent Engagement in Schools (PES) Project 2014; Phase II Horizon 2016-2017; and Phase III Horizon 2017-2019.

INTRODUCTION

Clear consistent evidence for more than the past five decades has shown that when parents are engaged in their children's learning in schools, their children have better academic, social, and emotional outcomes. However, little is known about which engagement strategies and practices are the most effective, why some parents are disengaged with school, and the leadership role Principals can play in engaging parents to improve student learning and wellbeing.

To investigate these issues, The University of Queensland (UQ), P&Cs Qld, and the Department of Education and Training (DET) are collecting data on parent-school-community engagement in Queensland State Schools through the Parent Engagement in Schools (PES) project using a multi-phase approach. This publication entitled, *What gives some Principals the edge on parent-school-community engagement?*, presents four case studies compiled from the Phase II Horizon 2016-2017 research that exemplify Principal leadership for parent-school-community engagement in disadvantaged State Schools across Queensland.

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

There are strong links between parent-school-community engagement and children's school learning (Fox & Olsen, 2014; Mistry, Benner, Biesanz, & Clark, 2010). It has been widely argued that optimal student learning outcomes ensue when the key educators in a child's life, namely parents and schools/teachers, form respectful collaborative relationships with one another and work towards common goals (Emerson, Fear, Fox, & Sanders, 2012; Epstein, 2011; Fox & Olsen, 2014; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Harris & Goodall, 2007; Pushor, 2013; Pushor & Reutenburg, 2005; Willis, 2013).

Principals play a key role in engaging parents and the community through their leadership style, communication, attitudes, and expectations (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014; Drysdale, Goode, & Gurr, 2009; Giles, 2006; Gordon & Louis, 2009; Mleczo & Kington, 2013). The phenomenon of *turnaround schools* since the 1990s in the United States of America (US), for example, has been driven by high-need low-performing schools (Barnett & Stevenson, 2016). More recently in 2009 the Obama administration provided \$3.5 billion in School Improvement Grants to the US Department of Education to improve student achievement in the lowest five percent of schools (US Department of Education, 2009). To qualify for these funds, the Local Education Agencies needed to identify which schools they wanted to transform and which of four models was the most appropriate for their needs (US Department of Education, 2009). The four models comprised: Turnaround model which replaced the Principal and

rehired no more than 50 percent of existing staff; Restart model which converted to or reopened as a charter school; School closure which closed the school and enrolled the students in another suitable school; and Transformation model which replaced the Principal but not the staff and instituted instructional reforms (US Department of Education, 2009). As these various US reforms indicate, school leadership is seen as critical to turning a school around. Moreover, Tennes (2017) found evidence in some turnaround schools that successful school leadership enabled school and student improvement through the prioritisation of parent engagement. However, while school leadership is considered important in driving the achievement of schools and students and parent and community engagement is emerging as a vital part of the process, there is limited US and Australian research on how Principals can shape an engagement culture. Rarer still is Australian research on how successful Principals in disadvantaged schools foster high levels of parent-school-community engagement.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) What gives some Principals in educationally-disadvantaged schools the edge on parent-school-community engagement?
 - a) What knowledge of **students, teachers, and curriculum** does the Principal possess that helped him/her to support how s/he, and the teachers, engage with parents/community members?
 - b) How does the Principal's knowledge of the **milieus** (schools, classrooms, parents, community, and technology) inform his/her engagement strategies and practices?

METHODOLOGY

In the Phase II Horizon 2016-2017 research Queensland State primary schools were identified as potential research sites based on a number of indicators that attributed high levels of parent-school-community engagement to their Principal/school leader and simultaneously recorded a low Index of Community Social-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value. ICSEA is a composite score that measures the school's level of advantage and is based on the education levels of parents, school location, and the socio-economic backgrounds of the students enrolled (MySchool, 2011). The indicators used to assess the Principals' levels of parent-school-community engagement were created using data sources from the Phase I Parent Engagement in Schools (PES) 2014 research (Povey et al., 2016; The University of Queensland, 2018) and School Opinion Survey (SOS) (Queensland Government, 2018). The SOS comprises five individual surveys given annually to parents, students, students in Special schools, staff,

and Principals to seek their views on aspects of their school that are working well and areas that can be improved (Queensland Government, 2018). As a result of this process, four disadvantaged primary schools (ICSEA below the Australian average of 1,000) with the highest levels of parent-school-community engagement were invited to participate in the research.

Design-based research (DBR) was used to answer the research questions. DBR blends empirical educational research methods with theory-driven designs of learning environments. DBR entails an iterative research process that not only evaluates but systematically attempts to refine the processes of research while also producing design principles that can guide similar research endeavours. DBR can be implemented in different contexts to understand how, when, and why educational initiatives work in practice (Bell, 2004).

The Phase II Horizon 2016-2017 research used Schwab's (1973) framework to inform data collection, analysis, conceptualisation, findings, conclusions, and implications for future research. The framework has four interconnected dimensions: students, teachers, curriculum (subject matter), and milieus where milieus include knowledge of schools, classrooms, parents, and communities. As a result of the research findings, a further milieu, technology, was added. A mixed-methods approach that involved collecting multiple data for analysis using qualitative and quantitative techniques (Brown, 1992) was employed to examine each Principal's parent-school-community engagement strategies and practices.

The four Principals featured in Phase II Horizon 2016-2017 research were initially approached by email to participate in the project and subsequently provide consent for their school's involvement. They each supported the project by encouraging teachers, students, and parents to participate, and making available suitable venues for interviews and focus groups. In addition, P&Cs Queensland facilitated access to each of the P&C Presidents at the schools and encouraged them to support the project through formal and informal contact with parents.

Over two- to four-day site visits at each school, the research team conducted: separate semi-structured interviews with the Principal, P&C President, and key members of the school's leadership team; focus groups with teachers, parents, and students; and documented and photographed evidence of parent-school-community engagement strategies and practices. Each interview and focus group took approximately one hour. In total, 12 interviews and 16 focus groups were conducted and involved 123 participants. Interview and focus group data were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed with NVivo computer software. Informed by Schwab's four-dimensional framework, the team thematically analysed the data to produce the research findings.

Quantitative data were also collected from teachers and parents using an online or hard-copy survey. Across the four schools, the surveys were answered by 72 parents and 45 teachers respectively. Descriptive analyses, such as cross tabulations and frequencies were applied, using the statistical software Stata. (A summary of quantitative findings across the four schools is available at: <https://issr.uq.edu.au/parent-engagement-schools> [Findings Tab]).

RESEARCH FINDINGS (SUMMARY)

Schwab's (1973) framework provided four interconnected dimensions: students, teachers, curriculum (subject matter), and milieus where milieus include knowledge of schools, classrooms, parents, and communities through which to examine how each of the four Principals in the research developed knowledge *of* and *for* parent-school-community engagement which in turn informed the strategies and practices they adopted. At the heart of their parent-school-community engagement work was student learning and wellbeing. The Principals each developed their knowledge of parent-school-community engagement through their different professional experiences as teachers and school leaders during their careers as well as through their personal experiences as parents and active citizens in their communities. Based on their experiences, they each recognised the value of: building personal, respectful relationships with others; connecting positively with individuals and organisations (school and community); being open to learning *from*, *with*, and *alongside* students, parents, and teachers; and pursuing professional learning opportunities for themselves, teachers, and parents. They were purposeful, proactive, anticipatory, and futures-focused, creating opportunities for parent-school-community engagement in continual, expansive, collaborative ways to benefit students, parents, and teachers in their schools as well as stakeholders in the broader community.

The main findings as seen through each lens of Schwab's framework are summarised below:

- The Principals possessed detailed knowledge of **students** which they built by connecting personally with them and their families. The Principals' knowledge of students enabled parent-school-community engagement by building respectful relationships; creating reciprocal connections between home and school learning; and aligning student needs and interests with opportunities that enhanced their learning and wellbeing.
- The Principals developed knowledge of **teachers** through conversations and working alongside them in ways that engendered open, supportive relationships. They recognised and developed each teacher's strengths. The Principals led by example and drew on their own teaching experiences to articulate clear expectations for parent-teacher engagement. They encouraged teachers to see families through a contextual lens and to build on the strengths of diversity. They offered professional development opportunities to cultivate teachers' skills for connecting with families.

- The Principals developed contemporary **curriculum** knowledge through personal and professional development opportunities. This knowledge allowed them to purposefully connect student learning and curriculum learning areas. They regularly shared curriculum news with the school community and P&C. They used specific strategies to overcome challenges to engagement (e.g., Liaison Officer to co-develop curriculum activities using teacher, parent, and community knowledge).
- The Principals developed knowledge of **schools** from working in different contexts throughout their careers. Each subscribed to the philosophy, “It takes a village to raise a child”. In cultivating a welcoming, inclusive school climate, they garnered knowledge about families and the community and showed genuine interest in each student’s learning and wellbeing. The Principals’ use of visibility (e.g., drop-offs/pick-ups) communicated to parents and students they were accessible and approachable.
- The Principals drew on their knowledge of **classrooms** from teaching and working in schools to enact and support practices that made parents feel welcomed, respected, and valued. Regular visits and contact with teachers heightened their awareness of what was happening in classrooms. The Principals used different strategies to enhance student learning and parent-school-community engagement opportunities that included employing teacher aides with particular knowledges and skills and supporting innovative classroom practices (e.g., co-teaching).
- The Principals developed knowledge of **parents** from their personal experiences and careers. They viewed parents as their child’s first teacher, the keepers of intimate knowledge of their child, and important partners in their child’s education. Principals valued being an initial point of contact (e.g., personally conducting enrolment interviews), advocated face-to-face contact, extended personal invitations, and communicated regularly with parents. They built parents’ capacities to participate in their child’s learning by providing workshops, preparation for school entry, and certification courses.
- By participating in local activities, organisations, and events, the Principals developed knowledge of their **community’s** families, languages, cultures, and histories, affording them understanding and respect for engaging with parents and community members. They demonstrated agility in connecting the work of external and internal stakeholders to advocate for opportunities and resources to benefit students.

- The Principals developed knowledge of **technology** by using different platforms (e.g., school website, Facebook, electronic newsletters, Qschools app) to communicate with the school community. They also supported teachers to use technology (e.g., email, SMS, ClassDojo) to engage parents in student learning.

Dragonfly Creek State School – Case Study 1

BACKGROUND

School background

Dragonfly Creek State School (DCSS) was located southwest of Brisbane in Queensland, Australia. It was a public coeducational primary school with a student population of approximately 200. Over the last decade the population of the local area decreased slightly and mostly comprised family households of which there were almost 50 percent two-parent families, 30 percent couple families without children, and almost 20 percent single-parent families. More than 50 percent of the residents in the area were born overseas with most being born in southeast Asia, India, New Zealand, the Philippines, or England. Around 40 percent of the local area households did not speak English at home; almost 20 percent spoke a southeast-Asian language. The demographic details relating to language were noticeably reflected in the school's student population, which included 60 percent of students with a language background other than English. Less than 10 percent of the students were Indigenous Australians. In 2016, DCSS had an ICSEA score of slightly over 900, compared with the Australian average of 1 000, identifying the school as one of low socio-educational advantage. Data from the 2014 Phase I Parent Engagement in Schools (PES) project showed that the Principal enjoyed positive relationships with parents and worked with the school community to identify parent and student needs.

Principal background

The DCSS Principal had worked at the school for two and a half years. He commenced his career as a secondary school teacher in far north Queensland, teaching Humanities and Social Sciences and language subjects. He recalled how his views about parent-school-community engagement changed when he was taken off class for half a day a week to work with a guidance officer in a position with a community relations focus. This new role helped him to understand that families can be vastly different and as a result he developed an enhanced sense of compassion and empathy for others, which he indicated he carried forward into his career.

After a number of years in middle administration as a year-level coordinator, assisting with student welfare and liaison, the Principal became Head of Department, Resources – a role which included the application of technology in education. After becoming Head of Middle School and Student Services, he accepted a position as Deputy Principal in the State primary school sector. His work in the middle phase of learning and the transition of students from primary to secondary school was recognised

with a Departmental Award of Excellence in Education. He has continued to work as Deputy Principal or Principal in approximately ten schools of various sizes, complexity, and socio-economic standing.

STUDENT DIMENSION

The DCSS Principal encouraged regular informal friendly contact with students and their families from the earliest of opportunities and with the youngest of members. For example, one parent told a story of how he had taken his pre-school child, Gracie (pseudonym), with him to a school orientation day the previous year. He recalled how the next year:

The school had a booth down at the street fair down at the railway station. I'm walking down there and we don't know a lot of people in the community and all of a sudden I hear this voice, 'Gracie' and I'm like, 'Who knows my daughter?' I turned around and there's (Principal's name) and he's had one contact with my child and knows her by her first name and he's remembered that. (Participant 1, DCSS English Parent Focus Group)

The Principal described the strategies he used to connect with students and families:

It's being out there before school, doing playground duty with the kids, having a joke with them... It's about being at things... sausage sizzles on a weekend, coming and cleaning up the grounds, the working bees on the grounds, a bit of weeding. (DCSS Principal Interview)

The Principal used strategies that connected personally with individual students and families. He called students and family members by name. Contact was enabled by his daily physical presence in the school grounds, humorous exchanges with students, and active participation alongside parents in school activities. Parents commented that the Principal's strategies impressed them in ways that laid a platform for future positive parent-school relationships.

TEACHER DIMENSION

The Principal said he subscribed to a view inspired by, *"To Kill a Mockingbird* and Atticus Finch – you can never understand a person until you get in their shoes and walk around in them; and schools are like that" (DCSS Principal Interview). He said that when he shared with teachers about how to look at students and their families it was about, "...being able to see it (the world) from another person's point



of view and that their point of view is not the *right* point of view and that, most likely, there isn't a right point of view" (DCSS Principal Interview).

Accordingly, this Principal emphasised the value of setting an example and not expecting anything of teachers that he would not be prepared to do himself. He explained that this strategy was about, "...fighting the fight, walking the walk with teachers in the classroom, knowing what's going on in the classroom, being mindful and human in what you expect teachers to do" (DCSS Principal Interview). He signalled that his belief in "flat structures" encouraged teachers and parents to feel comfortable to approach him; to come into what he described as often seen as a "hallowed zone", the Principal's office (DCSS Principal Interview). At the same time, the Principal noted that it was not only his responsibility to manage the resources he had to reach the best outcomes for student learning and wellbeing, but also to help teachers do likewise.

Given the multicultural nature of the school where 60 percent of the student population were from homes where English was not the first language, the Principal recognised that cultural and educational backgrounds of parents represented a salient challenge to improving academic and wellbeing outcomes for students. He noted differences between teacher and parent backgrounds as a further challenge. However, he iterated that, "...we can't let language barriers be a reason for our parents not to be involved", and encouraged teachers to invite parents into the school, saying: "It was just a matter of finding what your community feels comfortable in engaging with and harnessing that" (DCSS Principal Interview).

One way the Principal responded to the challenges of linguistic and cultural diversity was to institute Case Management Meetings in which he, the class teacher (taken offline), Advisory Visiting Teacher (AVT) (behaviour), AVT (special needs), Guidance Officer, and sometimes the Support Teacher Literacy and Numeracy (STLN) participated. Instead of referring a student who was perceived as having something that needed to be addressed by specialist support, these team meetings involved school staff working together to build a profile of the whole child: "So not just looking at their scores on the page, their achievement levels, but digging deeper to find out more about that student" (DCSS Principal Interview). Meetings focused on building the capacity of teachers and other school staff to better understand and respond to student needs by them sharing their perspectives and experiences of interacting with the student and their family. According to the Principal, these meetings shone light on things, "that the class teacher might not necessarily have been aware of" or "stimulated a reason that we needed to investigate further and make some phone calls or enquiries" (DCSS Principal Interview). Examples of follow-up actions included academic interventions that teachers made in their

classrooms and referrals to relevant personnel or organisations (e.g., Mission Australia) by the Guidance Officer (DCSS Principal Interview).

These meetings went hand-in-hand with professional development for teachers about working with English Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) students. The Principal indicated that sessions on, “how students learn language and engage with language” became an important focus at DCSS to understand how EAL/D students were learning to read (DCSS Principal Interview). Although students “knew things about literature and reading”, he said that, “they weren’t picking up the reading skills in a sequence a child would normally” (DCSS Principal Interview). The Principal explained that students appeared to rely heavily on visual cues so they associated pictures and words without necessarily using all of their available resources to decode and comprehend written texts. Hence, teachers were encouraged to focus on phonemic awareness as well as whole texts particularly when working with EAL/D students, and to discuss this need with parents, so they could adopt similar strategies at home.

The Principal evidenced a vision for promoting parent-school-community engagement underpinned by ethical ideas such as empathy. Not only was he attuned to the needs of parents and students but also teachers. He led by example and encouraged teachers to be aware of how their background and perspectives may differ from those of parents in the school community; hence, neither was right nor wrong. He encouraged teachers to search for the best possible ways to engage parents in student learning by harnessing and valuing what was comfortable for them. He supported teachers by conducting Case Management Meetings that enabled shared understandings and the development of clearly articulated plans for responding to each student’s and family’s needs.

CURRICULUM DIMENSION

The DCSS Principal saw his role as the school’s curriculum leader to deliver “a curriculum that parents feel students need in their particular context” (DCSS Principal Interview). Although this meant some flexibility was needed in implementing the mandated curriculum (i.e., the Australian Curriculum [AC]), he indicated this needed to be managed given the sequence of learning required in a student’s educational journey. According to the Principal, schools were “increasingly time poor”, making curriculum implementation complicated and challenging (DCSS Principal Interview). Challenges faced by schools included: issues of scale (e.g., school size impacting available resources); extra-curricular activities (e.g., instrumental music classes in school time); increased content in curriculum learning areas (e.g., five subject areas in The Arts); and ongoing curriculum reforms (e.g., introduction of the new Digital Technologies curriculum). The linguistic and cultural differences among students, parents,

and teachers at DCSS further compounded these challenges. It was not always possible to accommodate how some parents at the school may have wanted to engage in their children's learning (e.g., offering to give dance lessons for a term) as there were certain expectations for the school to deliver in terms of student learning and wellbeing.

The Principal's knowledge of the curriculum and students at the school allowed him to negotiate these competing factors. For example, he described how the AC: The Arts was used as a vehicle to also teach the AC: English (language, literature, literacy). Students in their final semester of primary school received additional Drama lessons. These classes encouraged their verbal communication and taught them how to "read people" (DCSS Principal Interview). As a result of what they learnt, the Principal described the change in ability and confidence of these students as transformational. Before the classes, he observed that some of them, "wouldn't hold the microphone, let alone get up in front of anyone and speak" (DCSS Principal Interview). He reported that Drama facilitated and extended their oral and written expression to the extent that each student successfully developed and delivered a speech about themselves for their families at graduation.

To negotiate the sometimes disconnect between what parents wanted for their children at school and what the school was required to teach, the Principal called upon his knowledge of the curriculum to problem-solve critically and creatively. For example, purposefully connecting The Arts and the English learning areas enhanced student learning and achievement in ways parents recognised as valuable and students enjoyed.

THE DIMENSION OF MILIEUS

School milieu

The DCSS Principal espoused the philosophy of, "*Ubuntu* – It takes a village to raise a child" (DCSS Principal Interview). Parents reported that the school community "treats all parents the same" (Participant 3, DCSS English Parent Focus Group). Parents described the school as having a "community connection" where "people look after each other" (Participant 2, DCSS English Parent Focus Group). This description reflected the Principal's declaration that: "Not one of my teachers would not go that extra mile and not just the teachers, but the teacher aides as well" (DCSS Principal Interview).



One teacher stated: “The front reception is really the first port of call for most parents” (Participant 2, DCSS Teacher Focus Group). Across the different focus groups, Ms Drury (pseudonym), the school office administrator, was described as “always nice” (Participant 1, DCSS Student Focus Group), “always bends over backwards to help” (Participant 2, DCSS Teacher Focus Group), and the “grease that makes the wheel turn” (Participant 2, DCSS English Parent Focus Group). The Principal agreed that being “greeted at the front counter” is important, but argued that this welcoming environment should extend to other school aspects such as, “someone coming up to you if you look like you’re lost and saying, ‘Hi, do you know where you’re going?’” (DCSS Principal Interview). The Principal added that at school open day events, “everyone believed in what they did, saw the value in it, and they were happy” (DCSS Principal Interview). He likened the atmosphere to a classroom that was “buzzing”: there was an expectation of learning as soon as you walked in and he said, “you [can] feel that when you walk into a school too” (DCSS Principal Interview).

The Principal’s belief in the idea of visibility underpinned the school’s welcoming culture. He said that “being visible” not only referred to being physically present but also to “what you do being visible to the school community” (DCC Principal Interview). This was one reason he chose to be in the playground before school each day. He explained that a parent might not be able to write a note or email given their limited English, but instead could tap him on the shoulder to explain what they wanted. He added: “But if I didn’t follow what was [being said], I could go up and get a teacher or teacher aide who did speak Vietnamese and say, ‘Look, I’m having trouble. Can you interpret for me?’” (DCSS Principal Interview). The Principal’s practice reflected his view that, “People identify better with a person than a piece of paper” (DCSS Principal Interview).

The Principal also used strategies that helped build positive relationships with parents by sharing his own personal experiences. One example was, *Principal’s Ponderings*, a section in the newsletter where he would not only write about “what’s happening this week” but also included experiences he “had with [his] own kids growing up” (DCSS Principal Interview). Parents would often contact him later to say, “Oh yes, the same thing happened with my kid” (DCSS Principal Interview). He added that this approach, “...just gets people interested and engaged in a newsletter rather than, ‘Who cares what’s happening Monday’” (DCSS Principal Interview).

The Principal ensured that non-English speaking parents received translations of important information from the school such as newsletters and the School Opinion Survey. Both English and Vietnamese newsletters were also accessible via the school website. Commenting on the accommodations the school made for parents, one Vietnamese parent relayed (via an interpreter):

For example, sometimes the student have meeting between 3:00pm and 6:00pm and [the mother] doesn't know English, but her husband know, but he does [not] come back [until] after 6:00pm. So the teacher is willing to wait for him at 6:15pm so he can attend the meeting.
(Participant 2, DCSS Vietnamese Parent Focus Group)

The parent concluded that this approach showed the school, “values the involvement of parents and they want to interact with the parents to communicate with the kids’ learning activities and they want to work together to have the kids have better results” (Participant 2, DCSS Vietnamese Parent Focus Group).

The Principal enacted strategies for engagement such as visibility that created a sense of inclusivity and belonging among parents and the school community. He and the teachers/staff were personable and considerate, regularly available for direct easy contact, and willingly accommodated parents’ different needs.

Classroom milieu

The DCSS Principal’s knowledge of classrooms was gained throughout his career as a teacher and administrator in schools. In connecting classrooms and parent-school relationships, he again used the idea of visibility. As noted earlier, this involved “walking the walk” with teachers, knowing what was happening in classrooms, having realistic expectations of staff, and being responsible in managing available resources (DCSS Principal Interview). He pointed out that the way he constructed the school timetable, matched teachers with classes, and made up classes, was “not necessarily driven by the numbers” but by what he thought would “give the best results to students, have the support of teachers, and be visible to parents in the classroom” (DCSS Principal Interview). Parents understood, for example, that if there were 22 students in a class compared to 28 that, “the fewer number of children, the more individual time that can be spent on each child” (DCSS Principal Interview). The benefits to students of low student-to-teacher ratios in classrooms visibly conveyed the Principal’s commitment to engagement.

The Principal also made conscious decisions about the employment of staff to meet the particular needs of the school’s clientele. For example, a Vietnamese-speaking teacher aide or aides who were of Vietnamese origin were employed to work in the Preparatory (Prep) Year. This strategy was effective because he noted that, for most parents, the aides were the first point of contact with the school. Given the parents’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the Principal commented that an advantage of employing these staff members was that parents were, “able to have a free and easy conversation

about educational matters with a teacher” (DCSS Principal Interview). The aides were also used as interpreters on phone calls with parents or to sit in on interviews with teachers to discuss student report cards. In addition, interpreters were arranged at other key times in the year and for other language speaking groups. The Principal commented:

We book interpreters for parent-teacher interviews, and we say: ‘Look, if you speak Somali, we’ll have an interpreter here for you between four o’clock and six o’clock on this afternoon if you want to make a booking with the teacher at that time.’ (DCSS Principal Interview)

The strategies used by the Principal enhanced meaningful contact and information exchange between teachers/staff and parents by tackling language barriers that traditionally impede effective parent-school relationships in disadvantaged schools.

Parent milieu

Data collected from the DCSS parents endorsed the Principal’s extensive knowledge and support of families. Parents at the school indicated that they appreciated his constant efforts to build positive relationships with them and their children.

The Principal’s knowledge of parents and families heightened his awareness and understanding about the possibilities and challenges of parent-school-community engagement. He noted: “The Vietnamese have a very high expectation for educators and, basically, they entrust their children to us and they expect that we’re doing a good job” (DCSS Principal Interview). These expectations stemmed from the importance they attached to their child’s school education, as the following comments from one parent attest: “[In] the Vietnamese culture, they want the kids to learn or study more than play. But for here, so the kids spend time to play more than to do assessment” (Participant 2, DCSS Vietnamese Parent Focus Group).

Aspects of culture also presented significant barriers to parent-school engagement. For example, the Principal reported a “very distinct line in the sand” between how parents at the school saw their role and that of teachers (DCSS Principal Interview). He stated that because of their “cultural beliefs and ethics”, parents considered: “School was the business of the school and teachers were respected... the teachers managed the school; they were the professionals and that was their business” (DCSS Principal Interview). In addition, economic factors diminished the time and energy parents had for engagement. The Principal spoke about the need for parents at the school to work long hours in low- paying jobs:

There were people who work four jobs and they work Saturdays as well and sometime Sundays: 'I don't have any time. I work night shift. I own a shop and I'm open from six o'clock in the morning until seven o'clock at night because I'm a convenience store' ... and 'I can't make it to parent-teacher meetings...' (DCSS Principal Interview)

Hence, the Principal advanced a contextual perspective for teachers when assigning student homework or considering plans for managing academic or behavioural challenges. He also stressed the importance for teachers/staff to challenge deficit ways of thinking about parents, arguing that many may want to participate in school events related to their child's education but find cultural, economic, and linguistic factors preclusive. Along with more commonly recognised barriers such as low perceptions of some parents about their knowledge and skills for contributing to their child's learning, these factors limited parent-school-community engagement opportunities at DCSS.

As a result, the Principal called upon teachers to find ways to engage with every parent in the school's culturally diverse community. For example, he looked for opportunities to celebrate the school's multicultural students. He stated that:

And whenever we had a celebration that involved multiculturalism, so the Harmony Days, Luna Festivals, and things like that, that's when our parents would click in there, because while they may not have thought that they could manage an event, they can cook and they'd come and give their time that way... so there was engagement at different levels. (DCSS Principal Interview)

Evidence that the Principal was invested in building the capacities of culturally diverse families to participate and have a voice in their school community came as part of this research. When approached about participating, the Principal suggested that it was important that a focus group be made available for interested Vietnamese parents. He also suggested that questionnaires be offered in hard copy to ensure all parent voices were represented.

The Principal discussed the P&C as an opportunity to engage parents. He indicated that, in addition to newsletters, he used emails and social media to contact parents and invite them to participate: "Our P&C has a school P&C Facebook page that caters for that community" (DCSS Principal Interview). Although the Principal identified the P&C as an opportunity for parent-school engagement, parents also noted that, depending on the personalities involved, the P&C had the potential to be divisive and rather than unite parents may cause them to disengage.

The Principal acknowledged that although each parent wanted the best outcomes for their child not every parent had the resources to engage with the school in the usual ways (e.g., volunteers and fund raisers). He viewed parents through a contextual lens and encouraged teachers/staff to build on the strength of cultural diversity not deficit.

Local community milieu

The DCSS Principal's knowledge and respect for the school's context and the interests, preferences, and abilities of teachers/staff and community organisations enabled him to create positive parent-school-community connections for the benefit of all involved. The school's recent Centenary celebrations were frequently mentioned by the teachers and parents in this research as an example of the Principal's leadership. In recalling his role, one teacher noted: "Because we had our Centenary last year, so our Principal was very heavily involved with organising that and I think that meant you had to make lots of links with the community" (Participant 6, DCSS Teacher Focus Group). In contrast, the Principal singled out the role of teachers/staff in the school's Centenary celebration success whom he said recognised the particular challenges faced by the school's parents and hence, their limited capacity for hosting the event. He enthusiastically recalled the teachers' extraordinary investment of time, energy, and resources in driving the different activities and events: "they cooked the barbeque", "went into the State Archives for hours and hours and days and days researching the history of the school", "made a book", and "there were websites and chat rooms to follow it" (DCSS Principal Interview). The Principal recognised the teachers' different contributions went "above and beyond" what was expected of them in their roles. However, he noted that, "they wouldn't have done it if they didn't think it was worthwhile" (DCSS Principal Interview). He recalled how inclement weather almost threatened the event's cancellation. Its continuation underscored the value that he and the teachers attached to positive parent-school-community relationships.

To encourage parents and community members to come into the school, DCSS hosted a Vietnamese Language School on Saturday mornings (DCSS School Website). In a focus group, one teacher described the language school: "So they use our facilities and they have their own teachers and they teach the kids Vietnamese. It's like a proper language school" (Participant 2, DCSS Teacher Focus Group). Another teacher explained: "So a lot of our kids can speak Vietnamese, but they can't read it. So they learn it" (Participant 5, DCSS Teacher Focus Group). The school recognised the value of teaching reading and writing in a language other than English particularly since many students who attended the Vietnamese Language School also attended DCSS. Allowing the language school to run on

Saturdays built the capacity of these students as bilingual learners, made use of DCSS's otherwise idle facilities, and strengthened parent-school-community connections.

DCSS used particular strategies to engage parents of non-school-age children. According to a focus group of teachers, play groups, Pre-Prep (Preparatory Year) sessions, and a Prep Information Day were among the most effective. The play groups were run by a community organisation. One teacher elaborated: "There are two different play groups that operate in the little F Block two mornings a week" (Participant 2, DCSS Teacher Focus Group). This teacher added, "And that just helps people come into the school and feel comfortable being here" (Participant 2, DCSS Teacher Focus Group). A second teacher said the Pre-Prep sessions were when, "...the Prep teacher gets the Pre-Preps in for a program over that last term, like once a fortnight to familiarise themselves with what's going to happen at Prep (Participant 6, DCSS Teacher Focus Group). At the same time, the Head of Curriculum ran workshops with the Pre-Prep children's parents where:

We'd have them in the library and we did pre-literacy, pre-numeracy, school readiness, and just like a sort of school admin. Like, if you need uniforms, what time we have lunch... And that was pretty good because I think it just introduces the parents and it's a few familiar faces for when they start. (Participant 3, DCSS Teacher Focus Group)

According to the teachers, feedback from parents over the past two years recognised the value of the Pre-Prep sessions for helping their child transition into Prep the following year.

The teachers reflected on the success of the Pre-Prep sessions having stemmed from Prep Information Days. These days were held on a Saturday afternoon and all of the teachers attended. One teacher commented:

And we had it down in the hall, and it was just any sort of prospective (parent), like anyone that thought they might want their kids to go here came. So it was a decent turnout. We sort of walked them (parents) around the school, and showed them our classrooms, and our Principal spoke to them about it. (Participant 6, DCSS Teacher Focus Group)

These different strategies for enabling parents and children to participate in programs at the school had gained momentum over the past several years. The play groups and Pre-Prep program contributed to a sense of community among parents with the school as a hub. These groups provided parents with information, support, contact with others with similarly-aged children, and regular times

and places to meet. Simultaneously, these opportunities helped them prepare their children to transition from early-years learning to more formal education settings such as Prep.

Technology milieu

DCSS made use of a variety of digital technologies and platforms to communicate with parents such as the school website, emails, electronic newsletters, a school Facebook page, and a P&C Facebook page. One parent stated that: “I think utilising both methods, maybe newsletters and also sending emails to parents, it’s kind of encouraging them to participate” (Participant 3, DCSS English Parent Focus Group). The Principal reported that the school’s Facebook page is “very heavily used” (DCSS Principal Interview). He encouraged the use of educational software that was accessible in the home and the use of interactive platforms to engage parents in their child’s learning. To compensate for the challenges parents reported in assisting their children, the Principal purchased educational programs for use in the classroom and at home, which he said could:

...be manipulated by the classroom teacher for individual student needs. ‘Johnny’s having problems with one-to-one correspondence with his numeracy.’ Can’t explain that to the parent, but the teacher can key in: ‘When you get into this software program at home, they’re the activities that the child can access to help them with at home.’ And the parent can see that, ‘Oh’. They can pick up on the screen, because Mathematics is a universal language, while they can’t explain the concept, once you see it, ‘Oh’... And the parents were therefore able to say, ‘Look, I can’t help you with your Mathematics, personally. I’m not a teacher or a teacher aide, but I know that if you login, the teacher has set up activities there that I know you can use’. (DCSS Principal Interview)

The Principal also supported and enabled teachers to build relationships with students and their families through “interactive class communication sites” like ClassDojo where parents could engage with their child’s class teacher (DCSS Principal Interview). A Year 2 teacher explained how she used ClassDojo with parents:

I use ClassDojo to message parents if I need to chase up anything or remind them about anything.... I’ve got all the parents connected, but four, so 83 percent.... So the parents like it. I post up stories about what’s going on. If I get a chance, I’ll take a photo of the kids doing an activity or work and I just post up what they’re doing, and some parents comment on it or like it.... So just any school announcements, stuff we’re doing in the classroom. I’m planning to survey parents on it about homework. But, yeah, a lot of parents will also message me just to

ask any questions about homework; if they've got questions about things. ...I can see the ones that have viewed stuff, but not all have messaged me and asked questions... But it's there for them if they need it. ...I will still send home the normal school notes. (Participant 4, DCSS Teacher Focus Group)

Teachers indicated that they also phoned parents and used SMS. For example, one said:

I text a few of mine (parents). But, like I said, I've been here for aeons. So I've had families – I've got personal relationships with some parents. So it's easier for me to text. They text me. So if their child's away, they'll just text me. (Participant 1, DCSS Teacher Focus Group)

Another teacher indicated that they encouraged parents to load the QSchools app on their phone which enabled them to get “messages and newsletters and stuff on it” (Participant 3, DCSS Teacher Focus Group).

The Principal encouraged teachers and staff to engage parents using a number of digital technology platforms such as the school website, QSchools app, and Facebook. He supported teachers to build relationships with students, parents, and families through conventional means such as class newsletters and the use of interactive platforms such as ClassDojo, SMS, and educational programs accessible at school and home.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The DCSS Principal built knowledge of students, teachers, curriculum, and milieus (schools, classrooms, parents, local community, and technology) throughout his career. He described a critical time of learning about parent-school-community engagement when as a secondary school Humanities and Social Sciences teacher he also worked with a guidance officer for half a day a week in a position with a community relations focus. From this opportunity he developed a strong sense of empathy which deepened his knowledge and understanding of not only differences among families, but also differences in backgrounds and expectations that can separate teachers and parents to impede parent-school-community engagement. He adopted an “Atticus Finch” approach to his role, indicating the need to suspend judgement about students and others until he had spent time “walking around in their skin” (DCSS Principal Interview).

This philosophy infused the Principal's strategies and practices for parent-school-community engagement. He developed knowledge of students by creating early personal connections with each student. He remembered and used the names of students and parents whenever he saw them. This made them feel not only valued but also valuable members of the school community. The Principal fostered teacher awareness that although parents may not share their background or perspectives they nevertheless had high expectations for their child's education and the school. He encouraged them to view difference through an abundance rather than deficit lens. Teachers were therefore encouraged to find ways to engage every parent in their child's learning. The Principal modelled respect and support for all parents and students as evidenced in practices such as employing teachers/staff able to communicate with parents from the dominant cultural group and employing interpreters for meetings with parents from other cultural groups.

The Principal indicated that parent resources and curriculum requirements needed careful weighing to achieve maximum learning and teaching outcomes in the learning time available. He used the strategy of purposeful connections to align student learning opportunities with different areas of the curriculum. According to the Principal, parent engagement was enhanced by knowing what was happening in classrooms. He also conceived parent engagement through the notion of visibility. He demonstrated visibility not only by his physical presence in the school, but also in his practices (e.g., decisions about smaller class sizes) which he considered parents would recognise as favourable for teaching and student learning.

Throughout this case study, the Principal's approach to building relationships with parents and community members was revealed as responsive, flexible, adaptable, and nimble. Parents for whom English was not their first language recognised the strategies the school and teachers used as valuing their engagement in their child's learning. They experienced a strong sense of inclusivity and belonging. The Principal was supported in his efforts to reach out to the community by a committed and dedicated teaching staff. This was demonstrated by the school's Centenary celebrations and innovative early-year's programs that had emerged in the last several years. Strategic in nature and timing, these programs underlined the importance the school attached to positive early connections with parents and prospective students. The Principal encouraged outside organisations (e.g., Vietnamese Language School) that would advantage student learning and wellbeing, and provide a service to the broader community to utilise the school's facilities on weekends. He also used a range of conventional means of contact and digital communication technologies and platforms, and similarly supported teachers in their efforts to build positive relationships with parents. These findings highlighted how the Principal's knowledge of and respect for the school's context that included

students, teachers, parents, and the community enabled him to create positive parent-school-community connections for the benefit of all involved.

Warnerville State School – Case Study 2

BACKGROUND

School background

Warnerville State School (WSS) was located in Queensland's Gold Coast hinterland. It was a metropolitan public coeducational primary school with approximately 600 enrolments. Almost 80 percent of the local area's population comprised family households with the majority made up of two-parent families with children. Around 40 percent of the residents in the area were born overseas with most being born in New Zealand, England, South Africa, China, or the Philippines. In almost 90 percent of the households, English was the only language spoken at home. Some of these demographics were reflected in the school's student population which, for example, included less than 10 percent of students who had a language background other than English, and less than five percent were Indigenous Australian students. In 2016, WSS had an ICSEA score of just below 990, compared with the Australian average of 1 000, identifying the school as one of low socio-educational advantage. Data from the 2014 Phase 1 Parent Engagement in Schools (PES) project showed that the WSS Principal enjoyed positive relationships with parents. He worked with the school community to identify parent and student needs as well as shared responsibility for decision-making with this community (based on data collected during Phase I PES project 2014).

Principal background

Prior to taking up his position at WSS, the Principal was: Principal at a school in northwest Queensland; a Deputy Principal in a rural central Queensland town; and a teacher in the southern Darling Downs region in Queensland. During his time as a teacher he started to attend P&C meetings. As Deputy Principal in rural Queensland, he led a human relationships education (HRE) program where he regularly liaised with parents and community groups. He was later chosen to be on the ministerial reference group for HRE. He obtained a Masters of Educational Administration through which he learned that managing resources as a Principal did not only relate to material or human resources, but also to culture and knowledge. These experiences led him to value a positive school culture where he encouraged the school community to discuss the school's vision for the future rather than mostly focus on what may not be working.

STUDENT DIMENSION

The Principal built effective relationships with students and parents using purposeful strategies. He used “mirroring and matching” to which he was introduced when he studied neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) (WSS Principal Interview). He elaborated: “So you mirror and match the voice... You tend to match their (people’s) stance and you match the way they [stand]. You do it at about a 45 degree angle and you go into instant rapport” (WSS Principal Interview). When interacting with frustrated or angry parents he said that mirroring and matching to create rapport was not about: “...matching [a parent’s] level of screaming or yelling, but it can be about, ‘Boy, I don’t think that’s right either. Tell me about it. Come on.’ And then they calm down...” (WSS Principal Interview). For this Principal learning about NLP had made him “consciously confident” about how he spoke and acted with parents and students (WSS Principal Interview). He said that he modelled these strategies during whole school assemblies, using humour, everyday language, and readily-relatable examples to purposefully connect with students and parents (WSS Principal Interview).

The WSS Principal also built positive relationships by showing respect and striving for rapport. One parent commented: “He is really approachable and he really cares about the children” (Participant 3, WSS Parent P&C Focus Group). A second parent observed:

He always talks to the children... If the child has something wrong, ‘How’s that going for you now?’ He’s aware of what’s going on and not just as a general: ‘This is happening.’ He knows what’s happening in each grade, each class. (Participant 6, WSS Parent P&C Focus Group)

The P&C President also noted the Principal’s strategies for building effective parent and student relationships:

I think the biggest thing is that he’s got such a presence. So sports days, he’s down on the loudspeaker all day. Swimming carnivals, again, he’s there, he’s present, he’s involved with it. So he’s not a Principal that sits in his office and pushes his paper around... (WSS P&C President Interview)

These examples showed that the Principal encouraged parent-school engagement through deliberate consistent efforts to positively connect with students and families. He noted their individual needs, characteristics, and circumstances and used this information as a reference point whenever he reconnected with them. Referring to the effectiveness of the Principal’s strategies for parent-school

engagement, one parent concluded that his knowledge of students and families “does make a difference” (Participant 1, WSS Parent P&C Focus Group). Another summed up the Principal’s approach by saying: “That’s what the school does well here. You’re a name, you’re not a number” (Participant 1, WSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group).

The Principal pointed out the importance of student agency as a parent-school-community engagement strategy. He noted his surprise at how many parents attended school events (e.g., sports days, Christmas concerts), but added that: “...anything that you run involving their kids, it’s their kids that are a conduit to the parents” (WSS Principal Interview). He elaborated: “Obviously the messages they take home to the parents are important, but also, just as equally as important, is using the kids to get the parents to come in and actually see what’s going on is really critically important” (WSS Principal Interview).

Teachers also described ways they harnessed student agency to enable parent-school engagement. For example, some teachers encouraged parents to bring their children with them to discuss their Semester 1 reports. The teachers discussed *three-way goal-setting sessions*. Organised by the school toward the end of Term 1, these sessions were well attended by parents and students and informed by conversations between teachers and students over several weeks beforehand about the learning goals students wanted to achieve.

The Principal recognised the role of students to create reciprocal connections between their learning at home and in school. The recognition of their role as agents of parent-school engagement was reflected in the school’s myriad practices. These included enthusiastically encouraging traditional forms of parent involvement (e.g., attending sports days) as well as instituting innovative strategies such as goal-setting sessions in which students, parents, and teachers participated.

TEACHER DIMENSION

The WSS Principal emphasised the importance of knowing his teachers. He indicated that knowledge of each teacher’s teaching style, practices, and the programs they were implementing was essential for him to talk with parents about their child’s academic progress and wellbeing.

Teachers signalled their support of the Principal’s leadership and the positive staff relationships he engendered. One teacher commented:

He makes appointments with us to come into our room and watch lessons.... But it's not threatening at all, and he'll give you a little sheet of paper with some feedback on it and it's always positive. (Participant 2, WSS Teacher Focus Group)

Another teacher observed:

He feels confident in our abilities, obviously, to communicate and if anything does go wrong or if we have a query, I feel confident that I can go and ask him. But he also lets me do what I want to do. Obviously he puts out the guidelines of what we can and cannot do. (Participant 3, WSS Teacher Focus Group)

Parents also endorsed the Principal's leadership style and its importance for teachers and students.

One explained:

We've all worked in companies where if the boss doesn't get it right then everyone else has tension and stress. Same here, the boss has looked after all of his staff and then they find it easier to do their jobs, and the children are happier. (Participant 4, WSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group)

A second parent succinctly observed: "Because a stressed teacher, makes stressed kids, makes a miserable home life" (Participant 3, WSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group).

This Principal was explicit when speaking with teachers and staff about the strategies he used and why. He stressed the importance of communication, particularly face-to-face, to build positive parent-school-community relationships. Teachers recognised that parent engagement was a school priority. One iterated, "We've got the idea that parents are invited, they're welcome ... always at any time of the day" (Participant 3, WSS Teacher Focus Group). They noted the importance of having regular contact with parents that communicated positive information and feedback. This was not necessarily about major events such as *Student of the Week*, but could include a phone call, an email, or a comment at the pick-up point noting a student's effort in class (e.g., "Michael did well today.") (Participant 2, WSS Teacher Focus Group). Teachers at the school felt supported in their efforts to reach out to parents: "If we go to them (the Principal/school leadership group) with a proposition [such] as bringing parents in for any sort of activities, they're always more than happy for us to do so; they always support us on that" (Participant 1, WSS Teacher Focus Group).

The Principal built each teacher's capacity to interact positively with parents and the community. When speaking with teachers he said he would tell them a story of how once, after a "bad day" at work, a petrol station attendant, who saw his badge, asked about what the school was like (WSS Principal Interview). He iterated: "We have a choice in our school as to what we say over the back fence, what we say at the petrol station, what we say at the grocery store" (WSS Principal Interview). Rather than complain about his day, he would tell teachers that: "I chose to say something else, and that was, 'It's a great school. We've got fantastic staff, great kids, really good parents, great community'" (WSS Principal Interview). He elaborated: "It's a fake it until you *become* it issue; not until you *make* it, but until you actually *become* what you're saying" (WSS Principal Interview). He would explain to teachers that if everyone in the school was "sending out positives" then whenever parents talked it would have a positive flow-on effect to the broader community that would "build up the reputation of the school" (WSS Principal Interview). Hence, the Principal was explicit in helping teachers to develop "ways and means that they can talk with people" (WSS Principal Interview). He pointed to a text, *Learn: Lead: Succeed* (Principals Australia Institute, 2007), that guided his leadership. He stated that this text focused on five themes namely leadership: starts from within; is about influencing others; develops a rich learning environment; builds professionalism; and inspires leadership actions and aspirations in others.

CURRICULUM DIMENSION

In matters of the curriculum, the school's P&C President indicated that the Principal kept the committee apprised of new programs together with their implementation and relative success (WSS P&C President Interview). Although parents in the P&C committee articulated that it was not their role to participate in the formal curriculum, discussions with the teachers showed the considerable lengths to which they went to build the capacity of parents to contribute to their child's school learning. This was most evident when looking at the topic of homework and the program, *Speech Sound Pics* (SSP). In relation to homework, the Principal relayed that he learnt early in his career as a classroom teacher about the "need [for] parent feedback" (WSS Principal Interview). This was one reason initial parent-teacher interviews at WSS were scheduled in the first semester (week seven) each year. According to the Principal, these early discussions were important for teachers to learn about the experiences of students and parents so: the amount of homework being set, the kinds of activities to offer, possible ways to differentiate homework for different students, and timing of homework to align with the needs of families, could be mutually evaluated and adjusted if necessary.

The teachers also discussed their strategies for supporting parents who indicated they lacked confidence to help their child with homework. One teacher noted that not all parents wanted to help with homework however, he indicated that tasks were set at a C level (i.e., meeting the year-level standard) and parents who needed support would usually email him to say, “I don’t understand such and such” (Participant 4, WSS Teacher Focus Group). He continued: “Then I’ll call them up and I’ll say, ‘Come in and I’ll explain it to you and I’ll be able to help out’” (Participant 4, WSS Teacher Focus Group).

A second teacher added:

I have the same thing, and I said this on my parent interviews and I’ve sent out via a couple of emails and newsletters as well saying, ‘With our new SSP (*Speech Sound Pics*)... don’t feel silly if you have any questions because it took me a long time to learn it as well. So please feel free to email me, come and see me or anything. Call me if you have questions about it.’ Then I also didn’t send out homework until I had my parent interviews, so I could teach them (parents) how to do the homework with them (students) and also, there’s still only four or five, but at the end of this term or the beginning of next term, once they’re in a routine, I invite the parents to come in and we do SSP together in the classroom so they can follow that up at home.
(Participant 1, WSS Teacher Focus Group)

Speaking about the Mathematics curriculum and homework, one teacher further noted: “Sure enough, every Friday when we go through and mark it (homework), I’ll have one or two kids who say, ‘Oh, I didn’t do it that way. This is the way dad told me to do it’” (Participant 4, WSS Teacher Focus Group). According to this teacher, he would tell the students: “That’s fine, because you’ve got to learn different strategies” (Participant 4, WSS Teacher Focus Group).

Students reflected comments made by the teachers (above) about homework and parents. Describing the practices of WSS teachers, one said, “They would normally say: ‘Encourage your parents to try and help you. If you don’t understand this, ask your parents’” (Participant 5, WSS Student Focus Group). The students added that the school offered programs in which parents could participate such as an after-school homework club and spelling class.

The topic of homework provided insights into how WSS teachers worked with parents to promote student learning and wellbeing. They set up numerous communication channels including email, phone, newsletters, information guides, and parent-teacher interviews. The teachers endeavoured to make parents feel comfortable about asking questions about programs the school used (e.g., “Don’t feel

silly if you have any questions because it took me a long time to learn it as well.”) They used a range of strategies to build the capacity of parents for helping their child at home. These included: one-on-one sessions (parent/s and teacher); three-way sessions (parent/s, teacher, and student); and invitations to help in the classroom to learn alongside their child in real time. Through these avenues they provided explicit teaching, explanations, demonstrations, and modelling as parents watched, practised, and applied what they learnt. The teachers evidenced respect for parents by not expecting them to assist with homework until they had the knowledge, skills, and confidence they needed. Instead, they acknowledged them as co-learners and in turn, empowered them as co-teachers of their child. The students were actively encouraged to seek help with their homework from their parents. The teachers demonstrated respect for parent knowledge by recognising in the classroom the legitimacy and worth of different possible strategies they might use when assisting their children with homework tasks.

THE DIMENSION OF MILIEUS

School milieu

WSS evidenced an atmosphere of inclusivity and belonging. Parents described the school as having “a really good community feeling” and that “everybody is made to feel welcome” (Participant 1, WSS Parent P&C Focus Group). For students, a dedicated friendship spot and buddy bench were examples of inclusive practices in the school grounds. For parents, examples included a number of spaces outside classrooms, next to playgrounds, and under-cover concrete play areas with seating created for them to sit and share informal conversations with one another before and after school. The physical environment also featured colourful murals which communicated the school’s values: “Be safe”, “Be proud”, “Be respectful”, and “Be a learner”, along with positive messages such as, “We love our school”.

The school website, newsletters, and annual report similarly evidenced a strong sense of pride. On the website, prospective parents were welcomed with positive statements such as: “We invite you to contact us to personally visit our school to speak to a member of our administrative team and to experience the spirit of WSS” (WSS Website). Current parents were encouraged to get involved in the school through activities such as tuckshop and fundraising as well as engage in their child’s learning by meeting with the teacher and communicating regularly. The annual report encouraged parent and community engagement through: School and Community Meetings, the P&C committee, class meetings, parent-teacher evenings, parent-teacher-student interviews (e.g., three-way goal setting sessions), fortnightly electronic parent newsletters, emails, Facebook, school digital sign, and presentations at school assemblies.

The Principal employed numerous other engagement strategies that included sending personalised invitations to events to parents and personally taking new families on tours of the school. Students and parents reported that school offices administrators/staff were welcoming, friendly, and built connections with them and their families. One parent explained that the office administrators: “Know all the kids. I walk in and they’re like, ‘Oh yes, you’re their mum,’ and I’m like, ‘Yeah’. They’re very approachable” (Participant 2, WSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group). Another parent commented: “I don’t think there’s ever a day... that we walk away from this school and don’t go, ‘I love that school’” (Participant 2, WSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group).

The Principal noted that the prevailing positive school culture was not always so. When he arrived he found teachers “were scared of parents” and that parents perceived “nothing was being done about [student] behaviour problems” (WSS Principal Interview). He added that, “...parents were saying things [to their child] like, ‘If someone hits you, get up and hit them back’” hence, “teachers were very gun shy of parents” (WSS Principal Interview). In response, the Principal drew on strategies from the text, *Learn: Lead: Succeed* (Principals Australia Institute, 2007), to probe the school’s culture. First, he asked the teachers/staff to metaphorically depict the school and “include what they thought was important” (WSS Principal Interview). Second, he asked them to list current school values. Third, they compiled a *history gram* to chart significant past school events. Fourth, they brainstormed an *iconography* of the school’s “traditions, rituals, behaviours, icons, unwritten laws, and taboos” (WSS Principal Interview). The teachers/staff subsequently selected five of these to critically examine underlying assumptions, possible reasons these existed, and their influence on the school’s culture. Fifth, he asked the teachers/staff to list positives, minuses, and suggestions to improve WSS. Throughout the process he also invited the previous Principal to provide his perspective and insights on the school. From these activities, three critical issues emerged: “...behaviour, the ineffectiveness of the operation of Prep, and everyone’s running their own race” (WSS Principal Interview). In addition to these whole-staff activities, the Principal spoke to each staff member individually and “actively talked to parents and asked them about the school” (WSS Principal Interview). He noted how this information-gathering process guided school improvement while simultaneously ensured continued teacher/staff and parent “buy-in” as his plans unfurled (WSS Principal Interview).

For example, to tackle the problem of student behaviour, the Principal consulted with parents through a survey that was sent home with each student as homework for them to work through together and provide feedback. He assembled a committee of parent representatives who worked with him to develop a behaviour plan known as “the smooth and bumpy road” (WSS Principal Interview). He

explained that the plan relied on an analogy of two roads which everyone understood: “One’s a straight, smooth road. The other one’s windy” (WSS Principal Interview). He continued:

If you’re on the straight, smooth road, then you get to take part in all the activities in the school.... The kids have little cars that they actually move on the road itself. Basically, then, teachers are required, on the smooth road, to have some sort of positive reinforcer system going in their classroom. On the smooth road the kids can get things like *Student of the Week*, *Warnerville Gotchyas*, and *Warnerville Spirit Award* – which comes with a certificate and morning tea with me.... On the bumpy side, there are things called, signs. They’re like levels of behaviour, but they’re written as *signs* because the kids have cars.... Basically, the first sign is a warning, second and third signs, they’re blank on the chart... that’s because they’re negotiated in class. Most often they’re a timeout and a longer timeout or a timeout in a buddy classroom.... Parents are brought in at Sign 3 and an email (or a personal conversation) goes home to say that their child’s gone up to that. And then Sign 4 has consequences. One of those consequences is the Red Room. It can be a one- or two-day Red Room, with the exception of throwing rocks or similar, which is a five-day Red Room. (WSS Principal Interview)

The Principal reported that parents also used the smooth and bumpy road at home, which he found “really interesting because that was an unexpected consequence... of the process” (WSS Principal Interview). Parents indicated that their children enjoyed being rewarded for their behaviour. One stated: “Our son loves it.... He’s begging to be rewarded for good behaviour, rather than always being penalised for bad” (Participant 1, WSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group).

To first understand the school’s culture, the WSS Principal used a number of activities. He actively engaged with teachers/staff, the past Principal, and parents to ascertain their perceptions, identify critical issues, reimagine the school’s values, and plan future directions. Together with parents, he successfully created a school-wide student behaviour plan (the smooth and bumpy road). WSS was welcoming and inclusive and members of this community were proud of their school. The Principal’s practices, use of physical spaces, and school messages reinforced that parent engagement was valued and their views, ideas, and contributions were taken seriously.

Classroom milieu

Parents associated engagement in the classroom at WSS with feeling welcomed, respected, and wanted. One parent new to the school explained:

We've felt welcomed by both class teachers to come in and help out in class. It's not 'drop your kid off at nine o'clock and pick him up at three o'clock'. If you want to come and help with reading, or Fun Day afternoon, [you can]. It's nice to know that your input as a parent is respected as well. It's important for your kids to see you there.... They see you in the tuckshop or something like that, they love it. They really do. It's nice to feel that you're wanted by the school. (Participant 3, WSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group)

When the Principal was asked about the different ways parents participated in classrooms, he noted that this topic was raised at the last school and community meeting. As a result, he said, "So we've asked our teachers to put out there how their parents can help in the classroom, what sort of times, what sort of things that they can do, and then the teachers could capitalise on that from there" (WSS Principal Interview). The Principal used a range of strategies to include parents in the classroom. He described one strategy as, "getting in and actually watching what's going on in classrooms" (WSS Principal Interview). He explained that this approach ensured alignment between the school's expressed strategies for involving parents and what was actually happening in classrooms (WSS Principal Interview).

The P&C President talked about the Principal's approach to parent engagement in classrooms. For example, he actively encouraged parent engagement without creating a sense of expectation. The P&C President explained that: "If I were expected to do something that would get my back up a little bit" (WSS P&C President Interview). He iterated that the Principal regularly talked positively about parent-school engagement on assembly and at other times such as sports days.

The P&C President, parents, and teachers however, noted how parent engagement was taken up differently across the school and discussed perceived constraints on parent engagement in classrooms. For example, the P&C President said:

...I do think that it depends on the teacher a lot and there's only so much, I think, that he (the Principal) can do at the teacher level because some teachers would cope very well with help and others would not. (WSS P&C President Interview)

One parent also indicated that parent engagement in classrooms depended on the "personality of teachers" and "their way of teaching style and how they like to run their classroom" (Participant 6, WSS Parent P&C Focus Group). Other parents observed: "Some teachers don't want it" (Participant 4); "I'd say it's the teacher, yeah" (Participant 2); and "Yeah, I don't think they find time to fit it in" (Participant 6). Constraints on classroom time were also linked to changed student and teacher needs

and the curriculum in the upper primary school. Speaking of his own experience, the P&C President opined that, “more help was needed in the younger years and then as the kids got more independent and moved up there was less need for it” (P&C President Interview). He added that his skillset for helping in the classroom diminished as his children progressed from year-to-year:

So once you get up into the higher levels, I wouldn't feel super comfortable coming in and helping out in a Year 6 classroom if they were doing maths because I know the way they do maths these days is way different to the way I did maths. ... So the curriculum has only gotten bigger, I think, and the expectations on the teachers are more and more. (WSS P&C President Interview)

For the teachers, diminished opportunities to engage parents in classrooms were linked to the introduction of the Australian Curriculum (and, in Queensland, the use of Curriculum to Classroom materials) and standardised testing (e.g., National Assessment Program in Literacy and Numeracy [NAPLAN]). One teacher commented:

...I think the way that we've engaged with parents has changed because of the curriculum. You can't get the parents in to do reading groups because it's so prescriptive of how we do it: what the process is, and what we have to say then, and what kind of questions you have to ask, how long you wait. It's too hard. (Participant 1, WSS Teacher Focus Group)

The teachers said they missed “culmination days” where parents and grandparents used to be invited at the end of each term to the classroom to share activities with their child that they had set up (Participant 3, WSS Teacher Focus Group). Parents in each of WSS's two parent focus groups (P&C and non-P&C) made similar comments about the absence of such past positive opportunities for them to celebrate their child's learning. The Principal explained that, “It (culmination days) just became all too hard in terms of how things changed and were being done” (WSS Principal Interview). He noted that many parents still were regularly involved in helping with art rotational activities and reading, for example, especially in the lower school classrooms. A number of reasons however, accounted for fewer parents helping with reading groups. He elaborated:

There's been a higher imperative put on results, and probably NAPLAN results. So therefore, we can't afford any more to run our reading groups, such that we're dependent on parents to come in to do the reading group and they don't turn up. (WSS Principal Interview)

Although the Principal encouraged parent engagement openly and often, WSS parents reported that opportunities for them to engage in classrooms depended on individual teachers. Some parents perceived their capacity to contribute to student learning decreased as their child moved into upper year levels and the curriculum became more complex. Parents, teachers, and the Principal signalled that curriculum changes and standardisation impeded parent-school engagement in classrooms.

Parent milieu

The Principal conceptualised positive parent-school-community relationships as the foundation of a strong school. He invested in these relationships, not as a figurehead, but as someone who genuinely cared about the WSS family. He indicated that building good relationships meant that when he, or any of the teachers/staff, inevitably had to have difficult conversations with parents, it was easier because they already had engaged positively with the school. The Principal's capacity to build this sense of community was demonstrated by a parent, who for personal reasons, had left the local area, but continued to drive 40 minutes each day so her child could remain at the school. The parent commented:

...and the support I've got here, not just for her (the child), but for me, I was like, 'No, she's staying. I'm not moving her at all. She's staying in this school'. I think, no matter where I go, she'll always be at this school. (Participant 6, WSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group)

This case study has previously highlighted the multiple different ways this Principal demonstrated his connectedness with the school community. These include: remembering the names of parents and students and showing genuine concern for their welfare; personally conducting school tours; creating a familial relaxed atmosphere during school assemblies to connect with the school community; personally inviting parents to these gatherings; using a range of strategies to build rapport with parents such as encouraging teachers to adopt an *open door* policy and send regular positive messages to them about their child's learning and wellbeing; and communicating in several forms (e.g., email, phone, face-to-face, incidental contact, formal meetings).

Parents at WSS gained the impression that they were keepers of important knowledge about children (which teachers might not be able to access) and their input was valued and important at the school. These impressions stemmed from conversations with teachers and the Principal and the strategies they used. One parent commented:

Your opinion's not overlooked. If they're (teachers) finding it hard to connect with a student they'll say to the parent, 'I'm just having a bit of a hard time trying to gauge what's happening' and 'What do you do at home?' and they listen to what you're saying and then they introduce it into school as well. So it's not a whole different way of helping the child. It's what you use at home, so it's familiar to the child. (Participant 2, WSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group)

A second parent observed that teachers were: "Supportive of parents, working with them – they (parents) know their children best. They're with you. They're side-by-side with you. Not above you or 'we're so far removed from [you]' whatever" (Participant 3, WSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group). Another parent stated: We all know that there are expectations because it comes back to the respect thing. We respect what the school would like us to do. But they respect that we all have to take a slightly different path to get to the same point and support us in that.... It's great. (Participant 4, WSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group)

Parents recognised that their presence and input were valued at the school. They felt part of a team working towards the shared goal of achieving optimal student learning and wellbeing outcomes. The strategies used by the Principal and teachers/staff highlighted to them the ongoing role they had to play in their child's education and that parent knowledge was essential if they were to cater effectively to each child's individual needs.

Local community milieu

The Principal's experiences of working in schools enabled him to develop effective ways of working with parents. He became interested in parent engagement early in his career and took advantage of opportunities to talk with other Principals and visit schools to see the strategies they were using to build parent-school-community connections. He subsequently championed an initiative he called, "School and Community Meetings", as a way of engaging the WSS community in "higher-level decision making" (WSS Principal Interview).

Unlike P&C meetings which were typically attended by a small number of interested concerned parents, School and Community Meetings attracted 30 or more people who each actively participated. Held every three years, the purpose of these meetings was "getting staff, community members, and parents to come and actually talk about particular aspects of the school and to give feedback" (WSS Principal Interview). This feedback responded to two questions: "What's really working well?" and "What's our vision for the future?" (WSS Principal Interview). Hence, rather than ask, "What's good?" and "What's bad?" – which might encourage negativity – the Principal sought constructive feedback to



reimagine the school's values and vision (WSS Principal Interview). The concept of *vision values voting* emerged as a central feature of these meetings. Drawing on ideas from other schools, the Principal explained that he had developed a process to overcome the issue of when people in schools get together and “write all over butchers’ paper” only to find “the most important things” get lost (WSS Principal Interview). To initiate the process, he said all parents were invited to participate in a school-wide survey to identify possible areas for improvement. This information was reduced to 12 issues for parents at the School and Community Meeting to prioritise into: four they considered most important, four that were next important, and four of less importance. From this process the Principal said he gained “a real solid feel of where that particular group of people, in representing the community, [was] saying, “These are the issues”” (WSS Principal Interview).

Teachers also facilitated the process. Although all parents were invited to the meeting, the Principal asked each teacher to distribute written invitations to five parents on his behalf. Hence, for 27 classes the previous year this meant the parents of 135 students were personally invited. Two teachers or members of the school's leadership team also worked with each parent team (up to six teams with five or six parents each). These 12 facilitators received professional development about protocols for use during the meeting such as “skilful dialogue”, the idea of “chunking up and chunking down”, and dealing with “questions of advocacy” and “questions of inquiry” (WSS Principal Interview).

With the benefit of experience the Principal had refined the meeting process to one evening (approximately three hours) broken in-between by a communal meal. Catering for the meeting showed respect for the parents' time and ensured they were more likely to be able to attend. During the meal break, information from each group was electronically collated to enable sharing of the results afterward and ultimately the formulation of a *Statement of Purpose* for subsequent dissemination to the broader school community. The meeting process and documentation provided a tangible record of joint decision-making and a path for achieving parent-school-community goals going forward.

In speaking about other community initiatives, the Principal noted the support available to the school from multiple outside organisations. He singled out two: *Evolve Interagency Services*, which provided therapeutic and behavioural support for students and, *Kalwun Development Corporation*, which provided specific support for Indigenous Australian students and their parents and families. The P&C President also noted that the school had set up good working relationships with several community groups that paid a nominal fee to hire the school's facilities such as the school hall and grounds on a regular basis. She also indicated the school had “very good relationships with the local politicians in

the area” (WSS P&C President Interview). Commenting on the benefits to the school of these positive relationships, she said: “(Principal’s name) been very good with that and as much as you might not like the political aspect of it, if you don’t have a strong relationship with your local members, you’re not going to get any extra funds” (WSS P&C President Interview).

In addition, the Principal and other WSS staff noted three early-years initiatives which built effective connections with the local community. These were: a mobile *Pop-Up Library* which was funded by the State Library of Queensland through the *First 5 Forever* program and operated each week in the school grounds; a *Pre-Prep Day* which the school ran at the end of each year for parents with a child enrolled in Prep the next year; and *Koala Joeys*, a program for Pre-Prep children from birth to five years old.

Speaking about *Koala Joeys*, the Head of Curriculum (HoC) indicated that she and another teacher were trained in the program. Together they worked with parents and their children one morning each week for approximately 90 minutes. She observed that the experience was “as much an education for parents as well as the children” (WSS HoC Interview). The set program took about 40 minutes and emphasised parent-child interactivity through familiar nursery rhymes, movement, singing, and dancing. During the program, the HoC noted that she and the teacher “[got] to feed in lots of information about what are good skills for early literacy and numeracy with the parents” (WSS HoC Interview). They also relayed to them, “information about recent brain research and how it’s important to be doing these sorts of activities with the littlies” (WSS HoC Interview). Afterwards the teachers and parents enjoyed a shared morning tea and playtime with the children. The school provided tea/coffee and biscuits and the children brought their own lunchboxes and shared fruit. The HoC commented, “Again, it’s a time to talk about healthy eating and manners” (WSS HoC Interview). A future expansion of the program to include more trained teachers promised additional benefits to the school from the professional development these staff would receive such as enhanced learning and teaching in their own early-years classrooms.

One teacher summarised the value of these three early-years initiatives, saying:

So we’re trying to put in stuff before school so that we’re not catching up when they get to school. The kids know the classroom. So with *Koala Joeys* we visit the Prep playground and the classrooms and they’ve been to the library and they’ve been everywhere and we know (Principal’s name) and we know teachers. So that’s the whole idea, and the parents, I guess, feel a bit more connected to the school and they get to ask the questions that they may not know about. (Participant 3, WSS Teacher Focus Group)

One parent indicated that the integration of these different early-years initiatives into the school community meant that her daughters experienced less anxiety in starting school than they might have otherwise. She said the reason for this amounted to “familiarity” created by “the community between kindy to school.... So they know the Principal, teachers, and it’s the communication and the relationship between both. I found it really good too” (Participant 3, WSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group).

The early-years initiatives at WSS encouraged positive parent-school-community relationships by fostering familiarity, confidence, and communication so on their first day at school Pre-Prep children were “not walking into a brand new place” (Participant 1, WSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group). Opportunities for parents to learn in settings that were non-threatening and enjoyable increased their knowledge, understanding, and skills, allowing them to feel supported in their role as their child’s first teachers and in preparing them for when their child moved into formal education. From “kindy to school” these initiatives not only prepared children for school in general and specifically to enter WSS, but also built a sense of connectedness among parents, children, teachers, the Principal, and broader community.

Technology milieu

WSS used multiple digital technologies and platforms to engage parents in their child’s learning. These included the: school Website, electronic fortnightly parent newsletters, emails, Facebook, apps such as School Star, SMS system, and digital school signboard. Parents indicated that they appreciated these multiple forms of communication, recognising that “if you haven’t got email, they (the school) always back it up with paper” (Participant 1, WSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group) and “it makes it easier for parents because we get the reminders and we know what’s coming up” (Participant 2, WSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group).

The Principal supported and enabled teachers to build positive relationships with students, parents, and families using apps such as ClassDojo. Using ClassDojo teachers communicated with parents and shared “what they’re doing in class” (Participant 3, WSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group). One elaborated:

It’s [ClassDojo] just an easy way to send photos. It’s a bit like an email thing, but it’s more like just keeping the parents involved with what’s going on... It creates that opportunity for the parent to talk the same language, because instead of just printing out a newsletter and it getting

lost in the bag, they're getting to at least see what has been happening. They feel like they've been in the room, but they haven't been in the room. (Participant 3, WSS Teacher Focus Group)

Parents explained numerous benefits of this digital platform and its interactive capacity. One enunciated: "You're getting information of what they've done during the day. So you pick them (child) up and you say, 'Hey, how was this today that you did at school?'" (Participant 5, WSS Parent P&C Focus Group). Another parent described how they: "showed [their] kid the photo and we talked about it" (Participant 6, WSS Parent P&C Focus Group). A third parent indicated that the teacher's use of ClassDojo afforded them insights into aspects of their child and school other than academic work. For example, she not only saw how the teacher talked about her child, but also how the teacher and other classmates "worked as a team" and "the way they helped their teachers" (Participant 4, WSS Parent P&C Focus Group). Parents confirmed that they valued this form of engagement because it gave them a window into the classroom and school, and helped them have informed conversations at home with their child about what and how they were learning.

Parents also used ClassDojo to send messages to teachers, as one recounted when speaking about her son: "During the day I forgot to tell him I couldn't pick him up, he needed to come down, so I could message the teacher" (Participant 1, WSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group). Another parent observed:

Well preferred method of contact for this class would be through the Dojo system as that is checked more regularly than the emails daily, only because it's right there; it's on all the time and that will be a trigger, and the emails can take a couple of days to get to because of the workload. (Participant 6, WSS Parent P&C Focus Group)

Working parents reported that ClassDojo ensured they did not miss out on important aspects of their child's learning. One explained:

I normally work Tuesday afternoons, so I can't get to assembly any more, but her teacher also puts up who got *Student of the Week* and puts the photo on the Dojo as well.... So she videoed the class doing this *GoNoodle* (Movement and Mindfulness for the Classroom) dance and put that up. It's good to know what they're doing in class, not just homework and that sort of stuff. (Participant 1, WSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group)

The WSS Principal used several technology platforms such as the school website, Facebook, and digital signboards to engage parents. He supported and enabled teachers to build positive parent-school

relationships using apps such as ClassDojo which parents recognised as an authentic real-time means to connect to the classroom and teachers that benefited their child's learning and wellbeing.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Parent-school-community engagement permeated the language, culture, and practices of WSS. The Principal provided leadership for engagement by recognising the importance of children's connections to their parents and families and in turn how parents and families connected with one another and the community. In short, he paid attention to students and parents and built positive relationships with all in the school and broader community.

His knowledge of neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) helped him become consciously confident of what he was doing and why. He used NLP-informed strategies to engender respect and build rapport with others. He exercised his agency as Principal (e.g., during school assemblies) to demonstrate that the school valued each student. Together with the teachers/staff, he used student agency to enhance learning and teaching by encouraging different activities such as student-parent-teacher (three-way) goal-setting sessions.

The Principal emphasised to teachers the importance of regular positive communication with parents – face-to-face if possible, and to let them know about their child's major as well as small daily achievements (e.g., positive classroom behaviour). He urged teachers/staff to speak positively about the school both in and outside the school grounds. The teachers indicated that the Principal's approach positioned them to implement parent-school initiatives successfully while simultaneously encouraged open lines of communication among those in the school community. Accordingly, the number and range of strategies the teachers used to assist parents to work effectively with each child at home evidenced a respectful approach toward the role parents can play in their children's learning. At the same time, their responsiveness, commitment, and care showed the value and importance they attached to cultivating productive parent-school relationships.

Some parents and teachers reported that teaching styles, preferences, needs, and time constraints affected the different ways and possibilities for opportunities to engage parents in student classroom learning. Parent engagement was most prevalent in the lower primary school. Perceptions of their capacity to contribute to student learning in upper primary classrooms impeded engagement for some parents. Structural changes in education namely the introduction of the Australian Curriculum and its implementation using classroom materials that encouraged prescribed teaching approaches together

with increased emphasis on standardised test results also emerged as impediments. These changes appeared to negatively impact decisions to continue past innovative parent engagement activities at the school and to limit future possibilities for regular parent engagement opportunities in student learning in classrooms.

The Principal used a number of parent-school engagement strategies to build a positive school climate. These included being visible in the school daily, instituting School and Community Meetings, creating dedicated physical spaces for parents outside classrooms, conducting personal school tours, using multiple forms of communication, and encouraging teachers to use digital platforms such as ClassDojo.

Early-years initiatives such as *Koala Joeys* built reciprocal home-school connections. These programs aided smooth transitions for students into formal education while simultaneously built the capacity of teachers to work closely with parents and families in ways that benefited student learning and teaching.

The number and range of organisations and community groups with which the Principal worked successfully evidenced his abilities to communicate effectively and build and sustain networks of quality relationships with others. He recognised however, that parent-school-community engagement was ongoing. The Principal's approach to parent-school-community engagement thus reflected the philosophy to which he subscribed: *Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.*

Reef Island State School – Case Study 3

BACKGROUND

School background

Reef Island State School (RISS) was located in a metropolitan town in northern Queensland. It was a public, coeducational primary school with a student population of approximately 600. The local area's population was growing and characterised by family households that included almost 40 percent couple families without children, 35 percent two-parent families, and approximately 30 percent single parent families. Twenty percent of the local residents were born overseas with the majority indicating their country of origin as New Zealand, England, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, or the United States of America. In approximately 90 percent of households, English was reported to be the only language spoken at home. However, 30 percent of students at RISS indicated having a language background other than English. Other languages spoken included Tagalog, Italian, Maori, Mandarin, and Tokelauan. Some of these demographic characteristics were reflected in the school's student population, which included 35 percent Indigenous Australian students. In addition, students with disabilities represent approximately 17 percent of the school's population. In 2016, RISS had an ICSEA score of just below 900, compared with the Australian average of 1 000, identifying the school as one of low social-educational advantage. Data from the 2014 Phase I Parent Engagement in Schools (PES) project showed that the Principal enjoyed positive relationships with parents. She made decisions based on what she considered were the school's best interests, but also accommodated and valued the voice of parents and the school community (based on data collected during Phase I PES project 2014).

Principal background

Before taking up her position at the school over a decade ago, the Principal had over 20 years of experience in a number of secondary schools as a teacher and then as Deputy Principal. The Principal described her early experiences of parent engagement as "decent" and was pleasantly surprised to discover increased levels of parent engagement in primary compared to secondary schools (RISS Principal Interview). She indicated that years of experience allowed her to understand that student learning and parent engagement needed to be considered equally to ensure school success. This Principal made strategic staff appointments to build and maintain positive relationships between the school and parents. As RISS Principal, she set about building the school's vision for the future, making community partnerships central to the school's strategic planning.

STUDENT DIMENSION

The Principal at RISS developed knowledge of students and parents using strategies that showed she valued them. Parents observed: “She does take a lot of time to get to know people and she is very kind and very caring” (Participant 6, RISS P&C & non-P&C Parent Focus Group); “She seems to have a really good memory” (Participant 3, RISS P&C & non-P&C Parent Focus Group); “she knows parents and she will know 99.9 percent of every student by name” (Participant 6, RISS P&C & non-P&C Parent Focus Group); “I just wandered down the hall then, she was talking to someone and I just slipped past her, she obviously noticed and said, ‘Thank you for doing this’. She notices” (Participant 4, RISS P&C & non-P&C Parent Focus Group); and “Even past students, if she saw them in the street, she’d probably go over and call them by name” (Participant 6, RISS P&C & non-P&C Parent Focus Group). According to students, the Principal displayed similar qualities. One commented: “Yeah, she’s a very sociable person. You can just walk up to her and talk to her” (Participant 7, RISS Student Focus Group).

In her dealings with parents and students, the Principal practised gratitude, approachability, and noticing.

The Principal appointed a Liaison Officer – who had also been a teacher aide and previous student and parent at the school – to help facilitate effective parent-school relationships. As part of her work, the Liaison Officer developed a detailed knowledge map of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and families. She elaborated on her work:

I have an Excel spreadsheet on my computer and on it I have every student, who they are, where they come from, like their tribes and their totems, what language they speak, and I also collect data like their hearing test and their vision test that we can’t record on our system, but I update that every year or after every test and I hand it back to teachers. (RISS Liaison Officer)

Elaborating on her role, the Liaison Officer stated that, “We do a lot of the home visits, phone calls, we engage with community, like the sporting clubs and PCYC (Police-Citizens Youth Club)” (RISS Liaison Officer Interview). She carefully gathered and systematically compiled up-to-date information on what was known and not known about the languages, cultures, histories, families, connections to country/place, and health of students. She made relevant information available to the teachers to help them navigate – in knowledgeable and sensitive ways – the complexities and challenges of working with Indigenous Australian students and their families. As a result of these strategies, the Liaison

Officer worked with the Principal and teachers/staff to encourage respectful parent-school relationships.

The RISS Principal ensured that she was the first point of contact with students and their parents. She personally conducted school enrolment interviews as a means of collecting comprehensive entry-level data that subsequently informed student learning and wellbeing. This Principal indicated that she asked parents *hard* questions early to ensure that appropriate support structures were in place to position students for success from the outset.

The Principal demonstrated her care, compassion, and a deep regard for students by adopting strategies to ensure all students were treated with respect and dignity. She took personal responsibility for student care. One teacher noted:

I've seen (Principal's name) in uniform shops buying uniforms. (The Principal) will shower the kids. I had a kid who used to come regularly with poo caked on, dried poo, and she would shower him. I've seen (the Principal) put conditioner through kids' hair and comb the nits from them. (Participant 6, RISS Teacher Focus Group)

The Principal shed light on her approach to students as part of building positive parent-school connections, saying that, "You can't teach a kid until you reach them" (RISS Principal Interview). She advocated being "highly visible" and made a point of doing playground duty every day and to referee lunchtime games, which she established to keep students engaged and connected to school (RISS Principal Interview). One teacher observed, "Well she's out there every day.... She's umpiring on the loudspeaker" (Participant 1, RISS Teacher Focus Group). Refereeing lunchtime games helped the Principal to develop knowledge of the students in an authentic context and simultaneously afforded her opportunities to model appropriate, fair, and harmonious social interaction. She used her agency as Principal to develop relationships with students who might otherwise be disengaged from school.

The Principal recognised that time spent getting to know students and positively interacting with them represented an investment in student learning and wellbeing. She acknowledged student agency as a key component of parent-school-community engagement, saying:

...and then the other secret of the universe, I think, is the kids are the *bait* and so where we've had teachers who have been very entrepreneurial in that way they don't hesitate and say, 'Is it okay if we have an open afternoon and the kids show off their science project to their parents?' I [go], 'Knock yourself out. Just do it' but I can't mandate that from my teachers. But we're

getting to that point where increasingly teachers are going: ‘We really need parents to know about their kids.’ (RISS Principal Interview)

The Principal also used strategies to build relationships with students that built solidarity among the school and broader community. One strategy was, *Word of the Week*. The P&C President explained:

At our assemblies each week we have what’s called, *Word of the Week*, which you may have seen at the front on the front sign (referring to the school-community billboard)?.... We also have an *Aboriginal Word of the Week*, which generally that’s also written up. The last one I knew of was called, *wija*, which means face, so that the kids get to learn a word of the week plus an Aboriginal word as well. (RISS P&C President Interview)

The Liaison Officer provided further insight about the *Word of the Week* strategy:

They’re a clan of the (Aboriginal name). I have access to Elders who speak the language and they give us words. We have an Indigenous word of the week alongside our Strive word of the week. So with that, our language is not being lost, and following protocols, making sure we have permission from traditional owners and then getting the language and pronouncing it right and getting it on assembly and teaching the kids is quite a big thing. (RISS Liaison Officer Interview)

The strategy of the *Word of the Week* created solidarity among the students at RISS. They built common knowledge and enjoyed positive shared experiences as they practised saying the words, used them in different contexts, learnt about their meanings, and developed understandings about language and culture. The strategy also fostered parent-school-community engagement by showing respect for parents and community members and providing meaningful opportunities for them to participate in and contribute to student learning and wellbeing in and out of the classroom.

The Principal adopted strategies that showed she valued students and their parents by: taking time to talk with them, addressing them personally, and acknowledging their contributions. She appointed a Liaison Officer to build positive connections between Indigenous Australian parents/community and the school/teachers. She recognised student agency as key to parent-school-community engagement and encouraged teachers to adopt innovative strategies to engage parents in their child’s learning. She espoused strategies that reflected children’s rights and built solidarity. These strategies included her use of diagnostic enrolment, *Word of the Week*, and refereeing student lunchtime games.

TEACHER DIMENSION

The Principal acknowledged it was the teachers themselves, their teaching practices and subsequently, the students as recipients of this teaching, that were integral to the process of engaging parents in their child's learning. She noted that her default position was an expectation that all teachers develop a relationship with each student's parents in their class. She iterated:

...ultimately my teachers themselves and who they are and how welcoming they are is the attractant ... it might be that there's a child that is a bit naughty or has done something or we need to get to know the parents and I'll say to the teacher, 'Do you know that kid's parent? Have you ever rung them? Well guess what, they need to be your friend because if we have to fight with the parent as well as the kid we're going to have double the job at hand.' (RISS Principal Interview)

Teachers indicated that the Principal built strong relationships with the staff and was prepared to *go the extra mile* to ensure that they felt well supported. One teacher observed:

She goes above and beyond. Everything that she does is for the benefit of her staff and the children... She cares. If we're going through something that's quite traumatic we can go to her and tell her and she will nurture us and support us through it. (Participant 4, RISS Teacher Focus Group)

The Principal's support of her staff was reflected in her: *open door* policy, the effort she made to attend staff social functions, and her desire to be viewed not only as the Principal, but also as a member of staff. Another teacher noted: "Yes, she's our boss, we know that and we respect her, but we are definitely able to talk to her very candidly and she will acknowledge and support us" (Participant 4, RISS Teacher Focus Group).

The value and importance placed on the role of the teachers in student learning and wellbeing were also evident in the Principal's appointment of a Duty Officer, whose role it was to manage day-to-day non-teaching challenges such as missing belongings. This appointment allowed teachers to focus their parent contact on issues related specifically to student learning and wellbeing and also reduced the likelihood of negative parent-teacher interactions. The Principal explained:

A parent can walk in off the street without an appointment and just go up and go, 'My kid's lunchbox has been stolen three times this week and what are you going to do about it?' So



there's someone there to listen to that, because our teachers don't have time. (RISS Principal Interview)

With a student population that included 35 percent Indigenous Australians, an important part of the work in building parent-school-community engagement at RISS was to develop a better understanding of these students and their families. The ultimate goal was better educational and wellbeing outcomes for this population. As part of weekly staff meetings, the Liaison Officer at RISS provided teachers with ongoing professional development (PD) and support using the framework: *Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives in Schools* (EATSIPS). Part of this PD involved teachers sharing their planning of where they had embedded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and subsequently receiving feedback from local elders – with the Liaison Officer acting as a conduit – on ways to improve what they had done.

At RISS 100 students (of 600) were identified as having a disability. The Principal iterated the importance of ongoing contact, support, and engagement of parents of children with disabilities. She described reclaiming a teacher car park within the school grounds as a drop-off and pick-up point for parents of children with varying levels of disability. The Principal noted that this process served the practical purpose of providing a safe place for the entry and exit of these students, but also provided a point where parents and teachers could have brief positive exchanges about students. She noted that this initiative had gradually built strong relationships between teachers and parents of children with disabilities, saying:

So the teachers toddle out with their kids that they look after, the teachers and teacher aides, and there's a whole group of them, there's like 30 staff, sit out with their little clutch of children waiting for the taxi or the mother or the father to come and get them and then they have that quick exchange, 'They had a great day today', or the parents go, 'How were they this morning? They were shocking when I dropped them off'. 'No, they were fine.' (RISS Principal Interview)

A further PD opportunity for teachers was the practice of *walkthroughs*, which involved teachers walking through one another's classrooms, at their own and at another school in the local community. Walkthroughs provided teachers opportunities for "sharing practices", which in turn launched generative professional conversations (Participant 3, RISS Teacher Focus Group). In more recent discussions with the Principals of each of the schools it was proposed that teachers "would actually like to see video snippets of teachers implementing their practice" (Participant 3, RISS Teacher Focus Group). The spread of innovation within and between schools highlighted the RISS Principal's

philosophy of learning and teaching as a collective responsibility and also reinforced her stance on the importance of the school as part of the broader community.

The Principal acknowledged that teachers and their practices were integral to the process of engaging parents in their child's learning. The teachers indicated that the expectations of the Principal and the leadership team in communicating with parents were clear and consistent and that this team led by example, had an open-door policy, and espoused a *whatever it takes* attitude to building positive parent-school-community relationships.

CURRICULUM

The RISS Principal facilitated the development of culturally-relevant student learning opportunities based on the Australian Curriculum, the school context, and feedback from Indigenous Australian Elders. Working closely with the Principal, the Liaison Officer iterated that the work of parent engagement was relational and could not be assumed, rather parent-school-community engagement needed to be continuously worked on. In speaking about how she achieved parent-school-community engagement for student learning, she stressed: "But it's all in the curriculum. It has to tie back because you just can't do something for nothing. It has to have a purpose" (RISS Liaison Officer Interview). Through the curriculum, students were supported to build knowledge and understanding about History, Science, the Arts, English, and the Cross-Curriculum Priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures while simultaneously learning about culture, cultural identity, and respect.

In addition to weekly staff meeting PD for teachers, the Liaison Officer endeavoured to connect knowledge that Indigenous Australian parents might have to what teachers were doing in their classrooms. She explained:

We even find out if the parents can help with the cultural stuff: 'Do you know who can help me make damper or who can teach the boys how to play didgeridoo or help them dance?' We just give them the information and then I kind of leave it to them (teachers) to make contact with the outside community... If they're not comfortable then I'll do it, but they just have to be respectful when they are doing it, and it's through our PD that we constantly remind them.

(RISS, Liaison Officer Interview)



The Liaison Office described how feedback obtained from the Elders of two local Australian Indigenous groups represented at the school had influenced what and how the curriculum was taught. Teaching about fire as part of the Year 3 Science curriculum, for example, connected with teaching the Arts in Year 4. She elucidated: “I could actually get my hands on some actual fire sticks.... This is what fire sticks look like in the natural form and this is what they look like when they’re decorated” (RISS Liaison Officer Interview). She explained how these curriculum connections opened up other learning opportunities for teachers/staff and students about respectful relationships with Indigenous Australians. She elaborated: “I’m not from the two tribal areas, [so] I have to get permission and follow protocol and there’s a big process involved on how to do it. So, just teaching the students too that they still have to be respectful” (RISS Liaison Officer Interview).

A further example concerned a text in the Year 3 English curriculum called, *Stolen Girl*. The Liaison Officer talked about the introduction of the book and her subsequent approach to working with parents:

So it was getting that message out to parents and grandparents that their children may come home talking about the *Stolen Girl* and how our Aboriginal babies were taken from their parents and it might bring back hurtful memories. So I got on the phone and contacted every single parent and just gave them the heads up that this was happening: ‘You may find that they come home and ask questions. If you’re needing counselling or support please come back in and we can offer you that.’ (RISS Liaison Officer Interview)

The Principal highlighted the challenge of engaging parents in student learning given that the structure of P&Cs perpetuated traditional roles (e.g., as fund-raisers). She noted that time taken by the *business* of P&Cs meant that parents were less likely to hear directly from teachers about what was happening in classrooms. The Principal lamented that the focus of P&C meetings was not “totally on [student] learning” (RISS Principal Interview). She explained: “If I had my way.... I would love it if a teacher could come along and present what is happening in a classroom, and the focus is totally on learning, not on who’s selling the chook raffle” (RISS Principal Interview). Nevertheless, the P&C President reinforced the opportunities created by the Principal for the P&C to influence the curriculum. She indicated that she was a member of the school’s Curriculum Strategic Planning Group. The P&C President noted that the Principal kept members informed about the latest news from Department of Education and Training and explained how changes in the education landscape might affect the school. If there was flexibility to respond to these changes, the President indicated that the Principal and the P&C members would openly discuss possibilities and explore all available options.

Parent-school-community engagement at RISS was also evident in the curriculum dimension through the theme of homework. The Principal and teachers adopted the stance that homework was not mandatory but that if parents wanted their child to complete homework, they needed to request it. The teachers indicated that they were happy to set homework for students, even if only one parent *opted-in*. This decision appeared to minimise teacher and parent anxiety about homework as parents seemed to lack time or self-efficacy for helping their child with school tasks at home. One teacher elaborated:

The parents have to opt-in to have homework because we were finding that the parents weren't having the time to do it or they weren't understanding the homework that was being sent home as well. So their level of education, compared to what was being sent home, was not matching.
(Participant 5, RISS Teacher Focus Group)

The Principal worked closely with the Liaison Officer and teachers/staff to purposefully connect different aspects of the curriculum with parents' contextual knowledge. This knowledge took account of the area's history and deepened teacher and student knowledge and understanding about Indigenous Australian culture and identity. The work of the Liaison Officer assisted teachers and parents to recognise that parent-school-community engagement was relational and needed to be ongoing.

THE DIMENSION OF MILIEUS

School milieu

The RISS Principal was described as "incredibly passionate about her job" (Participant 2, RISS P&C & non-P&C Parent Focus Group) and "the school" (RISS P&C President Interview). The Principal built positive school climate using multiple parent engagement strategies. She emphasised that visibility of, and subsequent accessibility to, teachers/staff fostered strong trusting relationships. Teachers reported, "Everyone's treated equally" (Participant 3, WSS Teacher Focus Group). A welcome message from the Principal on the school website articulated her position:

I am very proud to be the Principal of this school ... I love my job and I am lucky to work with talented and wonderful staff who aim to help every student succeed no matter what... I extend an invitation to you to visit our school in person.... Please come to the main office and introduce yourself. We hope you take up this offer and look forward to meeting you when you do. (RISS Website)

Parents attested to the welcoming atmosphere of the school and the Principal in particular: “She’s always in there and she never hushes you away. She’s always happy to chat” (Participant 3, RISS P&C & non-P&C Parent Focus Group). Teachers and the P&C President similarly concurred that the school practised an “open door policy” and communicated messages to parents of support and accessibility (Participant 1, RISS Teacher Focus Group; RISS P&C President Interview).

A strong sense of inclusivity, belonging, and welcome were evident across the school. Large “WELCOME” or “Welcome to our school” signs were strategically placed at entry points to the school. Proudly displayed inside the school administration foyer and classroom doors were also the Indigenous Australian words for welcome, “Wadda Mooli”.

The school motto, *The Reef Island Way*, comprised three core values, *Learn*, *Care*, and *Play*. The motto affirmed the school’s stance on student learning and behaviour as well as commitment to a “values in action” approach (RISS Principal Interview). According to the school’s website: “All members of the school community, including parents/carers, staff, visitors as well as students” were expected to abide by the motto. Visible reminders of the motto using colourful posters throughout the school reinforced this expectation.

The Principal’s words and actions reflected her commitment to parent-school-community engagement. Tangible messages of welcome were evident on the school website and in the grounds through signs that included local Indigenous Australian language. The school motto simply expressed the values that would ensure a supportive inclusive school climate.

Classroom milieu

The RISS Principal indicated the need for teachers to engage parents in classrooms in “organic” as opposed to “systematic” or “regular” ways characterised by prescribed and/or traditional approaches (RISS Principal Interview). Teachers were actively encouraged to welcome and invite parents into their classrooms on a regular basis. This reflected the school’s open door policy, which one teacher described as: “I think letting the parents know that you’re there, that the door is always open, and that you’re only at the other end of the phone if you need to ring” (Participant 4, WSS Teacher Focus Group). Teachers were also “encouraged to use innovative strategies to engage parents in the classroom” (RISS Principal Interview). One such strategy was an open-classroom activity at the beginning of each year. One teacher explained:

So we had two options. We had an 8:30am to 9:15am and then a 2:30pm to 3:00pm [time]. So both the options were available and parents could come in and they could sit with the kids and see what the kids were doing and engage with the learning and we just kept on teaching.

(Participant 3, RISS Teacher Focus Group)

Another strategy was co-teaching. For example, one teacher described how she and the other Year 6 teachers learnt about electrical circuits from working alongside a parent with particular Science knowledge and skills. They shared the students' assessment tasks with the parent and were open to him taking the lead in co-teaching Science with them in the classroom. The experience imbued confidence in them to host the school's Science fairs in subsequent years, evidencing the far-reaching impact of the parent-teacher co-teaching venture on student learning.

RISS's Master Teacher described a further example of co-teaching. As a Year 5 classroom teacher, she and another teacher made a decision to co-teach in a double-teaching space. She detailed the process of engaging parents in this initiative:

...that took a lot of convincing (of the parents) of how great of an idea this is going to be: 'We're going to have all 58 students in one room with two teachers.' So I had to do a lot of PR (public relations) around, 'This will be a great learning opportunity. Come in and see how this works and give us your thoughts. What do you think is working? What are the children coming home and saying or not saying?' to let us know how we were going with that. (RISS Master Teacher Interview)

By actively seeking parent feedback, the Master Teacher described how she and her colleague identified opportunities and challenges which they worked on together to ensure parent input and contributions were a valuable ingredient in the ongoing success of the co-teaching venture.

The Principal enabled engagement in classrooms by creating a school culture in which teachers recognised they were empowered to engage parents in multiple, new, different, and creative ways. Whole school strategies (e.g., open classrooms) and co-teaching between teachers and between parents and teachers were encouraged.

Parent milieu

The RISS Principal viewed parents as each child's first teacher and acknowledged the critical importance of partnering with parents to ensure the best outcomes for each child's learning and

wellbeing. She explicitly communicated to parents the need to walk *beside* staff. She reinforced to teachers/staff the need for open and ongoing communication with parents and to set clear expectations for parents' behaviour, saying:

I have recognised the need for an equal pillar to learning that is, parents. Parents are children's first teachers... I would like more teachers to be having that in their minds and I think that changes the relationship then that people have with parents.... If we can work together, and I say to parents: 'I'm beside you.' I'm not like this (indicated head-to-head, confrontational position). If I'm like this, 'We may as well give up now and you can exercise your right of choice and go somewhere else, because it's not going to work'... [I say] 'Look, I do molehills. I don't do mountains. Come to me. Don't wait for six weeks until you're ready to explode and come in and explode'.... But the teacher is your first port of call. (RISS Principal Interview)

The Principal noted that face-to-face communication was always the preferred method of communication, "the gold", but acknowledged that parents are "busy and time-poor" (RISS Principal Interview). Hence, she signalled the importance of communicating school news in a variety of ways including: newsletters (both hard copy and electronic formats), the use of bulk short message service (SMS), and communication books.

Similarly, the RISS Master Teacher stated that, "taking [a] proactive approach to engaging with parents is crucial" because it builds rapport. Phone calls to parents to share positive stories about their children were expected and subsequently the decision was made that teachers would make positive phone calls to a number of parents every week following the staff meeting. For example, when working in the classroom, the Master Teacher recalled:

...and Wednesday afternoon we would call three parents to tell them something good that their child had done that week and that was just set into our timetable and we would keep a list of who we had called and hadn't called and move through. (RISS Master Teacher Interview)

The Principal recognised parents' strengths and worked with them to actively develop their skills, not only as parents, but also in building their capacity for employment. She noticed that parents who were actively engaged as volunteers or as employees were good role models for their child and families. Reciprocally, she noticed that they gained more knowledge and ability for positively contributing to their school and community. She indicated that many of the office staff and indeed, the Liaison Officer, had started as volunteers at the school. She elaborated:

If you did a straw poll of a lot of the non-teaching staff here, you would find many of them were parents who hung around for a while and then they kept coming back and then I said: ‘Well, if you hang around for a while you’ll get a job.’ (RISS Principal Interview)

There was an expectation that volunteering was an integral part of being a parent at the school. The Principal noted that RISS had a volunteer parent agreement, where parents agreed to either pay \$30 or volunteer their time. She indicated that those who agreed to donate their time were then called and asked to complete a specific task for a short defined period of time such as selling tickets at the school’s dance fiesta for one hour. The Principal also recognised parents’ efforts and commitment to the school community on a whole-of-school assembly. She noted that during *National Volunteer Week* each year, RISS acknowledged the contribution of volunteers, thereby publicly reinforcing the importance of this role. The process of identifying, supporting, and empowering parents was described from the perspective of one Year 6 student who strongly endorsed this process as a model for students:

[The Principal] knows my mum a lot because she comes in lots. My mum, she’s getting a blue card where she’s able to come into the tuckshop to help out. But she doesn’t get paid.... It’s because she doesn’t really have a job yet. It’s really good when you volunteer first and then work your way up for a job. (Participant 16, RISS Student Focus Group)

Parents were offered opportunities to develop familiarity with the school and build their capacity to engage with their child’s formal education through programs such as, *Prep for Prep*. The Principal stated:

We run a Prep for Prep program that runs in Term 4, and so any child that parents have enrolled I ask them do they want to sign up. So the parents are captive for two hours and they stay while their kid gets a run in Prep. (RISS Principal Interview)

Make and Takes were workshops for current RISS parents offered on an intermittent basis in response to the needs of the parent community. These workshops assisted individual parents to navigate aspects of the curriculum and support their child’s learning (e.g., reading with their child at home or the use of technology in school). Parents were asked to make a small plate of food to bring along to share during the workshops, thereby creating opportunities for social interaction alongside learning.

The Principal viewed parents as each child’s first teacher and acknowledged the value and importance of building positive parent-school relationships for student learning and wellbeing. She explicitly

communicated to parents the need to walk beside teachers/staff at the school. As a school community that supported a high proportion of Indigenous Australian students and also a large number of students with disabilities, this Principal sought and utilised parent knowledge to best understand and to support each student. She valued parent knowledge and their strengths and provided opportunities for the development of their skills as volunteers and employees. Programs such as *Prep for Prep* and *Make and Takes* encouraged parent-school-community engagement by meeting the needs of new and existing parents.

Local community milieu

The philosophy, “It takes a village to raise a child”, shaped the strategies and practices used by the RISS Principal to engage with parents and the local community. When she started at RISS she set about building the school’s vision for the future, making community partnerships central to strategic planning. She said that developing her first strategic plan was “a massive community engagement exercise” that involved “a lot of consultation meetings with various stakeholder groups” (RISS Principal Interview). She reflected that she challenged those involved “to dream and give their best” saying, “If we could make this the best school in the universe, what would be its components?” (RISS Principal Interview). Parent-school-community engagement became a central theme in all subsequent strategic planning at the school.

A key strategy used by this Principal was *inreach and outreach*. This approach involved asking, “What can we do for the community and what can the community do for us?” (RISS Principal Interview). She recognised the need to develop positive relationships with key people and organisations in the local community for the mutual benefit of all parties. She proclaimed her role in this process metaphorically as a *dot-joiner*. In this role she accessed funds, enlisted community support, and gained the respect and support of teachers/staff to undertake different parent and community engagement projects.

For example, since 2004 the Principal has accessed ongoing funding from *Communities for Children* to improve learning and wellbeing outcomes for students at high risk of disadvantage. One initiative was a Science project, *Wolbachia Warriors*, which aimed to eliminate the spread of dengue mosquitoes. A second initiative was *Giggle and Grow* – a program for babies to four-year-olds which aimed to build early-years partnerships with parents to help transition their child to school. *Communities for Children* had also funded reading interventions and, in conjunction with the local PCYC, free swimming lessons.

The Principal noted additional examples of pragmatic relationships with community groups. A relationship forged with a local junior rugby league club resulted in the refurbishment and shared use

of the school oval. She reflected, “Did having an affiliation with (club name) improve my NAPLAN results? Well, maybe not directly, but at least the kids had somewhere to play” (RISS Principal Interview). She further noted that the use of the school outside of school hours (e.g., for boot camps and martial arts) not only provided venues for community organisations, but also served as security and to reduce vandalism of school property.

The quality of parent-school-community engagement at RISS was achieved through the Principal and teachers/staff not presuming to know about Indigenous Australian cultures and languages but through demonstrating cultural awareness, recognition, and deep knowledge when interacting with each family member. At the same time the school acted to do what was possible to raise student and school community awareness about the value and importance of Indigenous cultures and languages. The RISS Liaison Officer also indicated that providing regular PD to learn about Indigenous Australian cultures ensured that teachers developed deep knowledge of families and the local community and minimised possibilities of them speaking and acting in ways that might be perceived as disrespectful. Sometimes however, teachers did “hit a red flag” (RISS Liaison Officer Interview). When this occurred, the Liaison Officer said that:

...then they come and tell me and say: ‘That didn’t go really well.’ So then I’ll jump on the phone and have a chat to that person or community member and I’ll just bridge the gaps.

Sometimes (Principal’s name) will have parents coming in here blowing her head off and then she’ll send me out to bridge that gap. (RISS Liaison Officer Interview)

The Liaison Officer played a pivotal role in “bridging the gaps” that opened up when there were perceived or real breaches in trust and respect between the school/teachers and parents or community members. Her approach demonstrated the importance of a swift personal response from the school to repair breaches and restore positive relationships.

Community members also imparted valuable knowledge to young teachers who may not be aware of the area’s “hidden histories” (e.g., the practice of blackbirding) (RISS Liaison Officer Interview). The Liaison Officer noted that this has helped them and their Indigenous Australian students to recognise, “why [their] ancestors fought so hard to give us what we have today” (RISS Liaison Officer Interview).

The RISS Principal evidenced deep knowledge of the school’s various social, cultural, historical, and economic contexts in which parents and local community members were situated. She built positive relationships with them by adopting strategies that were proactive, responsive, preventative, and

restorative. She showed heightened levels of awareness, understanding, and sensitivity in her interactions with parents and community members.

Technology milieu

The RISS Principal and teachers/staff utilised various digital technologies and platforms to communicate with parents such as the school's Website, electronic newsletters, a school Facebook page, and the QSchools app. As previously indicated, the school engaged parents on the topic of technology. For example at the *Make and Take* workshops, the Principal explained that, "We show [parents] how we use technology in the school; we have iPads and these little things called XO's, which are like cheaper iPads, and then PCs" (RISS Principal Interview). The Principal elaborated that, "technology is not so foreign to the parents, but managing it within a school context is important for parents to understand how that all works" (RISS Principal Interview). The Principal also supported and enabled teachers to build relationships with students and their families through interactive digital class platforms such as ClassDojo.

The school website allowed the Principal to convey important messages regarding the general tone of the school or *what the school stood for*. For example, the Principal's message regarding diversity was clear: "Our ethos is built on a community that values and respects uniqueness and strives to support the growth of ALL members in their educational, emotional, and social pursuits" (RISS Website). This strong sense of inclusivity was evident throughout the school community. For example, parents stated that, "Kids don't look at another kid and say: 'That kid's different.' They just go: 'Oh yeah.'" (Participant 1, RISS P&C & non-P&C Parent Focus Group)

The school website also conveyed strong messages about the school's expectations for parent engagement in their child's learning. The Principal's message about ongoing access to student progress via the *Data Wall* clearly communicated the importance of positive home-school relationships:

Another strategy to help us work out what next actions to take when we are helping students progress their learning is use of a *Data Wall*. Next time you visit the admin (administration) building ask to see it and have it explained to you. Every child in our school is on that wall and it shows us their progress is below, at, or above expectations. (RISS Website)

Communicating this information was particularly important for helping to engage Indigenous Australian parents in their child's education. The Liaison Officer explained:

Sometimes I bring them up here to my data wall just to show them how well their kids are going. They're really not aware of how well their kids are progressing sometimes. Other times I have to have that little talk about your child needs to come to school because they should be reading at this benchmark, but they're not getting there. So we don't know if it's a learning difficulty or if it's because of their absences. So just having those conversations too. ...I have my own data wall. ...I just track the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. (RISS, Liaison Officer Interview)

The Principal and teachers used a number and range of digital technology platforms to engage parents in their child's learning. These included the school website, Facebook, QSchools app, and ClassDojo. The Principal recognised the importance of supporting parents to understand how digital technologies were used in the classroom. Hence, informal hands-on parent workshops were offered specifically to aid their learning of these. The Principal also used digital technologies to invite parents to learn more about the strategies (e.g., Data Walls) used at the school to gauge student progress. These invitations were reflected in opportunities the Liaison Officer took to talk with Indigenous Australian parents about the significance of their role in supporting student learning and wellbeing.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Building strong, trusting, authentic relationships with parents, students, teachers/staff, and local community members and organisations underpinned parent-school-community engagement at RISS. The Principal iterated: "So it's about relationships... That's what it is" (RISS Principal Interview). She treated all members of the school family with care, compassion, and respect. She embraced diversity and equality, exhibiting a deep regard for human rights and dignity. Accordingly, she adopted strategies to ensure students were not excluded (buying uniforms) or humiliated (making sure they were clean). The Principal's view of parents and students as holders of valuable knowledge about families and communities showed in her appointment of a school Liaison Officer. She recognised student agency as key to parent-school-community engagement. She promoted the importance of visibility because it simultaneously enhanced her accessibility for parents and students. Other key parent-school-community engagement strategies included her use of diagnostic enrolment, the *Word of the Week*, and refereeing student lunchtime games.

The Principal articulated clear strong views to teachers/staff about the significance of parent-school-community engagement, emphasising that parents are students' first teachers. She valued and encouraged engagement by recognising teachers/staff as integral and essential to this work. She encouraged parents to work alongside teachers to achieve their mutual goals of promoting student

learning and wellbeing. At the same time, she encouraged teachers to make regular meaningful contact with parents. She empowered them to adopt innovative strategies (e.g., co-teaching with parents). She hired a Duty Officer to ensure the work of teachers in developing and sustaining positive relationships with parents was not compromised or impeded. The impact of her approach not only had a positive, but also cogenerative effect on the work of teachers/staff, leading to: enhanced levels of care and insight about how to effectively engage parents in the school/classrooms; increased knowledge and confidence in curriculum learning areas such as Science; and closer alignment of both parent and teacher knowledge to deepen student understanding particularly of Indigenous Australian culture and identity.

The Principal evidenced openness in her dealings with the P&C President and committee. Faced with education change and reform, they worked closely together to explore all avenues to support the work of the school to ensure the best possible outcomes. Nevertheless, the Principal indicated that the traditional function of the P&C was less conducive to parent engagement in student learning than was ideal.

The school climate was welcoming, inclusive, and conveyed a sense of belonging. The Principal's philosophy that, "It takes a village to raise a child", aligned with messages throughout the school to parents from teachers/staff about a willingness to work with and alongside them. The school motto, *The Reef Island Way*, comprised three core values namely, "Learn", "Care", and "Play", which similarly encouraged pride and respect through students and the school community working together to learn and interact productively. Positive phone calls from the school/teachers to parents also built respectful relationships while simultaneously aided difficult conversations that sometimes arose later (e.g., due to student behaviour issues). There was a no-homework-policy for the school except where parents chose to opt-in during enrolment. With both homework and behaviour the school worked closely with parents and shared responsibility for decision-making. The Principal described herself as a *dot-joiner*, since she actively looked for opportunities to match opportunities and resources of individuals and organisations with the needs of students, teachers/staff, and the school. At the same time, she was agile and adept in recognising changing and emerging circumstances and positioned herself so she was "at the table... going: 'What's in it for the school?'" to advocate for the best possible outcomes for all concerned (RISS Principal Interview).

Scenic View State School – Case Study 4

BACKGROUND

School background

Scenic View State School (SVSS) was located in southwestern Queensland. SVSS was a rural public coeducational primary school with a student population of approximately 300. During the last decade the local area's population grew to over 12 000 people. Less than 10 percent were Indigenous Australians. The area mainly comprised family households. These were made up of approximately 40 percent two-parent families, almost 35 percent couple families without children, and around 20 percent single parent families. Less than 15 percent of the residents in the area were born overseas with the majority born in England, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Africa, or Germany. In approximately 90 percent of the households, English was the only language spoken at home. Some of these demographics were reflected in the school's student population. Approximately 20 percent of the school's students identified as Indigenous Australians and less than 10 percent had a language background other than English. In 2016, SVSS had an ICSEA score of slightly over 900, compared with the Australian average of 1 000, identifying the school as one of low social-educational advantage. Data from the 2014 Phase I Parent Engagement in Schools (PES) project showed that the Principal enjoyed positive relationships with parents. She worked with the school community to identify parent and student needs as well as shared responsibility for decision-making with this community (based on data collected during Phase I PES project 2014).

Principal background

The SVSS Principal had worked at the school for almost a decade. She commenced her career as a teacher in a small western Queensland town where she undertook a school project about the town's history. In this project, she engaged former teachers and local residents. In honouring the town's history, she believed the project improved school-community relationships. When she subsequently became Principal in a regional town in western Queensland, she implemented a program where successful local people were invited to explain to students about the opportunities for learning beyond their hometown. Hence, the Principal described herself as a community-minded person who believed that community involvement in schools improved student learning and wellbeing opportunities. She considered that her career journey had highlighted to her the value and importance of multiculturalism, education, and school attendance.

STUDENT DIMENSION

The SVSS Principal was recognised for her knowledge of the students. For example, one teacher reported, “She can call every child by name in this school without a problem. She knows them all” (Participant 4, SVSS Teacher Focus Group 1). In addition to knowing the students’ names, the Principal knew their family context as another teacher explained:

She knows their back story. ...40 percent of the kids now have either had a single traumatic experience or are living in a traumatic environment, and that back story is important to know in how we deal with those children. So, if they’re being naughty, sometimes yelling at them isn’t the answer. It’s, ‘They need a cuddle. They need someone to show some interest in them.’ [The Principal] knows those back stories, and then helps the teachers be aware of that. (Participant 3, SVSS Teacher Focus Group 1)

The Principal’s detailed knowledge of students and their various histories reflected her commitment to their learning and welfare.

The Principal also shared how important it was to build mutual respect and not just assume to be respected because you were a teacher or the Principal. To acknowledge the importance of student voice, for example, she held regular breakfasts with the senior students and encouraged students to lead parent engagement strategies. For example, student representatives attended the school’s P&C meetings. These students played an active role in the meetings such as presenting a written report and talking to the committee about their school fundraising activities (e.g., *Zooper Dooper Day*, where they sold ice blocks at school to raise funds). Their inclusion as student representatives at P&C meetings exemplified an innovative student-led parent-school engagement strategy.

P&C parents noted that the Principal sought opportunities for all students to reach their potential at school and described her as someone who “believes every child’s important, no matter where they sit” (Participant 1, SVSS Parent P&C Focus Group). Another P&C parent reported how engaged the Principal was with the students and noticed that she engaged equally with students “at the top and down the bottom ...targeting all groups, so that everyone gets the same advantages” (Participant 3, SVSS P&C Parent Focus Group).

The Principal valued students and was active in her support and encouragement of them in a range of different activities in and outside the school. This was confirmed by a parent who expounded that the

Principal, “gets our school involved in a lot of the local school competition things ...[such as] the *Reading Challenge* [and] ...the *Maths Challenge* ...where they compete against some of the local schools” (Participant 4, SVSS P&C Parent Focus Group). This parent further signalled how important the support and encouragement of the Principal was to the students, saying that her presence at events, “made those kids feel a little bit special, valued, because she’s taken time to be there.” (Participant 4, SVSS P&C Parent Focus Group)

The number and range of activities in which the Principal was involved in the school and community created opportunities for authentic interactions and conversations with students. The Principal connected with students personally. She promoted and pursued learning opportunities for them aligned with their different needs, abilities, and interests. One parent said of the Principal, “She’s constantly moving” (Participant 3, SVSS Parent P&C Focus Group) – a comment which underscored her active commitment to exploiting new and creative opportunities to further each student’s development and wellbeing. The Principal not only had a deep understanding of students and their family contexts, but also worked hard to cultivate mutual respect by valuing the student voice and their engagement in school.

TEACHER DIMENSION

The Principal emphasised that her twenty years of experience as a classroom teacher was valuable in understanding teachers’ experiences and subsequently in supporting them to make changes in their practices which included interactions with parents. She took time to get to know each teacher, adopting an abundance rather than deficit approach. She used this knowledge to identify each teacher’s strengths and passions, and matched them with positions that best utilised their skills, knowledge, and interests. She emphasised the importance of having the *right people for the job*, for instance, in pivotal years such as Prep, Year 2, and Year 4. She observed that school leaders needed to be “careful about who you staff where” and ensure that staffing choices made are in the best interests of the students, school, and broader community (SVSS Principal Interview).

This Principal emphasised the importance of leading by example. She believed that if teachers/staff saw her interacting with parents on a regular basis, then they were more likely to act accordingly. She discussed the importance of modelling respectful interactions with all members of the school community advocating, “Every day, to everybody say, ‘Good morning, how are you?’ and be positive, even if you’re not” (SVSS Principal Interview). The Principal explained that while this seemed simple, it made “such a big difference” (SVSS Principal Interview). The value of this approach was shown in her

philosophy that *choosing* to be a certain way can positively create the future you imagine; in other words, that: “You act into being” (SVSS Principal Interview).

One way the Principal encouraged teachers/staff to engage with parents in the school grounds was by instituting the *three-metre rule*. This simple but effective strategy encouraged staff members whenever they were in the school grounds and within three metres of a parent to greet them, open a conversation, and ask their child’s name, what year their child was in, and if they needed assistance. Teachers were encouraged to communicate regularly with families about positive events and good news stories as well as with concerns about student achievement or wellbeing. Teachers noted that they had regular contact with parents (e.g., one said, “You’re ringing at least one parent every week”) and this practice was seen as essential to foster positive relationships with parents (Participant 1, SVSS Teacher Focus group 2). The Principal reinforced this expectation through coordinated initiatives at school and classroom levels such as *Student of the Week* where each classroom teacher telephoned the parent of the student selected that week to notify them that their child was receiving an award and to invite them to attend the school assembly. This strategy meant that parents who might not usually attend often came to see their child recognised.

Teachers were encouraged to address issues early and reported feeling well-supported by the Principal. For example, one teacher said, “When there’s a confrontational parent situation, she will step in so that the teacher doesn’t have to deal with it” (Participant 1, SVSS Teacher Focus group 2).

The Principal encouraged the teachers to recognise and draw upon parents’ knowledge about their child. One parent indicated that at the “beginning of every year we have a chat with the teacher” to disclose information that will assist their child (who has a disability) in the classroom. This parent appreciated that the teachers took “information like that on-board” (Participant 5, SVSS Non-P&C Parent Focus Group). Teachers were also encouraged to work with parents to support the learning of their child. One parent reported that when funding was cut and the English support teacher was no longer able to provide support to her son, the class teacher continued the support her son was receiving. This parent described the teacher as saying, “Okay, I’ll pick up and keep going and [we’ll] work together” (Participant 1, SVSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group).

The Principal encouraged teachers to use strategies such as breakfast mornings to engage parents. These breakfast mornings were held once a term and teachers viewed them as an important way to develop trusting relationships with parents so, “They’re not in fear of us or we’re not in fear of them”

(Participant 2, SVSS Teacher Focus group 2). After these breakfasts, parents had “an opportunity to come back to the class to see how certain things run” (Participant 2, SVSS Teacher Focus group 2).

The Principal recognised the importance of building knowledge about teachers to put their strengths and preferences to best work in the school. She articulated a philosophy of *acting into being*. She encouraged teachers to engage with parents using a number and range of strategies that included: modelling respectful interactions, implementing the *three-metre rule*, expecting teachers to make regular positive contact with parents, hosting breakfast mornings each term, and encouraging teachers to use parent knowledge to maximise student learning and wellbeing.

CURRICULUM DIMENSION

The Principal developed a good knowledge of the curriculum throughout her career. She voiced concern about some Principals who entered the role without a similar length of teaching and school experience, commenting that:

...so I do have a strong knowledge of curriculum and kids; I've taught from Prep to Year 7. So I think I can give advice. I think that helps. I do worry about the ones who've had three years of experience and then suddenly go into Principalship and they climb the ladder. (SVSS Principal Interview)

The Principal supported teachers to engage parents in the curriculum by inviting them into the classroom as experts to share stories, experiences, and recollections. For example, one parent said he was invited to contribute to learning about History in his child's Year 2 classroom by talking about: “What school was like for me as a boy” (Participant 7, RVSS Parent Focus Group). Parents were also invited to help with reading groups and activities. Teachers agreed that home reading was among the most important strategies used to connect with parents. They also iterated the importance of communicating with parents about what their child was doing and learning at school. For example, one teacher commented, “But again, even in a small note, ‘Johnny's now on reader two, which is like 20 levels above where he should be. He's going great.’ That's a nice little note to throw in there” (Participant 3, SVSS Teacher Focus Group). A second teacher said, “That's the idea of ringing parents for the good things as well as the bad things. Making sure that that's communicated” (Participant 5, SVSS Teacher Focus Group).

Her length of experience in schools built the Principal's capacity for curriculum leadership. She encouraged a participatory approach where parents were invited to visit classrooms as experts who could share their knowledge and experiences and to help with reading and other activities. The teachers stressed the importance of communicating with parents about student learning and achievement. They agreed that notes home and phone calls were effective ways to communicate directly and quickly.

THE DIMENSION OF MILIEUS

School milieu

The SVSS Principal not only embraced the philosophy, "It takes a village to raise a child", she also emphasised that everyone had an equally important role to play in that child's learning. These underlying values instilled a strong sense of inclusivity and belonging in the school community as evidenced in statements made by parents. For example, one parent noted that during assembly, "They always let us know what's going on" (Participant 9, SVSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group). Teachers indicated that school assemblies also worked well because parents felt included. While assemblies provided information about what was happening in the school and celebrated student achievements, these times featured inclusive practices such as singing happy birthday to parents.

Teachers described the school atmosphere as "very welcoming" with "a lovely feel about it" (Participant 1, WSS Teacher Focus Group 2). Parents echoed these sentiments, saying that, "New teachers come in and they seem to get infected with... this 'nice' virus that goes around the school" (Participant 2, SVSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group). Parents also felt the school encouraged them to "talk to the teachers if they wanted to help" (Participant 9, SVSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group). Teachers confirmed this by saying that the school policy was clear that parents were welcome to volunteer in the classroom.

This Principal used the physical environment to create engaging spaces for parents to have informal conversations with other parents and staff in the school and seemed to "encourage the interaction" (Participant 5, SVSS Parent P&C Focus Group). She added small welcoming touches such as putting out the newspaper, books, dominos, and card games every morning and encouraged both the students and parents to read and/or play. The Principal reported that, "There is one group of parents who actually come to read the paper every morning" and quipped that "if it's a dad reading the paper, [then

that's a] good role model" (SVSS Principal Interview). These purposefully created parent spaces enhanced the sense of belonging in the school community.

When she arrived at the school, the Principal recounted that, "There wasn't as much engagement with the community" (SVSS Principal Interview). She stressed to teachers/staff the importance of encouraging parents into the school. She recalled that teachers/staff simply said, "Well the parents don't come in" (SVSS Principal Interview). To build a positive school culture for parent engagement, she encouraged them to understand and expand their knowledge of the school community through first, building authentic relationships, and second, being visible.

The Principal believed that a successful school community was founded on strong authentic relationships. She reflected that: "It's not probably something that's written down, but I think it's the essence of everything, really, in all parts of your lives. Relationships, relationships, relationships" (SVSS Principal Interview). She stressed that to build positive relationships with parents, one first needed to gain their trust – part of which was recognising that, in schools of low socio-educational advantage, "parents don't have a lot of self-belief" (SVSS Principal Interview). She iterated that relationships with the school community needed to be built on respect for all members and that interactions with the community needed to be positive. She reflected that: "You get a lot further with honey than you do with vinegar" and that it was "much harder to be angry and aggressive to somebody who's being respectful to you" (SVSS Principal Interview).

She relayed an example of how she developed positive relationships with the parents of a group of senior boys who were subtly bullying other students. The boys played rugby league on weekends and she drove to their games to watch them play along with their families. She explained that developing a positive relationship with the parents outside of school was an important step in engaging them and their children as valued members of the school community. She noted: "I worked really hard with that little group of boys and they did come around" (SVSS Principal Interview). Speaking about one of the students, she said: "I gave [Jack] (pseudonym) a bit of responsibility in terms of the younger students. Identified what his strengths were too. Jack was an excellent rugby league player. I actively developed a good relationship with his mother and his grandmother" (SVSS Principal Interview). These relationships proved invaluable when Jack later brought a knife to school and incurred a school suspension. She reported that her actions were supported by his parents: "They accepted the hard stuff" because "I had a relationship with them" (SVSS Principal Interview).

The Principal also subscribed to visibility as an essential parent-school-community engagement strategy. Hence, she was intentionally visible at drop-off and pick-up times, in the school playground, and at sporting events. Parents noted that, “She made a point of being out there to talk” (Participant 5, SVSS P&C Parent Focus Group). The Principal indicated that although being visible was hard work, it was “definitely worth it” (SVSS Principal Interview). She explained that when she first started at SVSS, families were not accustomed to engaging with the Principal. She therefore made a conscious effort in the first few weeks to be present in the school grounds in the afternoon at around 2:30pm, and to introduce herself to parents in an attempt to start building relationships and rapport.

A further strategy the Principal used to encourage parent engagement was positive school-wide student behaviour programs. Parents explained that the *Gotcha* awards were useful “for opening dialogue (with their child) at home about how their behaviour was at school” (Participant 1, SVSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group).

In addition, the school ran a homework club. The Principal relayed that the club operated because of her personal experiences as a parent doing homework with her child. The club ensured that parent-child relationships did not suffer given the potential stress home tasks can create for families. The club therefore promoted positive parent-school relationships as parents were assured of support for their child’s school learning if they were unable to provide it themselves. The club was adopted by the school community after a trial which saw it offered before school and during the second play-time break in response to identified needs of parents, students, and teachers/staff.

The Principal worked with teachers/staff to create a welcoming and inclusive environment by: building authentic trusting relationships, being intentionally visible, instituting positive school-wide student behaviour programs, and operating a successful homework club. She emphasised the importance of respecting all members of the school community. She went out of her way to develop relationships with hard-to-reach parents and students. This built mutual respect and encouraged parent engagement as well as acceptance when difficult decisions (e.g., imposing consequences for poor student behaviour choices) needed to be made.

Classroom milieu

This Principal prioritised time in classrooms. She indicated that an early practice she adopted was classroom observations where she provided feedback to teachers and students using the strategy of “three stars and a wish” (SVSS Principal Interview). This strategy involved identifying three positive aspects of what was working and offering a wish about an aspect that might improve future classroom

learning and teaching. She subsequently described how her practice of working in small schools where she devoted “the first half hour of the day to go around every room” needed to change when she became Principal of a larger primary school (SVSS Principal Interview). To adjust the strategy for a larger school, the Principal scheduled a weekly classroom visit that she and the teacher agreed would constructively contribute to student learning. Teachers explained that the Principal would “come in and maybe do some reading groups or might sit in on a lesson...” (Participant 2, SVSS Teacher Focus Group 2). The Principal’s commitment to classroom visits meant that she contributed directly each week to student learning and gained intimate knowledge and understanding of the teachers, students, and curriculum for assisting her to talk to parents about their child’s learning and wellbeing.

In addition to spending time in the classroom, the Principal made herself available to teachers who requested additional support with particular students or in engaging their parents. For example, one teacher recounted:

Last year, when I had an extremely difficult child in my classroom, [the Principal] made sure that if I needed her, she would be in that room. ...and she’d try and ring the parent of this ...child ...she wouldn’t answer. But mum works across the road. So [the Principal would] walk over there after school and [say]: ‘Oh, I couldn’t get you on the phone today, but we’re having this issue and we’re wondering how we can help your child.’ (Participant 1, SVSS Teacher Focus Group 2)

In this example, the Principal’s presence in the classroom not only showed support for learning and teaching, but also enabled her to gain unique knowledge of what was happening. This positioned her to speak to the student’s parent in more informed ways about how they might together assist the student concerned. At the same time, the Principal showed a quick direct yet nimble approach for contacting the student’s parents, demonstrating how her knowledge of families enhanced possible opportunities to engage parents in their child’s learning.

Although the Principal encouraged parents to engage in the classroom, teachers reported inconsistent levels of success in this area. For example, one teacher observed: “While we’ve got a Principal that is so engaged with the families, I wouldn’t say that we have the most engaged families” (Participant 4, SVSS Teacher Focus Group 1). The findings related to engaging parents in the classroom were therefore somewhat mixed. For example, in relation to reading, teachers differed in their approaches and preferences when inviting parents into classrooms. For one teacher, her past experiences appeared to colour her perceptions about the value of working with parents as she considered parents to be ill-

equipped with suitable reading strategies, and often unreliable in keeping their commitment. Another teacher was disappointed and perplexed by the low response from, and even avoidance by, some parents of her afternoon initiative to engage them in their child's reading. This teacher organised an afternoon tea for the parents to encourage them to come into the classroom in the last 15 minutes of the day and read with their child. When parents walked past the classroom she would say, "There's mum, go and get her so she can read with you" but she said, most students "would come back alone" (Participant 4, SVSS Teacher Focus Group 1). This teacher subsequently approached the parents personally, but she noticed they stopped walking past her door. Despite these and other efforts which involved visibly promoting the initiative using "signs around the school", the teacher reported that only two parents helped with student reading most afternoons (Participant 4, SVSS Teacher Focus Group 1). Although student reading levels improved, she recognised that her efforts to engage parents were less successful than she had envisaged.

When discussing the low response by parents to volunteer in classrooms, the teachers identified a number of mitigating factors. For example, one commented:

We have ...both ends of the spectrum. ...we have that really high drug population, we have some parents who don't engage with their kid's education at all. Then we have parents who are really super involved. ...out of every classroom there's probably at least two or three parents that are really involved somehow, whether it be P&C or helping out at different things like the disco or supporting the trivia nights. (Participant 1, SVSS Teacher Focus Group 2)

According to the teachers, the school's unique context influenced whether and if parents engaged in their child's learning. They noted other factors such as: timing (parents preferred before school or just after the daily morning school assembly), parents' level of education, and/or their past negative school experiences.

The Principal valued spending time in classrooms. She scheduled mutually suitable times with teachers for classroom visits and used the strategy with teachers and students of *three stars and a wish*. Although she encouraged teachers to continue to find ways to engage parents in their child's learning in the classroom, they experienced variable success. Possible reasons included: different teachers' preferences for working with parents; teacher disappointment in the limited success of past initiatives; the school's particular context; and parents' perceived self-efficacy for contributing to their child's learning.

Parent milieu

The Principal made a conscious effort to personalise her interactions with parents and learn their names. One parent noted that she even, “knew our daughter’s name who was not attending the school” (Participant 5, SVSS Parent P&C Focus Group). These interactions enabled her to build strong connections as illustrated by another parent’s words: “Everyone feels like they know her” (Participant 9, SVSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group).

The Principal sought not only to connect with parents, but also to support them. She seemed to go above and beyond for the families in the school. A parent described the Principal as having a “gift” to identify “why people were acting out” and understanding that “people were looking for support” (Participant 4, SVSS Parent P&C Focus Group). The Principal supported families in myriad concrete ways. For example, she noticed that there was a growing number of working families, so she placed a teacher aide on duty from 8:00am, provided students with activities, and set up the homework club to ensure these parents could arrive at work on time. The Principal supported a mother who was studying by making accommodations for her son to ensure that his behaviour did not impede her ability to successfully continue her studies. She supported families in crisis through the provision of uniforms and other measures.

The Principal also specifically supported parents in the transition of their child to Prep using an early-years initiative called, *Program for Pre-Preps and their Parents (PIPPAs)*. *PIPPAs* extended beyond preparing the children for formal schooling; the Principal used this opportunity to provide parents with information on various topics that would enable them to prepare their child’s formal education. In addition to enlisting various people to speak, the Principal and teachers also addressed the parents. Speaking about the benefits of *PIPPAs* for her son, one parent commented: “It was pretty good getting to know the teacher before going to the school” (Participant 2, SVSS non-P&C Parent Focus Group). She added that after the program, “He was actually looking forward to ...going to school” (Participant 2, SVSS non-P&C Parent Focus Group). Parents also found the program beneficial as they got to know other families at the school.

The Principal was recognised as having an aptitude to build capacity in others. For example, she empowered parents to support their child’s development and learning using an initiative called, *Principal’s Prattle*. An hour-long session open to all parents, *Principal’s Prattle* occurred “every Monday morning” after assembly (Participant 1, SVSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group). During these sessions, the Principal spoke about various topics such as: assessment and reporting, NAPLAN Online, the School

Readiness Trial, and school programs (e.g., anti-bullying and *Support-A-Reader*). The *Support-A-Reader* sessions (offered during the *Principal's Prattle* time-slot) provided families with certificates. When presenting the parents with their certificates, the Principal reportedly would say, "When you are looking for a job you can say, 'I've got a *Support-A-Reader* certificate" (SVSS Principal Interview). The Principal pointed out that even if one person valued the *Principal's Prattle* sessions, they were worthwhile.

Another way the Principal helped parents to better understand and support their child's education was by including parenting information to accompany the school newsletter such as an article titled, *Failure! What a genius idea*, by Michael Grose. In addition to the article, she might include a snapshot in the newsletter describing what the article covered and a link to other relevant resources (e.g., online *Parentingideas Magazine*).

The Principal actively sought parent input through channels such as the P&Cs Association. She described these meetings as a "forum to discuss educational issues" and stated that "all parents were welcome and were urged to attend the meetings" (SVSS website). Teachers described the Principal's approach as one where she, "built the school around parents", "involved them in everything" (Participant 2, SVSS Teacher Focus Group 2), and was "responsive to everybody's feedback" (Participant 1, SVSS Parent P&C Focus Group).

In the welcome message on the school website, the Principal communicated clear messages to parents (current and prospective) about the importance for them to share with teachers in the excitement of their child's learning and achievement. She spoke about "education as a partnership between the parent and school... best fostered by two-way communication" (SVSS Website). Parents were encouraged to get to know and keep in touch with their child's teacher to show their child their interest in all that was happening at school and in the classroom.

The Principal also recognised the importance of sport in schools of low socio-educational advantage such as SVSS. She explained that "sport brings them (students and parents) in" (SVSS Principal Interview). The Principal capitalised on this knowledge by inviting parents to participate in an initiative called, *Active After-School Communities*. The Principal elaborated on the program saying: "We did have a very successful active after-school community with soccer. We had golf, we had tennis. Because a lot of these kids, their parents can't afford to pay fees, this is their opportunity to have a go" (SVSS Principal Interview). She indicated that the program was funded by a grant from the Australian

Government to provide primary school children after-school access to sport and other physical activities which their parents might not ordinarily be able to afford. She said:

I did actually offer it to some parents and they actually became coaches. It was every Wednesday afternoon and, initially, I was very active. I would also be here for it or, whoever was in my role, I would ask them to stay. (SVSS Principal Interview)

By inviting parents to be coaches of students as part of the *Active After-School Communities* program, the Principal sought to enhance the learning and wellbeing of students and families. More recently, a new program called, *Sporting Schools*, aimed at helping children to become active in their local communities had replaced the program. The Principal indicated that this new program would be led by the Physical Education teacher and operate before school between 8:00am and 9:00am. Her response to these funding opportunities which included changes in programs highlighted her prioritisation of parent-school-community engagement.

The Principal built relationships with parents by making frequent positive personal connections. She supported parents in multiple ways that included implementing activities before school to support working parents and enhancing their knowledge and skills through initiatives such as *Principal's Prattle*, *PIPPAs*, and the *Active After-School Communities* program. She used strategies and practices that others recognised showed genuine care for parents.

Local community milieu

The SVSS Principal recognised the value of the local community for creating a sense of belonging for students. At the same time, she noted that positive community connections enhanced and expanded possible learning and teaching opportunities. According to parents, the Principal seemed to be able to identify the strengths in the local community and brought these into the school to improve learner outcomes. One parent said that, “[she] seeks these people out to get them to come to our school” (Participant 4, SVSS P&C Parent Focus Group). Another parent commented on this ability as particularly valuable in a school in a poor community since the opportunities she created “opened the kids’ eyes to so much outside of Scenic View” (Participant 1, SVSS P&C Parent Focus Group). For example, she organised local personalities (e.g., rugby league players, past school Principals, and members of the defence forces) to come into the school to speak to the teachers and students and share their success stories. The Principal also drew on her personal connections with organisations in the community such as Rotary to enhance student learning. One parent noted that these opportunities not only broadened student horizons but also demonstrated “that she’s (the Principal) interested in

the community in which they live” (Participant 5, SVSS P&C Parent Focus Group). The Principal stated that she believed “having the whole community involved with the school ...gives more opportunities for kids to understand where their family comes from” (SVSS Principal Interview). She elaborated that “tapping into those things ...had a dual benefit. It’s great for the school, but it’s also great for the community” (SVSS Principal Interview).

The importance of the school’s connections with the local community was also evident in teacher and community-led lunch-time and before- and after-school activities such as soccer, coding, and knitting clubs. While some of these clubs were led by school staff, they were also led by local community members. The Principal enunciated:

We adopted a school grandmother in the first year and that happened to be one of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander grandmothers... She would read with the kids. ...we adopted an Elder as well, and she taught them crocheting. (SVSS Principal Interview)

The Principal also recognised the value of partnering with local medical centres to improve the health of students and ultimately enhance their opportunities for learning at school. Teachers indicated that this education-health initiative was important. One explained that, “kids can’t learn because of medical difficulties” and some parents seem unable to advocate for their children or “sometimes the parents, I think, want back-up” (Participant 3, SVSS Teacher Focus Group 2). She added that some Indigenous Australian parents “don’t feel that they’re taken seriously. ...where the doctor might go, ‘Get lost’ to the Indigenous person, they won’t do it in front of the Principal” (Participant 3, SVSS Teacher Focus Group 2). The comments of parents and teachers showed that the Principal’s leadership enhanced the agency of teachers, parents, and community members. Teachers, for example, exercised their agency to access health resources for students they identified as in possible need of assistance. Parents benefited from the medical treatment their children received but also from the guidance and mentoring of the Principal and school in navigating the medical system and its associated discourses. Community members such as the doctors and specialists at the medical centre benefited from the coordinated efforts of health and education professionals working together to improve the health and wellbeing of families.

Another strategy the Principal used was to work with the P&C on a number of ventures. One example was when the charity, Mission Australia, received funding to organise a *Parent and Community Engagement (PACE)* day and the school offered to host it. The P&C President explained that Mission Australia:

...got a bouncy castle, bungee wall, they hired a projector, displayed a movie. They basically did everything and we provided the venue and the people to run it because they couldn't. We both played to our strengths. We (the school and Mission Australia) ran that together and it actually ended up being a good fundraiser. (SVSS P&C President Interview)

P&C initiatives such as the *PACE* day showed the value of working with the local community and coordinating resources. The instigation of a Project Club for students that mirrored a community service club and ran in conjunction with the school's P&C represented another unique initiative.

This Principal was recognised for her ability to identify areas of strength in the community. She looked for ways to broaden student knowledge and experiences through different initiatives and programs that involved pursuing funding opportunities and/or tapping the available resources (including people) in the community. These initiatives included: inviting well-known personalities to visit the school, setting up an education-health partnership between the school and local medical centres, and working with the P&C to organise a Mission Australia-funded *PACE* day.

Technology milieu

The Principal, teachers, and P&C committee used several digital technologies and platforms at SVSS. The Principal used the school website and electronic newsletters to communicate with the school community. She supported the P&C in the creation of their own Facebook page, which, while not representing the school, was used to post "things that are happening at school" (e.g., information about the school disco; reminding parents about photo day) (Participant 1, SVSS Parent non-P&C Focus Group). Setting up a Facebook page was considered important by the P&C as one parent observed, "I think that's where we're going to reach out to people more" (Participant 1, SVSS Parent P&C Focus Group). The Facebook page was also used to engage teachers. For example, one parent noted, "Mr Smith (pseudonym) ...has commented on the page about those trivia nights. So the teachers are now going to be engaging with parents as well" (Participant 2, SVSS Parent P&C Focus Group).

Although the Principal supported teachers in their use of digital technologies such as email, not all teachers experienced success in engaging parents this way. One teacher stated that:

I don't think a lot of our parents either have access to email permanently, or they don't wish to use that form. But I've given my phone number to some, my private phone number to some people, and they have used it. ...I think they'd text you before they would email you.
(Participant 3, SVSS Teacher Focus Group 2)

However, some parents indicated that they would prefer teachers to communicate with them using email. For example, one parent said: “What I would like to see, just between teacher and parent, is I would love them to be able to just drop you a line through email a bit more readily, just something that hasn’t quite come across yet” (Participant 5, SVSS Parent P&C Focus Group). A second parent noted: “You could engage very quickly and very personally with the parents. Email is one of those assets we don’t use enough” (Participant 3, SVSS Parent P&C Focus Group).

There seemed to be limited use of digital technologies to engage parents in student learning in the classroom. Parents reported that they knew of a teacher in Year 5 who was using Class Dojo, but that it was used more as a rewards system than interactive communication and student learning platform with parents.

The use of digital technologies and platforms to engage parents in student learning was limited at SVSS. Parents appeared open to teachers making more use of email to communicate positive messages about their child’s learning and activities. The use of Facebook promised a possible further means to enhance parent-teacher interactions.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The strong sense of inclusivity and belonging to the SVSS school community was cultivated through: creating engaging spaces for parents; authentic and personalised interactions with parents, students, and school staff; and the belief that parent knowledge was important. The Principal modelled respect and inclusivity in her interactions with others in an attempt to develop mutual respect and expected her teachers to be positive role models. She also encouraged teachers to build mutual respect with parents by adopting the strategy of phoning them to talk positively about their child. Cultivating this respect was seen as an important buffer should difficult conversations arise later.

While the Principal was intentionally visible and accessible – before and after school, in classrooms, and events at school and in the community – it was the Principal’s detailed knowledge of the students, their family, situations, and contexts that built the respect and trust she was accorded in the school community. She also emphasised the importance of teachers/staff building knowledge and understanding of students and their family backgrounds and histories. Considering the broader context the students were situated in and how this impacted any behaviours they presented was an important aspect in helping the students in SVSS reach their full learning potential. The Principal was recognised as also having the ability to identify the strengths in others and to build their capacity to

reach their full potential. The Principal adopted a strengths-based view of teachers/staff, matching their strengths and preferences to positions in the school where these might be best used. The Principal recognised the value of student agency. She enabled student voice through regular breakfasts with the senior students and included student representatives on the P&C committee. The Principal empowered parents to support their child's development and learning using a weekly initiative called, *Principal's Prattle*, which provided information and resources to parents. The Principal also provided parents with a number of parenting resources from the *Parentingideas Magazine* through the school newsletter.

The Principal possessed good knowledge of the curriculum, having worked in schools and classrooms for more than two decades. She prioritised time in the classroom to work constructively alongside teachers and contribute to student learning. She encouraged a participatory approach where parents were invited into the classroom as experts to share their knowledge and experiences and to help with reading and other activities. However, the teachers highlighted several real and perceived impediments to parent engagement at the classroom level. These included the limited success of initiatives they had previously attempted and parents' diminished self-efficacy for helping their child at school.

The Principal was agile and adept at identifying the strengths in the community and opportunities for the local community to support student learning. She used her personal connections with community organisations to enhance student learning opportunities, such as organising local celebrities to come and share their success stories with the students. She partnered with local medical centres to set up an education-health initiative to improve the health of students and ultimately enhance their opportunities for learning at school. At the same time, she lifted the ability of parents to navigate the medical system and communicate effectively with medical professionals about their child's needs.

Although the school used a number of digital technologies and platforms (e.g., school website, electronic newsletters, email, Facebook) to communicate with parents, there was minimal evidence of their widespread or consistent use to effectively engage parents in student learning. This may have been partly due to the school's rural location and the diminished reliability of online communication technologies and platforms.

The Principal's stated aim to provide equity of opportunity for all students and parents infused parent-school-community engagement at SVSS. The findings testify to the success of her philosophy, *You act into being*.

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