

# Pedagogies, practices, and processes for engaging parents and communities in children's learning and wellbeing EPIC 2022 Final Report



OUR SCHOOLS – OUR FUTURE  
RESEARCH REPORT  
**November 2022**



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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Before entering the higher education sector, Linda enjoyed a successful career in State and Independent schools in a range of roles including Middle School Leader, STEM District Liaison Teacher, and Senior Classroom Teacher. She completed her PhD research on parent-teacher engagement in 2013. Linda brings strengths in curriculum and pedagogy and adopts dialogic approaches to designing and implementing research projects as she works alongside participants to generate authentic parent-school-community partnerships. Her work focuses on teacher pedagogies, practices, and processes for engaging parents in their child's learning and wellbeing. Linda has published widely and is known nationally and internationally in the area of parent engagement. She is Lead Author on the 2021 international volume, *Principal Leadership for Parent engagement in disadvantaged schools: What qualities and strategies distinguish effective principals?* Linda's service roles include National Publications Director of the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA) (2019-2023), ALEA Executive Board and National Council member (2019-2023), and Honorary Senior Research Fellow at The University of Queensland (2020-2025).

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## OUR SCHOOLS – OUR FUTURE

Our Schools—Our Future is an Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) research-based initiative designed to promote informed public policy debate about schooling. Through commissioned and internal research, Our Schools—Our Future explores trends and issues in key areas which determine the nature and performance of our school education systems. While the initiative has a particular focus on the contribution of independent schools to our education provision and outcomes, it examines a range of issues and trends relevant to the development and implementation of effective public policy for schooling generally. All research reports are available to members on the ISQ website.

# Foreword

The 'how to' of engaging parents in their child's learning and wellbeing – a concept known as parent engagement – is a big step closer thanks to our *Engaging Parents in Curriculum* (EPIC) research project – and this important new report.

EPIC is now in its second year, building on research conducted by Griffith University's Dr Linda Willis and Professor Beryl Exley in the Catholic and state education sectors since 2008.

We are proud to say that EPIC is advancing decades of research cementing the 'why' of engaging parents in their child's learning – and converting it to the 'how'.

This report: *Pedagogies, practices, and processes for engaging parents and communities in children's learning and wellbeing* is the result of another year of innovative research from Dr Willis and Professor Exley, who have worked alongside 22 school teachers and leaders from three ISQ member schools as they honed their respective parent engagement practices.

We are very grateful to each of those educators for their belief and commitment to this project and their foresight for what this collective research will deliver for families, teachers, and students for many years to come.

As Dr Willis and Professor Exley write in their findings, the participating teachers showed how often small changes in parent engagement practice were quickly rewarded with noticeably enhanced: student learning and engagement, teaching effectiveness and teacher satisfaction, as well as collective and community wellbeing.

"The findings challenge the perceived barrier to parent engagement that most parents lose interest in their child's formal education as they get older," Dr Willis and Professor Exley write.

"On the contrary, this research showed that parents of children of all ages were often *waiting in the wings*, they just needed to be invited into their child's learning in a way that worked for them."

Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network is grateful to receive funding through the Queensland Government, a significant portion of which has been used to fund this important and ongoing piece of research, which is resulting in tangible change for the teaching profession, students and families.

**Amanda Watt**  
EXECUTIVE OFFICER  
QUEENSLAND INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS  
PARENTS NETWORK

Ongoing, informed public policy debate around crucial key issues in the education sector is fundamental in driving innovation and improved student learning outcomes.

EPIC research, a collaborative project between Griffith University, Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network and Independent Schools Queensland, is testament to this and has been a guiding piece of research in the public debate in the parent engagement space since the first report was released in 2021.

This latest EPIC report again proves this ongoing research is delivering results on what ISQ member schools have been asking for: evidence-based guidance on how to effectively engage with their most powerful allies – parents and carers.

By distilling the 2022 EPIC findings into resources including a series of easy-to-understand snapshot documents and a new suite of professional development videos, it has never been easier for ISQ member schools to use this important piece of research to enhance their parent engagement knowledge and practice.

Thank you to the member schools who contributed to this ongoing piece of research and thank you to Dr Willis and Professor Exley for their professionalism and expertise in leading the 2022 EPIC research and preparing its corresponding report.

**Christopher Mountford**  
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER  
INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS QUEENSLAND

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The research project, Engaging Parents in Inquiry Curriculum (EPIC) 2022 and this final report, *Pedagogies, practices, and processes for engaging parents and communities in children's learning and wellbeing*, received funding from Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network (QIS Parents Network) and in-kind support from partners, Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) and Griffith University. The project was conducted by Griffith University researchers, Dr Linda-Dianne (Linda) Willis and Professor Beryl Exley.

The researchers wish to acknowledge the close collaboration with Ms Shari Armistead (Director, Strategic Relations, ISQ, and Board Chair, QIS Parents Network) and Ms Amanda Watt (EPIC Project Coordinator, ISQ, and Executive Officer, QIS Parents Network). The researchers also wish to acknowledge the willing participation of the principals, school leaders, teachers, parents, students and other school staff who contributed to and/or provided support for this research. Finally, the researchers acknowledge the continued generous support of Griffith University, ISQ, and the QIS Parents Network.

## DISCLAIMER

This report has been prepared for Independent Schools Queensland and the QIS Parents Network to promote informed debate on issues in school education. The authors accept full responsibility for the views expressed herein. Independent Schools Queensland and QIS Parents Network do not necessarily support all of these views.

The findings represented in the report draw on data generated by the researchers during participant interviews, professional learning days, conversations with principals, school leaders, and teachers, and other forms of communication such as email about their work with parents, students, and colleagues to promote parent engagement. Data were generated in good faith from the individuals and schools involved. No responsibility is accepted by Independent Schools Queensland and the QIS Parents Network, Griffith University, or the researchers for any errors or omissions contained in this publication. No liability will be accepted for loss or damage arising from reliance upon any information contained herein.

# Executive summary

The 2022 EPIC—*Engaging Parents in Inquiry Curriculum*—project report presents initial descriptive findings on parent<sup>1</sup> engagement research in which 22 teachers and school leaders from three different Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) member schools participated. The research was funded by Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network (QIS Parents Network) and received in-kind support from partners, Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) and Griffith University. The project is in its second year and extends EPIC 2021 research in which six schools participated (see Willis, Exley, & Daffurn, 2021 [EPIC 2021 Final Report]). The current project benefits from previous similar research since 2008 in Catholic Education and State Schools.

The aim of EPIC 2022 was to investigate how groups of teachers and school leaders collaborated to explore effective contemporary, evidenced-based pedagogies, practices, and processes in their school context and setting for engaging parents in their child's learning and wellbeing.

The report includes an introduction section in which the background, impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, brief literature review, theoretical framing, and research design and methods are outlined. The parent engagement journeys of each school are represented in three case studies which feature effective teacher and school leader pedagogies, practices, and processes for engaging parents. Parent engagement opportunities, challenges, and complexities identified by the participants are also featured. The case studies include detailed illustrations of practice from one or more teachers at each school. These illustrations are discussed under three broad headings—invitations, conversations, and transformations—ideas which emerged during data analysis. Each case study includes final observations and conclusions from the teachers and school leaders. The report offers overall findings, draws conclusions, and suggests implications for parent engagement practice and research under the headings: knowledge and practice; theory and concepts; and research design and methods. Limitations are considered and suggestions for further research are proffered. The words of one participant carry the final message of the report. Three appendices of frameworks which supported the EPIC 2022 participants' understanding, planning, and implementation of effective pedagogical practices for engaging parents are included. Appendix 2—the SSOOPP<sup>2</sup> Framework—accompanies the report as a separate, research-informed infographic/snapshot.

1 The researchers describe *parents* generally to include carers and families and broadly to include communities with the responsibility and care for a student's learning and wellbeing.  
2 SSOOPP (pronounced SOUP) stands for: short, sharp, often, optional, with a purpose, and personalised to parents and their child.



# Introduction



## BACKGROUND

Six schools—Schools A to F<sup>3</sup>—participated in EPIC 2021 which comprised two phases. In Phase 1, principals and school leaders from each school were interviewed about their parent engagement journeys. Phase 2 involved intensive case studies of classroom teachers from two schools. School A participated in Phases 1 and 2 and Schools C and D participated in Phase 1. The EPIC 2021 Final Report—prepared by Willis, Exley, and Daffurn (2021)—provided comprehensive findings about parent engagement at each school, together with four case studies of teachers which detailed effective pedagogical practices for engaging parents. Two infographics were also produced to represent the EPIC 2021 findings and support schools and teachers in their practice of engaging parents in their child’s learning and wellbeing.

NOTE: The names School A, C and D in EPIC 2022 continue the names by which these schools were known in EPIC 2021.

## EPIC 2022

EPIC 2021 paved the way for EPIC 2022, which was not a repeat of the previous year, but rather *scaled up* the research to focus on teacher and school leader groups working collaboratively to probe effective pedagogies, practices, and processes for engaging parents. Schools A, C, and D took part in EPIC 2022. This approach yielded detailed, nuanced information and understanding about the nature of parent engagement at each school that included common and unique challenges and complexities as well as possible new and creative opportunities to further this work. An essential aspect of EPIC 2022 was the active participation of principals and school leaders throughout the research. The success of EPIC 2022 also relied on the close collaboration among the researchers, ISQ, and QIS Parents Network in coordinating the communication and meetings with teachers and school leaders and producing resources to support the research and disseminate the findings.

## IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

EPIC 2022 was conducted against the backdrop of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The commencement of the school year was delayed in Queensland schools by two weeks until 7 February 2022 to protect the safety of students and teachers in classrooms. A range of restrictions continued in schools and early childhood services including mandatory COVID-19 vaccination requirements for workers and wearing of masks for close contacts of a confirmed case of COVID-19. The declared public health emergency period in Queensland was extended until 22 September 2022. This protracted period of restrictions reflected the high risk of COVID-19 to the Queensland community. At the same time, the 2022 Influenza season resulted in surging infection rates, and co-infection of Influenza and COVID-19 created additional concerns. The situation had serious impacts on staffing and student attendance for each participating school. Although these impacts were felt throughout data generation for EPIC 2022, the use of online platforms such as Microsoft Teams allowed the research to continue.

## BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

Although a direct causal link between engaging parents and improved student learning and wellbeing outcomes cannot be claimed (Boonk et al., 2018; see also Department of Education, 2020), there is consistent, compelling research evidence to suggest the benefits of parent engagement are significant (e.g., Borgonovi & Montt, 2012; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Fan & Chen, 2001; Fan et al., 2012; Goodall, 2017; Hamlin & Flessa, 2018; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2012; Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development [OECD], 2017). Such benefits accrue for individuals in terms of greater educational success and hence, improved life opportunities—with positive flow-on effects for communities and society more broadly such as lower rates of poverty, social and material deprivation, substance abuse, underemployment, and long-term welfare dependency (Goodall, 2022a; see also Povey et al., 2016).

Education reform initiatives and policies by governments and public policy makers worldwide reflect increasing recognition of the value and importance of parent engagement (Hamlin & Flessa, 2018; see also Willis & Exley, 2020). Among the latest internationally is the *Family Engagement Core Competencies* developed in the United States by the National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement (NAFSCE) (NAFSCE, 2022). Foremost among initiatives in Australia is the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* which states: “Learning is a partnership with parents, carers and others in the community, all of whom have a role to play in nurturing the love of learning needed for success at school and in life” (Department of Education, Skills, & Employment, 2019, p. 3). For school leaders, other influential documents include the *Australian Professional Standard for Principals* notably, Professional Practice 3—Leading improvement, innovation, and change, and Professional Practice 5—Engaging and working with the community (Australian Institute for Teaching & School Leaders [AITSL], 2017a). For teachers,

preservice teachers, and higher education providers, these also include the *Australian Professional Standards for Teachers* (APST), notably:

- Standard 3.7—Engage parents/carers in the educative process;
- Standard 5.5—Demonstrate strategies for reporting on student achievement to students and parents/carers; and
- Standard 7.3—Engage with parents/carers using effective strategies) (AITSL, 2017b).

Moreover, the Australian Government’s recent *Next Steps: Report of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review* (Department of Education, 2021) made 17 recommendations to improve teacher preparation and the teaching profession generally—two of which specifically refer to: Working with families/carers (Recommendation 7) and Supporting families and carers to engage with teachers (Recommendation 9) (p. ix).

Despite this increased recognition and concomitant emphasis on *what* parent engagement is and *why* it is important, *how* it may be achieved effectively in practice remains inadequately emphasised in schools and the literature. Where parent engagement appears to flourish (e.g., Willis, Povey et al., 2021), endeavours tend to be attributed to a few highly-motivated individuals and are mostly local and somewhat uncoordinated. To begin to understand more about this aspect of parent engagement, EPIC 2022 focused on teacher and school leader collaborations to investigate how effective parent engagement pedagogies and practices might be embedded in the regular work of teachers and processes for a more coordinated approach across a school.

## THEORETICAL FRAMING

EPIC espouses a philosophy and pedagogy for engaging parents using four interrelated concepts: engaging parents (parent engagement), inquiry curriculum, cogenerative dialogues, and affinity spaces. The researchers refer to these concepts as EPIC pillars.

3 All names of schools, teachers, school leaders, parents, and students used in this report are pseudonyms.

Parent engagement

The notion of *engagement* shifts the traditional proposition of parents’ *involvement* in schools towards parents’ *engagement* in their child’s learning and wellbeing (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). EPIC researchers are careful to stress that parent engagement (abstract noun) is not a destination, but a journey; hence, the term, *engaging (parents)*, in EPIC’s title more closely conveys the nature of this work as a continuing, perpetual *process* (action verb).

EPIC recognises that parents are the first and continuing teachers of their child. They bring vast knowledge of their child’s lifeworlds and the broader world including schooling, work, and life in general to the metaphoric table; hence, EPIC teachers and school leaders do not seek to *build* the capacity of parents, but rather seek to support parents to *actualise* their capacity (Pushor, 2022). According to Pushor, “One of the critical attributes of parent engagement is that it uses parent knowledge, that’s how you know it’s engagement and not parent involvement”. Similarly, Goodall (2022b) envisaged learning, education, and schooling as three concentric circles, explaining:

Learning begins at birth and goes on through life... Within that large circle of learning is education, which is learning that is focused to a particular end (Hadfield, 2005), undertaken for a specific purpose (Biesta, 2012). Schooling, as the final, smaller circle entirely surrounded by the other two (at least in an ideal world), may be defined as those elements of directed learning which come under the auspices of schools. (p. 23)

Goodall (2022a) iterated that when the focus shifts from *schooling* to *learning*, “then parents are already part of the process”.

Inquiry curriculum

EPIC researchers support teachers and school leaders to develop pedagogies, practices, and processes which meaningfully connect home and school learning. For this reason, the researchers favour *inquiry curriculum* approaches. Such approaches align with the Australian Curriculum and, unlike traditional approaches which tend to “[present] information, or ‘the answer’, up-front, teachers start with a range of scenarios, questions and problems for students to navigate” (Department of Education, Skills & Employment [DESE], 2021, para. 1). Inquiry approaches afford potentially bountiful opportunities for real-world connections and substantive conversations among students, parents, community members, and teachers. Such approaches thus increase possibilities for teachers to meaningfully connect with parents by calling on their parent knowledge (Pushor, 2022), while simultaneously enabling them to *accompany* their child on their learning journey (e.g., Exley et al., 2017; Ridgewell &

Exley, 2011; Willis, 2009, 2013, 2016; Willis & Exley, 2018, 2021b; Willis, Exley, & Clancy, 2020; Willis, Exley, & Daffurn, 2021; Willis, Exley, & Merli, 2021; Willis, Exley, & Pether, 2022; Willis, Exley, Singh et al., 2022a, 2022b; see also Pushor, 2022).

Affinity spaces

The idea of *affinity* spaces refers to spaces where learning can happen. These are generally *gathering* spaces, can include students and significant others such as peers, parents, teachers, and community members, and may be physical and/or virtual. The idea is not unlike Schwab’s (1973) notion of *commonplaces* where schooling is seen in the broader context of a child’s life and thus, the idea of curriculum takes on an expanded view (see also Pushor & the Parent Engagement Collaborative, 2013). Schwab envisaged curriculum and curriculum planning as comprising four coordinated spheres of influence or dimensions of equal importance: learners, teachers, subject matter or syllabi, and milieus—where milieus encompass commonplaces in schools, classrooms, homes, and communities. Willis, Povey et al.’s (2021) research found digital technologies—especially the idea of virtual classrooms—constituted an essential additional milieu. These spaces of learning where children find affinity “recognise that where and with whom children live, and their social, cultural, religious and economic contexts are all significant to teaching and learning” (Pushor & the Parent Engagement Collaborative, 2013, p. 10). EPIC researchers use the idea of affinity spaces to support teachers and school leaders to identify and create possible new opportunities for engaging parents in their child’s learning and wellbeing.

Cogenerative dialogues

*Cogenerative dialogues* are a type of affinity space. The affix, *co*, refers to participants (e.g., teachers, school leaders, students, parents, researchers) coming together to collaborate about some aspect of their work (e.g., planning the curriculum). *Generative* describes the unfolding processes typical of these interactive social spaces which can lead to substantive conversations and hence, new ideas and insights which participants might not reach alone. The purpose of cogenerative dialogues is for participants to listen and learn from one another to better understand a phenomenon (e.g., engaging parents), while simultaneously providing support and encouragement for each other. In these spaces, participants understand they are working *with* and *for*, not *on*, *over* or *against* one another. Hence, cogenerative dialogues are designed to be inclusive and use respectful practices such as:

- generous listening that includes radical listening (i.e., listening for what’s *not* said);
- inviting one another to participate;
- allowing participants equal talk time;

- accepting and valuing all ideas;
- suspending judgement;
- responding positively to the contributions of others;
- discussing one issue fully before moving on;
- seeing differences as opportunities for learning from one another;
- playing different roles (e.g., facilitators, sounding boards, encouragers, supporters, motivators, empathisers);
- debate without necessarily reaching consensus; and
- respectful disagreement. (Willis, 2013, 2016; Willis, Grimmett et al., 2018; see also Tatum, 2017; Appendix 3)

During cogenerative dialogues participants may decide on positive actions individually and/or collectively, which become the focus of reflexive discussions in subsequent dialogues. Cogenerative dialogues have been shown to have a *ripple effect* on other affinity spaces (e.g., classrooms) as conversations continue and expand beyond the group. Willis (2016) coined the term, *cogenerativity*, to describe the transformational potential of cogenerative dialogues for developing and sustaining *communities of learners*. Hence, EPIC researchers use cogenerative dialogues to encourage a culture among teachers and school leaders which promotes pedagogies, practices, and processes for engaging rather than mostly involving parents in their child’s learning and wellbeing.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Previous EPIC research has highlighted that there is no *one* or *right* way to engage parents. For this reason, EPIC researchers do not tell teachers what to do, but instead work alongside them in their parent engagement journeys, sharing relevant literature, research findings, and illustrations of practice to investigate the reality of what happens in the context of their particular situations. Consistent with this approach, EPIC projects (e.g., Willis & Exley, 2018, 2021a) draw on the principles and purposes of engaging parents, inquiry curriculum, affinity spaces, and cogenerative dialogues (i.e., EPIC’s theoretical framing or four pillars) to inform research design and methods. Accordingly, a design-based research approach (DBR) (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Bell, 2004; Brown, 1992; Papavlasopoulou et al., 2019; The Design-Based Collective, 2003) which uses interactive, iterative, flexible processes and practices to generate data is adopted throughout each project.

EPIC research is suited to DBR because such an approach:

- seeks to refine theory and practice;
- happens in real-world settings and contexts;
- uses mixed methods to respond to changing and/or emerging issues; and
- connects the research findings and design processes. (Papavlasopoulou et al., 2019, p. 417)

EPIC 2022 took place in the context of the everyday work of three schools where the researchers worked collaboratively with the teachers and school leaders. The researchers adjusted data generation to: suit each school; accommodate changing participant circumstances; address arising research needs and/or potential problems; and develop new understandings and innovative research methods in the area of parent engagement.

It should be noted that the researchers played dual roles as research facilitators and participants alongside the teachers and school leaders. This collaboration was extended to include two ISQ-QIS Parents Network community participants. The researchers and ISQ-QIS Parents Network participants met weekly to cogeneratively dialogue about aspects of the research (e.g., what was happening; what was coming next; what was working; what could be improved) and to discuss the group’s organisational and logistical needs (e.g., setting up meetings with teachers and visits to schools). These dialogues also enhanced understanding between the researchers and the ISQ-QIS Parents Network participants about the nature of working with university researchers and industry stakeholders, while simultaneously continually enabling the group to be responsive to emerging situations and the changing needs of all participants (i.e., school leaders, teachers, researchers, and ISQ-QIS Parents Network participants).

The research was granted ethical approval by Griffith University in 2021 which was extended in 2022. Three schools and 22 teachers and school leaders participated in EPIC 2022 (see Table 1 page 8) Participants included: principals; early years leaders; middle school leaders; curriculum leaders; early years, middle years, and senior secondary years teachers; teachers and school leaders in dual leadership and classroom teaching roles; and teachers and school leaders in largely non-teaching or service roles involved in coordinating specific school programs and/or administration.

At School C, two groups of teachers—a middle years and senior secondary years group and an early years group—participated. At School D, at least one teacher from each of the three classes, and the teaching principal, participated as a group. EPIC 2022 participants were at various stages professionally—including early-career to very experienced teachers—and some had held previous leadership positions. Four School A teachers or school leaders were also current or recent past parents of students at the school.

The teachers and school leaders taught across a range of subjects in the Australian Curriculum; notably for this report, English, HASS (Humanities and Social Sciences), Science/STEM (Science, Technologies, Engineering and Mathematics), The Arts, and HPE (Health and Physical Education).



**Table 1:** Table of EPIC 2022 teacher and school leader participant information

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION	SCHOOL A P-12	SCHOOL C P-12	SCHOOL D P-12	TOTAL
EPIC 2022 Participants	9	9	4	22
Teachers	5	4	3	12
School leaders	4	5	1	10
Principals	1	1	1	3
School leaders with classes	0	4	1	5
School leaders with no classes	4	1	0	5
Early years teachers	4	4	2	10
Middle years teachers	1	4	2	7
Secondary senior years teachers	1	1	0	2
Early-career teachers	2	0	2	4
Teachers with previous leadership roles	1	0	1	2
Teacher & current parent at school	2	0	0	2
School leader & current/past parent at school	2	0	0	2
EPIC 2021 participants	3	2	1	6

Note: Participants were counted more than once if they fell under more than one descriptor

Teacher and school leader data were generated intensively over eight months between March and October 2022. Data generation methods included: initial and final participant interviews; fortnightly cogenerative dialogues with four groups of teachers across the schools; professional learning sessions (online and face-to-face) to set up the research; parent information evenings; email communication; school and teacher artefacts (e.g., examples of teacher planning; Facebook posts); and three sharing sessions where participants from all schools and the researchers shared what they were doing and progressive findings. Almost 250 hours of video and audio data were generated throughout the research with most participants generating between 10 and 15 hours of data each. A distinguishing feature of the EPIC 2022 data set was 24 video-recorded cogenerative dialogues of teacher and school leader groups meeting on Microsoft Teams to share and support one another in the ongoing work of engaging parents at their school.

A smaller supplementary set of data from parents and student participants was generated using: interviews; presentations by parents to students; parent information evenings; artefacts (e.g., photographs); and email communication.

Microsoft Teams was used to generate video data and raw transcripts of interviews, cogenerative dialogues, professional learning sessions, parent evenings, and school sharing sessions; face-to-face professional learning sessions were audio-recorded in-situ and later transcribed manually.

All Microsoft Teams-generated transcripts were checked carefully against the video-recorded data and adjusted as necessary to ensure the transcripts were an accurate representation of what was said by participants. Initial analysis occurred during this time and included researcher notes and memos on transcripts. Videos produced by ISQ and QIS Parents Network which featured a representative group of EPIC 2022 participants who gave written permission for their video to be used in the research afforded the researchers access to a secondary data source. The descriptive findings in this report were generated through immersion of the researchers in the corpus of data which allowed the data to be organised and interrogated against themes which emerged. The broad headings, *invitations*, *conversations* and *transformations*—which structure the findings in each case study—are an example of what emerged from this analytical process. Throughout EPIC 2022, the researchers regularly cogenerated about aspects of data generation and used *metalogues*—conversations about cogenerative dialogues—to review the processes of research and gain deeper understanding about the findings which were emerging (see Willis & Exley, 2021a; see also Heck et al., 2019; Willis, Grimmer et al., 2018). Participants were invited to attend an online sharing session where the researchers presented preliminary findings and each principal was invited to member check and approve their school's case study before the report's publication.





# Case study 1 school A



### BACKGROUND

School A was a growing, independent, co-educational K-12 (Pre-Prep to Year 12) school of several hundred students located in a rural setting on the outskirts of a large metropolis in south-east Queensland. Primary classes up to Year 5 were double-streamed. Students often had the same teacher throughout their primary school years. School A was part of a global education system that focused on the development of “the child *and* the student” (Dana, Principal, School A, Professional Learning Session 1). The school not only recognised the importance of engaging parents, but also believed it had “a *responsibility* to engage parents” because of its ethos which revolves around “community” and “the vision of social and cultural renewal” (Dana, Principal, School A, Professional Learning Session 1). School A participated in Phases 1 and 2 of EPIC 2021. Dana<sup>4</sup> (Principal) also participated as a case study teacher in 2021 (see Willis, Exley, & Daffurn [EPIC 2021 Final Report]).

EPIC 2022 participants comprised nine teachers and/or school leaders who represented all areas of the school: Dana (Principal, Terms 1 and 2), Ava (Primary School Leader, Terms 1 and 2; Principal, Terms 3 and 4), Georgie (Administration Leader), Petrina (Secondary School Leader), Justin (middle years and senior secondary years teacher), and Max, Elsa, Dianne, and Beatrice (early years teachers) (see Table 2 page 11).

School A made a clear distinction between parent engagement and parent involvement. The school’s website highlighted the profound impact of parent engagement on students’ life achievements and emotional wellbeing. Parent engagement was described as parents taking an active interest in their child’s learning at school and making authentic connections between school and home life. Practical parent involvement activities such as volunteering to assist on special days and community-building social events were also encouraged. An association of parents met fortnightly to organise fundraising activities.

### Professional learning sessions

In EPIC 2022, the teachers and school leaders initially participated in a full day of professional learning on campus that comprised three sessions. The participants subsequently met with the researchers on Microsoft Teams for six cogenerative dialogues and kept in contact between times using email. In the spirit of design-based research (DBR), the professional learning was a two-way exercise. One of the researchers took up the school’s invitation to attend a full-day, research presentation and assessment event where students in their final year of senior secondary school explained a student-led research project they had designed and executed over ten months. The event was attended by: teachers who knew the presenting students at different phases of their schooling journey; the presenting students’ families and supporters; and other interested community members. The invitation to the researchers presented a valuable opportunity to meet with the teachers and ancillary staff and the parents and community members of School A in a more relaxed setting.

**Table 2:** School A – EPIC 2022 participants

NAME	ROLE	AREA	OTHER INFORMATION
Dana	Principal, Terms 1 and 2	Whole school, Terms 1 and 2	EPIC 2021 teacher and school leader participant; Experienced teacher
Ava	Principal, Terms 3 and 4; Primary School Leader, Terms 1 and 2	Whole school, Terms 3 and 4	EPIC 2021 school leader participant
Georgie	Administration Leader	Whole school	Previous school parent
Petrina	Secondary School Leader	Senior secondary and middle years	EPIC 2021 teacher participant; Previous school parent
Justin	Years 7 and 10 Classroom Teacher	Senior secondary and middle years	Early-career teacher; Parent at the school
Max	Year 3 Classroom Teacher	Early years	Experienced teacher; Previous school principal
Elsa	Year 3 Classroom Teacher	Early years	Early-career teacher
Dianne	Year 2 Classroom Teacher	Early years	Experienced teacher; Parent at the school
Beatrice	Year 2 Classroom Teacher	Early years	Experienced teacher

### Engaging parents

During the professional learning day, the teachers and school leaders brainstormed existing opportunities for parent participation at the school. Speaking on behalf of the participants, Dianne described the range of activities offered at class and school level:

In class we have parents talking with the children. In one class an architect spoke with the children. We’ve had gardening with the parents, cooking with the parents, coming in and sharing their skills with the students... Students sharing their work with their parents in the classroom. Parents going on excursions with students in different ways such as going along as class volunteers or welcoming back the Year 9 students from their camp. Class plays, birthday celebrations, open days, school tours, working bees (e.g., parents helping in post storm cleanups), craft groups, festivals, school fairs, Friday Foodies, Christmas markets, Year 12 Projects, school camp for parents, edible garden trail, school newsletter, class newsletters from the class teacher weekly or once a term, concerts. (Classroom Teacher, School A, Professional Learning Session 2)

### Inquiry curriculum

School A used an inquiry curriculum approach to learning and teaching as part of a spiral curriculum model where different areas of focus were studied intensely for three-week periods throughout the years of schooling.

### Affinity spaces

The participants identified a number of existing affinity spaces which they categorised as school, classroom, and parent-initiated spaces. *School affinity spaces* included: seasonal festivals, working bees, community fora, parent tours, information evenings, the Annual General Meeting, parent surveys, newsletters, parent camps, musical performances,

Year 12 inquiry projects (which involved invitations to the whole school community, school alumni, and members of the broader community), the school’s Facebook page, website, and parent portal. *Classroom affinity spaces* included weekly newsletters, parent-teacher evenings, reading groups, parent helper opportunities, field excursions, formal and informal parent meetings, group and individual email communications, and class carer initiatives. *Parent-initiated affinity spaces* occurred at school and classroom levels and included social media groups (e.g., Facebook, WhatsApp), school bookshop, craft groups, volunteering in the tuckshop, play meets, social events for new parents (e.g., barbeques), and support groups for families (e.g., during illness, pregnancy, birth of a new baby). (School A, Professional Learning Session 2)

### Cogenerative dialogues

In thinking about cogenerative dialoguing, the participants considered which affinity spaces afforded opportunities for two-way interactions between school and home. One teacher commented that “parent-teacher conversations that occurred after class constantly” represented valuable informal times to dialogue cogeneratively as teachers answered questions and parents and teachers “checked-in” with each other (Justin, Classroom Teacher, School A, Professional Learning Session 2). Justin further commented:

Working bees are worth their weight [in gold]. Once a term parents come and work around the school and the conversations that happen—and it’s outside of the class, it’s vertical streaming as well—so you’ve got secondary school parents talking to Kindy parents, ‘Oh, what year’s your son in? Oh great, we’re going into that in a couple of years’ time and how have you found it?’ And you get to know about people’s skillsets, ‘I’m a carpenter, or a builder, or an economist’ or whatever it might be. So many valuable conversations on those working bees. (Classroom Teacher, School A, Professional Learning Session 2)

4 In 2022, Dana was the principal of School A during Terms 1 and 2. Ava was the principal during Terms 3 and 4

## CASE STUDY 1 SCHOOL A CONTINUED

The use of parents as subject matter experts (SME) represented another opportunity for cogenerative dialoguing. The participants described an example of two Year 3 parents currently working with international companies and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) who were donating their time and expertise to mentor and support a Year 12 student on a year-long inquiry project that involved building drones (School A, Professional Learning Session 2). Early years parent information nights that involved *developmental conversations* were also identified as cogenerative in nature. During these conversations, stages of development of students, what parents noticed at home about their child, and issues they might be dealing with afforded opportunities for questions and answers and back-and-forth conversations between teachers and parents (School A, Professional Learning Session 2).

From speaking with other participants, Justin observed however, that some communication which held the promise of being cogenerative, slipped into one-way communication:

Weekly emails from class teachers, lectures, talks, festivals—which we thought should be two-way examples—have devolved into a one-way kind of performance; certainly in the secondary school, it's become more of a performance than a community gathering like a festival should be. (Classroom Teacher, School A, Professional Learning Session 2)

### Opportunities, challenges, and complexities of parent engagement

The participants also described several parent engagement challenges. Although parent engagement opportunities might be offered, parents could not always take these up because of work commitments or COVID-19 restrictions. Max commented, “It's been hard with COVID-19. It's put a huge dampener on these opportunities” (Classroom Teacher, School A, Professional Learning Session 2). Referring to the COVID-19 pandemic and concomitant increased use of online technologies, he added, “[it] seems to have made it more accessible to more people, but the face-to-face form of our interactions—sitting around chatting and having a cup of tea etcetera has suffered” (Max, Classroom Teacher, School A, Professional Learning Session 2).

Dianne highlighted the particular challenges of online learning for early years teachers because:

[We] ended up writing a complete one-on-one program for parents to work with their child; so we basically wrote a manual for them. We realised we had to penetrate the parents to teach the students. So everything went through the parents to actually teach the students; they had to sing the songs, tell the stories—so all through the adult, not through the screen. (Classroom Teacher, School A, Professional Learning Session 2)

The early years parent manual detailed the school's philosophy which also explained why the teachers “weren't going to engage young children in front of a screen” (Dianne, Classroom Teacher, School A, Professional Learning Session 2). Dianne added however, that the manual made aspects of learning and teaching explicit and was now part of an early years parent starter pack and on the school's website. Hence, the experience of COVID-19 ultimately created a unique opportunity that yielded a valuable and sustainable resource for early years teachers and parents in general.

Systemic challenges at the school level included an online portal that required parents to remember to log into a space that was not considered highly user-friendly and encouraged a one-way information-sending approach (School A, Professional Learning Session 2). Broader systemic challenges included an apparent lack of preservice teacher preparation in parent engagement. Elsa, an early-career participant, reported: “It was actually quite difficult for a preservice teacher to engage with parents and although I had four practicums, it was really the last one of seven weeks where I had more opportunity to experience parent engagement first-hand” (Classroom Teacher, School A, Professional Learning Session 2). Elsa could not “remember writing anything specifically academically about parent engagement” (Classroom Teacher, School A, Professional Learning Session 2). Justin, also an early-career teacher, agreed with Elsa's comments, recalling that “[parent engagement] was just added into little bits of the places in my [initial teacher education] experience” and “was more about reporting and making sure parents were informed, especially if their child needed additional support” (Classroom Teacher, School A, Professional Learning Session 2). He explained, “It (referring to reporting to parents of students needing learning support) almost felt more like an insurance-covering exercise, making sure, ‘Oh well, you've told them everything, so there's no surprises’” (Justin, Classroom Teacher, School A, Professional Learning Session 2).

The participants drew attention to several complexities of engaging parents. Justin experienced tension in his dual role of being a teacher and a parent, and having to refrain from giving more information to his child than he felt he should. He conceded, “I make that mistake all the time! My child comes home all excited and they want to know something and I say, ‘What about this?’ and I just launch into it!” (Justin, Classroom Teacher, School A, Professional Learning Session 2). Dianne (also a parent at the school), commented on the tension she experienced as a teacher between:

... sharing information with parents about what we're (referring to her class) doing and why, but needing them to understand the role they can play, ‘Don't tell them the answer!’, that's not the point. We want them (students) to find the answer, but it's what we need you to know so you can share this journey with your child... Holding back is actually giving the power to the child. (Classroom Teacher, School A, Professional Learning Session 2)

Georgie highlighted a further complexity of parent engagement. Although parent information nights were compulsory and therefore well attended, she reported:

They (referring to parents) are so engaged every time they come into the school and every time people go, ‘I want to do that education as a parent. What are my opportunities to come and do the Year 12 year? How can I really learn this because I didn't have this as an education.’ (School Leader, School A, Professional Learning Session 2)

The participants subsequently discussed past initiatives where different teachers had successfully utilised the school's facilities to provide out-of-hours support for parents' learning. Despite the overwhelmingly positive response from parents and the school community, teachers' workloads, levels of exhaustion, and existing commitments (e.g., after-school meetings, co-curricular activities) were mentioned as barriers to the practicality of running and ultimately sustaining these offerings (School A, Professional Learning Session 2).

### ILLUSTRATIONS OF PRACTICE

The findings below from School A of one middle and senior secondary years teacher, Justin, and one early years teacher, Max, provide representative illustrations of pedagogies, practices, and processes for engaging parents in their child's learning and wellbeing.

#### Illustration of practice 1: Justin—Middle and senior secondary years teacher

Justin was in his first year as a full-time registered teacher. He previously worked for approximately two decades as a satellite engineer and later as a project manager. He started teaching part-time at School A in handcrafts and manual arts before gaining qualifications to teach outdoor recreation. During his initial teacher education (ITE) program, Justin specialised in physics and media arts, and while at School A, he also taught across many other subjects (e.g., chemistry, history, geography) between Years 7 and 12. In addition, Justin was a parent of two students at the school (Justin, Classroom Teacher, School A, Professional Learning Session 1).

#### Invitations

At the beginning of the research, Justin noted that parents seemed more engaged in the early years of schooling compared to secondary school (Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 1). His experience teaching bushcraft privately had afforded him opportunities to recognise the value of parent engagement and the kinds of subjects which might lend themselves to their involvement. He noticed however, as students became teenagers, parents tended to become more like “taxi drivers”—dropping off and collecting their child from lessons—and “there was a definite expectation of most parents that their child came to school to learn, and then they go home for home things” (Justin, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 1).

Justin's usual practice for engaging parents was to provide students with the resources they needed so they could continue their classwork at home (Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 1). For students who missed classes due to illness, he would send an email that included any handouts and copied in their parents so they could assist their child with making up the missed work. Hence, Justin indicated that he had always kept parents “in the loop”, although EPIC 2022 was the first time he had “actively requested parents do something proactive with their child's learning” (Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 1).

Justin described how he made early formal contact several weeks beforehand with the parents of his Year 7 students who were about to study the topic Indigenous Societies. He composed an initial email to introduce himself and the upcoming unit in which students needed to research and develop a presentation on a particular Indigenous society such as one connected to their own family ancestry. His email also described the reported benefits of parent engagement and let them know about *how* they might participate. He stated that their involvement in their child's learning was “opt-in... not compulsory”, and the work would remain “the student's own responsibility” (Justin, Classroom Teacher, School A, Parent Email). He iterated:

This is not about the parent doing the project for the student, but supporting them by aiding research, enthusiasm, ideas, concepts and being truly engaged alongside them in their learning... This particular [unit] suits this research because of the familial nature of the subject matter where families can take an interest in their own deep ancestry if they wish, or simply a shared joy in researching and learning about a unique people from history. (Justin, Classroom Teacher, School A, Parent Email)

Justin's email finished by letting parents know he would “be back in touch as the teacher leading the experience as to how exactly we can support the students and what the practicality may look like” (Justin, Classroom Teacher, School A, Parent Email 1).

#### Conversations

Justin continued the conversation with the Year 7 parents by connecting with them again at the beginning of the unit. He explained:

The concept of Parent Engagement does not mean the parents doing the teacher's job, nor does it mean parents should do the student's work for them. What it does mean is that research supports that students are more engaged with their learning when there is fluidity and discourse between the school environment and the home environment. Have you ever asked your child what they did at school today, only to be met with a shrug and ‘nothing much’? I know I have! Such open-ended questions can be difficult for young people as we are then asking them to discern what is important enough to re-tell



because they don't want to go through their whole day, and they are often tired, and so it's easier to shrug and brush it off. Unfortunately, as parents, we often don't have the knowledge of what they have done in the school day to ask anything more specific. It is my intent to provide you with that knowledge.

I will write to you each day to advise what we covered in class to arm you with questions such as 'explain to me what that Global Circulation is', or 'how did you feel about that exercise you did today?', providing for greater opportunity to connect in the car, or over the dinner table, and to further cement and support the student's learning. (Justin, Classroom Teacher, School A, Parent Email 2)

Justin emphasised again that parents' participation was voluntary and choosing not to be involved would not impact their child's ability to complete the required tasks for the unit.

Justin continued a pattern of emailing parents after each lesson. His emails included specific details about the curriculum content and possible opportunities for them to engage with their child's learning. Some suggestions included asking their child to: connect with some aspect of content; retell a story; explain an idea; draw a diagram; select a picture; discuss a phenomenon and its possible consequences; play a game; look at a book or artefacts together; search the internet and print out material to bring to class; visit a public library; sit with their child in quiet contemplation; give their opinion on a subject or issue; or choose another suitable activity. Justin continued to help the parents to understand how engaging in their child's learning aided retention of information and deepened understanding. He encouraged them saying:

... as you may have experienced yourself, reading new information can be quite different to explaining that same information to someone else, and often when recapitulating from memory that information is less likely to be forgotten. Do not worry if your child cannot respond articulately on these topics immediately; we will continue to re-visit these concepts throughout the [unit] and it is normal for a student to 'not get it' first time around. (Justin, Classroom Teacher, School A, Parent Email 4)

Justin's emails also included information about aspects of learning and teaching such as the nature of assessment in the humanities curriculum area. He continually thanked parents for their positive feedback and invited them to feel free to ask any questions they might have.

Transformations

At the end of the research when Justin reflected on changes in his pedagogical practices for engaging parents, he described how the most fundamental shift was in his consciousness that parent involvement did not need to become less and less over the secondary years. He asserted,

"In fact, it's detrimental if we continue in that assumption" (Justin, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2). He recognised that "as a teacher [he has] the power and the authority... to bring in parents more for the benefit of the students" (Justin, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2). Justin expounded that, "Even just knowing and articulating and being mindful of that simple fact, gives you a different perspective" (Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2).

Typically, Justin considered that teachers approach parent engagement thinking that parents and their child can complete some aspect of learning together or that it entails the teacher covering an aspect of learning at school and parents following up at home. In contrast, he described that when teachers engage parents in the curriculum, they need to make sure what they suggest is "optional and supporting, *not instead of*, so if a parent is unable to join in for whatever reason, that student isn't then disadvantaged" (Justin, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2). He stressed that parents in his classes were not provided with curriculum content to teach their child at home; rather, "it was more giving them the curriculum content that [he] had already delivered and giving them the *toolkit* to continue those questions at home—to inspire dialogue and conversation—as opposed to asking them to do anything in particular" (Justin, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2).

Justin also described how he continued his email conversations whenever he spoke to parents informally (e.g., pick up times after school). He consciously made use of these affinity spaces to ask parents questions such as, "Have you been getting my emails? Have they been useful? and How have you found it (referring to their experience of engaging with their child's learning)?" (Justin, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2). These dialogues gained the attention of parents whom Justin considered were "swamped with a million people wanting a million things nowadays", but he felt it was also "nice to have those verbal connections on top of the emails" (Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2). During these interchanges, Justin often heard positive feedback about how parents and students had engaged in productive conversations about learning in the classroom—"most commonly in the car during the commute on the way home or into school, but also at home, whilst feeding the goats, around the dinner table, where they (referring to students) just bring something up regarding their lesson content" (Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2).

Justin relayed how one parent gave him feedback that she would go to collect her child after school "armed with questions" from his emails, only to find that "after the first couple of days she never used them because [her daughter] was so enthused by the content (referring to what she was learning in the classroom) that she just blurted everything out anyway" (Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2). The parent stated that this was unusual because her daughter

typically did not converse much about her classroom learning. Justin considered the parent's feedback and thought that, "Whilst it can't be proven, I think [the student's changed behaviour was] a direct result of the consciousness brought to parent engagement" (Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2). He added:

The very fact that I'm saying things like, 'Go and see what your parents think about that' and I'm supporting the parents, the parents only have to show a small amount of specific interest and it kind of opens the doors and the conversation continues without much more prompting. (Justin, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2)

Justin emphasised however, that "[parent engagement] does need to be started. You need the catalyst" (Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2).

Illustration of practice 2: Max—Early years teacher

Max taught Year 3 at School A. He was an experienced teacher who had been the principal and founding teacher at two schools (including School A). At the beginning of EPIC 2022, Max's knowledge and practice of parent engagement were well established. He believed that, "If you can engage the parents, it's going to be a lot better for the parents and teacher working together"; hence, "part of the task [of engaging parents] is that parents understand what our task is as teachers" (Max, Classroom Teacher, School A, Professional Learning Session 1). Max developed respectful, trusting relationships with parents early and often. He saw positive relationships as "kind of making an emotional deposit" (Max, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2). He connected with parents at school events and took time before school to say hello and ask, "How's your son or your daughter going?" and "What's been happening in your life?" (Max, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2). He considered that these kinds of social interactions built relationships "which then allow[ed] more difficult conversations to happen" (Max, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2).

Invitations

Max described his usual practice for engaging parents in their child's learning:

I generally send an email out once a week just saying, 'This is what we're doing this week', sometimes a couple of photos of gardening and what they're (referring to the students) doing. And parents have been really appreciative of that. (Classroom Teacher, School A, Professional Learning Session 1)

In adopting respectful practices with parents, Max believed they would reciprocate with respect for him as a teacher and so would their children. He indicated that he had "seen the

reverse of that as well"; hence, "bringing parents in in ways that are really well-communicated and followed-up with the reality of what's happening in the classroom is important for building the cultural fabric of the school" (Max, Classroom Teacher, School A, Professional Learning Session 1).

Justin and Dianne, two EPIC 2022 teacher participants, were also parents of students in Max's class. They agreed that his practices for engaging parents were effective and they were always well informed about what was happening in the classroom—particularly through his practice of sending out regular emails (School A, Professional Learning Session 2).

Following School A's professional learning day, Max emailed the Year 3 parents about a building project that students needed to complete at home and asked them to support their child with gathering materials (e.g., objects from the garden, paddle pop sticks, cardboard) and talking through the design. From his perspective as a parent, Justin described the difficulty he experienced at home in striking the right "balance" between helping too much and not helping at all as his daughter worked on her building:

[Seeing her] failing a few times and watching her struggle when she didn't really need to; but she did do it all herself except for when she got into trouble and was like, 'Oh, how can I do this? I've tried it and it's not worked'. (Year 3 Parent, School A, Cogenerative Dialogue 1)

Justin considered Max's guidance to parents about how they might support their child's learning at home made his role easier:

And it was very clear from what he sent out, that, 'You're supporting them, not doing it for them'. And yeah, it was simple and clear without being overly prescriptive. But yeah, it was very obvious what he was expecting. (Year 3 Parent, School A, Cogenerative Dialogue 1)

Conversations

After the home building project, Linda (researcher) asked Max about feedback he might have given parents on the learning and teaching experience. Max indicated that he had "just done an email with a few photos of a few houses to send parents saying, 'Here's a few examples of what's happened. Thank you for your support'" (Classroom Teacher, School A, Cogenerative Dialogue 1). As he spoke, he thought:

It's fairly brief at the moment, but to give a bit more meat on the bone (referring to his feedback), rather than the, 'Thank you for your support'; you know, 'How amazing to see the different designs and what sort of support was needed and how children had gone out into the bush with their parents and collected things and others had ended up at Bunnings'. (Max, Classroom Teacher, School A, Cogenerative Dialogue 1)



## CASE STUDY 1 SCHOOL A CONTINUED

The conversation was then taken up by Georgie (School Leader), who also participated in the cogenerative dialogue:

**Georgie:** And Max, just a random thought, so not often we end up displaying those dwellings in the library for all staff, for all parents to go and look at too. So I'm sure you can incorporate, which you probably will do anyway, it's just another touch point.

**Max:** Yeah, the library, that's a good idea.

**Georgie:** So you could in the email, you can also invite them (referring to parents) at drop off or before pick up time to go and see everyone else's project too. So again, there's another opportunity. That's just a thought.

**Max:** Alright, thanks. (School A, Cogenerative Dialogue 1)

### Transformations

Given Max's pedagogies for engaging parents in their child's learning were recognised as highly effective before the start of EPIC 2022, it is significant that he still noticed subtle positive changes in his own practice. Referring to his understanding of parent engagement, he said:

I think it's definitely shifted and made me more aware of the value of it... And I think I'm a bit more conscious of going from *informing* parents to *engaging* parents. I think that's a really important differentiation to make. (Max, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2)

To illustrate what he meant, he recalled the initial lesson of the building project when he asked the students to talk with their parents about the question, 'What was the first building?' (Max, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2). He recounted how:

The whole class had conversations with their parents and I was delighted when they came in the next day unexpectedly with lots of information and lots of discussion, and I could almost feel the kitchen tables in the classroom! It was really wonderful. (Max, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2)

Max's knowledge and understanding of effective pedagogies for engaging parents were also enhanced by EPIC's theoretical framing. Speaking about cogenerative dialogues and affinity spaces, he said:

I just think the word (referring to *cogenerative*) itself was an *aha moment* for me way back in Term 1. Just, 'Oh, we're generating stuff together. We're cogenerating'. I just thought that was such a great idea. And having affinity spaces and thinking, 'How does that happen? Where does that happen?' has been really great. (Max, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2)

The influence of these ideas on Max's pedagogical practices for engaging parents was demonstrated in his response to the students' building projects. The students' models were "taken up to the library where they were displayed" and also celebrated "in the school newsletter" (Max, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2). The idea of seeing the library as a powerful asynchronous affinity space to encourage more conversations and learning opportunities (i.e., cogenerativity) appeared to find root in the conversation between Georgie and Max in Cogenerative Dialogue 1 (see above).

Comments by Dianne about the time of the building project also revealed apparent *tweaks* in Max's practice. She noticed that he would email to say, "This is how the week's gone. This is what we've done" and also included "detail" and "examples" which she found "helpful" and "refreshing and just nice as a parent to know to keep in touch" (Dianne, Year 3 Parent, School A, Cogenerative Dialogue 3).

Max came to realise that the monthly parent-teacher meetings he hosted were "very cogenerative places" (Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2). He described how he chooses a topic that he is knowledgeable about, and feels comfortable with, for the parents to talk about in small groups. The last topic was anxiety and about half the parents in his class attended. The meetings gave parents opportunities to talk about issues of import to them and their child and to compare experiences and expectations. He noted however, that during the meetings, "It's not me just giving this information, but it's also, 'Let's have a discussion together' and 'What have you found?' and 'How's it been for you and your child or children?'" (Max, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2). Max described how the dialogues had a powerful impact on some parents as they shared ideas and exchanged "hints" and "strategies""to deal with bits and pieces" (Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2). Max regarded the meetings as "a safe, open space where we can support each other", which he felt nurtured and enhanced the health and wellbeing of participants (Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2). As the research concluded, he now saw greater potential in the future for these meetings as affinity spaces for dialoguing cogeneratively with parents—which included conversations about complex topics which had arisen recently in the classroom.

The notions of cogenerative dialogues and affinity spaces were further taken up by Max in his decision to host a multicultural day. In setting up the event, he discovered there were parents from Sicily in his class whose families came from regions close to each other; hence, he described these families as having "a lot of cultural synergy" for generating discussions on the day (Max, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2). He elaborated that a couple of South African families were contributing to the multicultural day in different ways (Max, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2).

These cultural similarities and differences underscored the value of bringing families into the classroom so everyone could benefit from the vast knowledge of the parents and anticipated positive experience of being together. Max considered he would benefit from thinking more consciously about the ideas of cogenerative dialogues and affinity spaces with the view to embedding these notions throughout his practice and planning for engaging parents. He hoped that the multicultural day might ultimately be a pilot for other teachers wishing to implement similar ideas in their own practice, so they can get to know their families better, while simultaneously engaging them in their child's learning and wellbeing more effectively (Max, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2).

Max observed that engaging parents is not without its challenges such as the possibility that teachers might open themselves up to potential difficulties that are happening in families (e.g., two parents who are divorced). He stated, "I think it needs to be recognised that it can be stressful (for the teacher)" (Max, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2). Hence, teachers should approach parent engagement with an appreciation of families and family dynamics, and the difficulties they may be facing. Max was emphatic however, that "the advantages [of engaging parents] are huge for the learning, for the children, and building a sense of wellbeing within the whole community" (Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2).

### SCHOOL A—FINAL OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Dana summed up the experience of EPIC 2022 by saying that the school did many things to engage parents which often were taken for granted "because it is part of the way we work"; however, she noted, "it doesn't mean we have arrived and can't improve constantly" (Principal, School A, Interview 3). In fact, Dana considered the school was "just at the beginning of the journey because [they] were probably doing much more parent involvement than parent engagement" (Principal, School A, Interview 3). Understanding the difference between the two concepts was important because as she explained:

It slips teachers' minds [and they don't think] when they are having their class meeting that, 'I'm not just going to sit there and tell the parents what we're doing, but invite them' and let them know, 'This is the next unit. If anyone's got any expertise in this, please let me know'. So just flipping the conversation a bit. (Principal, School A, Interview 3)

Dana concluded that being involved in the research had helped the teachers develop the language and strategies for the school "to work forward" in its parent engagement journey (Principal, School A, Interview 3).

Ava, who had also participated in EPIC since 2021, and in 2022 was school principal in Terms 3 and 4, echoed Dana's sentiments, saying, "If I looked back on where we've come from two years ago... I think the biggest thing is a school-wide understanding that parent education sessions and inviting community to things like festivals, isn't engagement" (Principal, School A, Interview 1). She elaborated:

We need to take [parent engagement] one little step further—which was evident in our last festival... where there was a really big push from our whole school faculty meeting where all the teachers across the three faculties were talking about how we can make this event not a passive event where the parents just watch from the sidelines. That big one was having an opportunity for parents to engage in our school grounds, and so they were invited to do some biodynamic farming things around Spring, while the students in the morning were preparing for the festival. (Ava, Principal, School A, Interview 1)

Ava further observed that "it's (referring to engaging parents) been very subtle, but I think there's just a shift in culture now that people are looking at the way that parents are involved in our school differently" (Principal, School A, Interview 1). She used the example of Max who had just hosted a multicultural day and described how:

He was beaming afterwards, like absolutely beaming, and he came in and said, 'Parents cried'. And he said he was getting all teary, like it was such an incredible experience to have parents crying—because they're so involved and touched by things that are happening in the classroom—[it] was just epic. (Ava, Principal, School A, Interview 1)

Apart from differentiating between parent involvement and parent engagement, the idea of *dialogue* represented a driving force behind changes in participants' pedagogical practices and processes for engaging parents. Max described how the notion of cogenerative dialoguing enhanced his understanding of the nature and power of meaningful home-school conversations. Beatrice also stated, "There has been a bit of a shift in terms of dialogue—asking parents to help with things, give their insight into things, what they think of things" (Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2). Beatrice redesigned her Year 2 classroom and found she needed to work with the students, as parents were ultimately unavailable to come into the school. However, she developed a survey that she sent home to parents to interview their child about the learning spaces they wanted in the classroom. The students' responses informed the redesigned classroom and furniture choices. Beatrice observed how initial dialogues between her and the students, and then the children and their parents resulted in "a really nice outcome" (Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2).



CASE STUDY 1 SCHOOL A CONTINUED

Beatrice noticed similar positive outcomes with other initiatives she implemented that could be traced to dialogues. These were not always face-to-face or through formal communication channels, but were observed informally among parents who used social media apps in which Beatrice was a passive participant. One initiative was a rug project made out of T-shirt yarn on which parents wrote messages about their children. Beatrice found that the students were excited to bring in their messages and find out what their parents wrote about them.

She reported that increased interactions between students and their parents, “created just a different dynamic to what [she] had done in the past and one [she’d] like to continue” (Beatrice, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2). Beatrice concluded:

I don’t think it would normally have happened. I think [the parents are] actually feeling a bit free just to come and ask questions now. I have a lot of people stick their head in the classroom in the afternoon, ‘Hey, can I have a look at Thomas’s (pseudonym) recorder work or knitting?’ And that freedom, even though I’ve made the offer before, it’s they’re more willing to take it up. (Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2)

School A participants also commented on the value of regularly meeting together to dialogue cogeneratively about engaging parents in curriculum. Beatrice observed:

There are things that Max has been doing with Year 3 that will be my space next year and even Justin up in the secondary school. So it’s really given a lot of food for thought... to hear what other people are doing and get ideas. (Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2)

Similarly, Justin commented on the additional time to meet which had enabled him to develop more effective pedagogies for engaging parents. Time to meet was important because he said, “It’s the difference between tokenism and action, isn’t it? Lip service and acknowledgement and actually getting down and being proactive” (Justin, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2). One example was his use of the CHANGE Framework (see Willis & Exley, 2020; Willis, Exley, & Daffurn, 2021 [EPIC 2021 Final Report]; see also Appendix 1), which he now added into his program planning. He declared:

Every program I plan has that front and centre. Along with when I’m doing the content, reviewing the curriculum, I’m looking at my diverse needs in my class for that particular cohort. I’m looking at my assessment and reporting and my schedule for that particular year and when in the year it arrives. I’m also looking at the parent engagement, just as another thing in the program planning, and doing that makes it almost effortless. It’s just another part that when you’re used to it, doesn’t take too long to add in, but it adds an extra dimension that definitely supports the students. (Justin, Classroom Teacher, School A, Interview 2).

Given the foregoing observations and conclusions, School A’s leaders played a critical role in ensuring dedicated time, space, and resources to support the work of teachers in developing effective pedagogies, practices, and processes for engaging parents.





# Case study 2 school C



### BACKGROUND

School C was a large, independent, single-gender K-12 (Pre-Prep to Year 12) day and boarding school located in a regional metropolis in south-east Queensland. The school catered for students in Kindergarten (Pre-Prep/Program for girls and boys), Junior School (Prep to Year 6), Middle School (Years 7-9), and Senior School (Years 10-12). Historically, School C was founded as a boarding school to provide formal education to the children of rural families. The school adopted a comprehensive education model in which academic, social, cultural, emotional, physical, and spiritual spheres were equally emphasised to encourage students’ development as confident, capable, respectful, and creative citizens in a global society. Partnerships between the school and families were viewed as essential to each child’s learning journey and therefore actively encouraged. Two 2022 school leaders, Jill (Principal), and Fiona (Head of Junior School), also participated in EPIC 2021, Phase 1 (see Willis, Exley, & Daffurn [EPIC 2021 Final Report]).

EPIC 2022 comprised nine teacher and/or school leader participants. Data were generated by two groups who mostly met separately. A middle years and senior secondary years group (Group 1) comprised five members: Jill (Principal, senior secondary years coteacher), Natalie (Head of Middle School, middle years teacher), Vivian (middle years teacher), Tesha (Learning Enhancement Coordinator, middle years teacher), and Heather (Junior and Middle Years Boarding

School Coordinator). An early years group (Group 2) comprised four members: Fiona (Head of Junior School) and Prue, Margot, and Grace (early years teachers) (see Table 3 page 21).

School C’s website indicated that collaboration was a core value of the school. A number of parent groups worked towards improving the educational environment for students as well as provided support, friendship, and networking opportunities for members through meetings, serving at school events, fundraising, and taking an interest in school activities. Parent contributions (e.g., sharing skills) to the school and classroom were encouraged and offers of help (e.g., reading to students, cooking, sewing, singing) were welcomed.

At the beginning of the research, Jill indicated, “Having been involved in the project since last year, [she] was fascinated by anything to do with parent engagement” (Principal, School C, Professional Learning Session 1). She further commented that she felt “really comfortable with it (referring to parent engagement)”, but “as soon as [parent engagement] walks the line into curriculum, it makes me nervous” (Jill, Principal, School C, Interview 1). Jill qualified her comments however, by saying, “I’m at the point of being intrigued by the possibilities [of parent engagement]” (Jill, Principal, School C, Interview 1).

Table 3: School C – EPIC 2022 participants

NAME	ROLE	AREA	OTHER INFORMATION
Jill	Principal; Year 12 English and Year 7 HPE Classroom Coteacher	Whole school; Senior secondary and middle years	EPIC 2021 school leader participant; Experienced teacher
Natalie	Head of Middle School; Years 7 and 9 English Classroom Teacher	Middle years	Experienced teacher
Vivian	Years 7 and 9 Science Classroom Teacher	Middle years	Experienced teacher
Tesha	Learning Enhancement Coordinator; Years 7 and 9 HASS Classroom Teacher	Middle years	Experienced teacher
Heather	Junior and Middle Years Boarding School Coordinator	Middle years	Experienced teacher
Fiona	Head of Junior School	Early years	EPIC 2021 school leader participant
Prue	Year 2 Classroom Teacher	Early years	Experienced teacher
Margot	Year 1 Classroom Teacher	Early years	Experienced teacher
Grace	Prep Classroom Teacher	Early years	Experienced teacher

### Professional learning sessions

In EPIC 2022, the teachers and school leaders participated in seven hours of professional learning—an initial three-hour online session, after which Groups 1 (middle and senior secondary years) and 2 (early years) met separately for two further two-hour online sessions. Group 1 subsequently met with the researchers on Microsoft Teams for eight cogenerative dialogues, while Group 2 met for six cogenerative dialogues. Both groups kept in contact with the researchers between times using email.

### Engaging parents

During the professional learning sessions, both groups discussed current practices for involving and engaging parents at the school. Group 1 described many different parent involvement activities and avenues in the middle and senior years such as the Year 12 dinner, Year 9 parent breakfast, Spring Fair, The Arts concerts, sports carnivals, school formals, functions hosted by the school’s parent association, assemblies, parent-teacher interviews, the student learning management system, social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram), and email communication. The group also singled out several initiatives which they considered were closer to engagement than involvement on the parent involvement-engagement continuum (see Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). These included: school staff visiting students in their home towns; online lunchtime forums for new boarder parents; boarding school orientations; parent book club; and a special parent/grandparent-student story sharing event.

Natalie observed:

There is a high level of involvement of our parents and lots of opportunities for involvement across the school in boarding, in academic areas, sporting, and the arts. And there are a lot of events, a lot of opportunities for parents to attend to support their child, a lot of information sent home too. We keep them in the loop about what

their child is doing. So, I would say, at that involvement level, we’re really high up; but I think there’s definitely opportunities for us—because our parents are willing to be involved, and I think if we gave them the opportunities to engage with their child’s learning a little bit more—I think our parents would embrace that and really enjoy it. But perhaps we haven’t necessarily made that our focus. We have definitely made a focus of involving our parents. (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 1)

During the early years professional learning sessions, Group 2 also discussed many different parent involvement and engagement pedagogies, practices, and processes. Fiona—who had also participated in EPIC 2021—talked about the difference between involvement and engagement:

I think *involving* parents is about giving them opportunities to be involved in something that has already been determined, but *engaging* parents hopefully allows them to bring richness from their own experiences to something and to contribute to it as a valued equal. (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2)

Speaking for the group, Prue described multiple activities and opportunities for involving parents that included: invitations to sports carnivals; volunteering on excursions; helping in the classroom; school assemblies; and participation in special days and events (e.g., Book Week) and various parent groups (Classroom Teacher, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2). Examples of parent engagement activities included: a visit to the local health centre where a parent worked as a nurse; weighing eggs in response to a question from the principal where a parent subsequently brought in an egg-weighing machine from an egg farm; diary entries to celebrate student milestones and achievements; history questions on student wristbands to encourage home discussions; and intergenerational conversations such as Zoom sessions with grandparents and having students phone

## CASE STUDY 2 SCHOOL C CONTINUED

their grandparents to ask about their life now and when they were young (Prue, Classroom Teacher, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2).

Grace described a recent time when she was working with students in Prep who had many different answers about where they were born, so she decided to email the parents during class time (Classroom Teacher, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2). Many parents “just emailed straight back” which allowed the conversations in the classroom to continue in real time, but also “over the dinner table that night” (Grace, Classroom Teacher, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2). Grace described how the next morning the classroom was “abuzz—full of information, and parents saying, ‘Thank you’, because they had something to sit down and actually discuss what [their child] did during the day” (Classroom Teacher, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2).

Margot described how her regular practice in Year 1 included a homework activity where students and parents listened and talked with one another about an aspect of their history or culture. These activities called on parent knowledge (see Pushor, 2022) or recognised students’ cultural backgrounds given the “number of international families” at the school (Margot, Classroom Teacher, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2).

Beryl (researcher) commented on the nature of the teachers’ various parent engagement examples, describing them as “short, sharp, often, optional, with a purpose, and personalised to families” (i.e., the mnemonic, SSOOPP<sup>5</sup>) (School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2) (see Willis, Exley, & Daffurn, 2021 [EPIC 2021 Final Report]). Fiona agreed, saying:

I do recall that from last year... that if there are multiple opportunities, but without that obligation—because it allows for people to hop into the opportunities when it suits them or when they feel they have something to add—they don’t have that guilt associated with, ‘I missed that big opportunity this year to do something with my child’. (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2)

### Inquiry curriculum

During the professional learning sessions, Group 1 described several ways they incorporated inquiry in teaching middle and senior secondary years students. These were aimed at provoking deeper thinking and involved practical strategies such as: asking open rather than closed questions; *think, draw, write*; and inviting parents with special interests to share their knowledge and/or skills with classes. Teachers also used text books to guide learning and teaching in subjects such as science which they considered were written using an inquiry approach.

Group 2 felt that some curriculum subjects such as science and the humanities and HASS were more conducive to inquiry approaches. The teachers often used commercially produced programs such as Primary Connections (Australian Academy of Science, 2022) which offers primary school science units that use inquiry approaches to guide learning and teaching. Margot indicated, “I don’t think the focus is as strong on inquiry as it probably was previously” (Classroom Teacher, School C, Professional Learning Session 3, Group 2). She suggested the focus had become weaker “because our curriculum feels so crowded the flexibility of time to really run with something feels very limited” (Margot, Classroom Teacher, School C, Professional Learning Session 3, Group 2). Nevertheless, Margot indicated that there were teachers who were active in the area of inquiry in particular units or who developed particular inquiry activities within a unit. One example the teachers noted was a sustainable township unit which involved students using their skills in coding and 3-D printing and learning first-hand from community experts who designed the local airport. Another example was a unit in which students called on parents and community members to design a nursing home that supported sustainable living and aligned with the values of the school. Fiona felt that “the teachers might agree that there are always opportunities to engage [parents] more if we think about it carefully beforehand” (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2).

### Affinity spaces

Speaking on behalf of the middle and senior years group, Jill described the idea of affinity spaces as where “informal learning takes place” and “people are drawn together with commonality of purpose—in this instance, student learning” (Principal, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 1). The group recognised that many important affinity spaces such as staff visiting students in their home towns, information sessions, surveys, the school’s daily electronic communicate, parent book club, online forums, school tours, Zoom sessions with parents, and enrolment interviews mirrored activities and avenues they had previously discussed for involving and engaging parents (see above).

For the early years group, Margot brainstormed an extensive list of affinity spaces. These included social events such as grandparents’ day, special outings, and regular picnics which provided opportunities for participants (e.g., teachers, parents, students) to “mingle and talk” (Classroom Teacher, School C, Professional Learning Session 3, Group 2). Other school calendar affinity spaces included sports carnivals, book launches, pampering days, concerts, excursions, spring fairs, and school retreats. Some activities boasted a particular focus such as parent-child morning teas. Margot also conceptualised school communication channels as an affinity space as these carried and curated messages, newsletters, and homework between school and home. Classroom affinity

spaces included homework—particularly activities which drew parents into their child’s classroom learning—and classroom helper activities—although these were described as “less prevalent since the COVID-19 pandemic” (Margot, Classroom Teacher, School C, Professional Learning Session 3, Group 2). Margot noted that online activities occurred more frequently during the worst of the pandemic, but allowed parents “to get together and chat”, while simultaneously showcased—sometimes surprisingly—the students’ social skills (Classroom Teacher, School C, Professional Learning Session 3, Group 2). Among other examples were: parent-teacher interviews—which over recent times increasingly emphasised parents’ experiences and knowledge of their child; tapping into parent expertise for learning and teaching units of work; new families coming into the school (e.g., school-for-a-day program); parent groups; parent association spaces; and parent Facebook pages. Although Margot felt that most of these affinity spaces demonstrated “fairly passive involvement” on the part of parents (Classroom Teacher, School C, Professional Learning Session 3, Group 2), Group 2 agreed that identifying them was an important step in unlocking their potential to enable more dialogical ways of working between home and school.

### Cogenerative dialogues

Group 1 participants described cogenerative dialogues as “structured discussions where teachers, students, and parents engage in a collaborative effort to implement positive change in the classroom and share responsibility for creating an active learning environment” (School C, Professional Learning Session 3, Group 1). In thinking about cogenerative dialoguing, Tesha felt that although the middle and senior years teachers “chat[ted] all the time with parents in all sorts of different ways”, these conversations were “not formalised” (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 1).

Jill agreed that there were several “good examples” of the teachers using cogenerative ways of working (Principal, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 1). One was a Year 7 information session which involved developing a video—out of necessity because students and parents were unable to attend school during the COVID-19 pandemic—in which the teachers “talked about all the ways that parents can support their child’s learning [such as] knowing when tutorials are on, knowing how much homework they can expect, and how they might find out about when their child’s assessment is due” (Natalie, School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 1). Natalie felt that while “those sorts of conversations aren’t specific to any particular subject, [they related generally to] how Year 7 parents might be able to support their child’s learning” (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 1). The group agreed with Natalie’s conclusion that the processes involved to develop and produce the video “might be an example of

cogenerative dialoguing or at least heading in that direction” (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 1).

Staff visits to families of boarder students in their home towns were another prime example of cogenerative dialogues (see also Willis, Exley, & Daffurn, 2021 [EPIC 2021 Final Report]). Tesha described how “spending time talking with students at home and in their current schools and with parents, and how then [those conversations] inform practice when the teachers come back to [School C]” not only showed the ripple effect of cogenerative dialogues, but also their power to positively affect other affinity spaces (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 1).

Jill continued:

I would think that when I do my interviews with prospective parents that that’s a cogenerative dialogue where I’m trying to tap into what they’re looking for, what they value within the school, what their child likes to learn, has difficulty with, preferred ways of learning, and all that information is recorded to assist transition. (Principal, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 1)

From the interview with Jill or Natalie, Heather spent another 45 minutes to an hour talking with parents and their child during a tour of the boarding house (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 1). She described how:

Having been a boarder parent myself, and being whipped through boarding houses, to take the time to spend with parents and talk to them about their boarding experiences [lets] you get a better sense of how they’ll be able to support their child in that space. If they’ve got no idea about boarding—they’re at odds about it as well sometimes—so for them to spend time in our space, and get a better feel for it, I think goes a long way towards the generative dialogue, but also parent engagement. (Heather, School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 1)

The school also offered an *orientation night* where traditionally parents and siblings stayed in the boarding house for an overnight sleepover. Heather explained, “Having slept there (referring to the boarding house) makes a huge difference in terms of how [parents and siblings of boarder children] settle as a family” (Heather, School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 1).

The immersive experience of transitioning students to the boarding school—from staff visits to students in their home towns to overnight family sleepovers—demonstrated the school’s commitment to creating a learning and teaching environment that supported a “better quality of dialogue” between school and home (Jill, Principal, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 1). The transition experience well illustrated the idea of cogenerativity (see

5 For more information, see Appendix 2 or the SSOOPP Framework Infographic.



## CASE STUDY 2 SCHOOL C CONTINUED

Willis, 2016), while simultaneously providing insight into the potential of cogenerative dialogues as an effective pedagogical practice and process for engaging parents in their child’s learning and wellbeing.

Group 2 participants considered a project designed to provide students with an emotional toolkit of concepts and skills (e.g., resilience, mindfulness, persistence, using humour) was a good example of early years teachers dialoguing cogeneratively. The toolkit’s strategies and language were initially deemed more suitable for older students. The cogenerative dialoguing approach of the junior school teachers to adapt the toolkit’s strategies and language to suit early and primary years students not only proved effective, but also ensured its school-wide application (School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2).

Fiona singled out three more examples of cogenerative dialoguing. The first example was a Town Meeting several years ago that focused on strategic planning (e.g., policy development, school resourcing, new buildings). Although she felt the example was “not necessarily attendant to curriculum design or delivery”, she remarked it was “the first time that I did really notice cogenerative dialogue” (Fiona, School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2). Parents, local business people, and interested community members as well as teachers and students were invited to attend. Mixed tables were created and a set of questions were developed to guide each table discussion. These discussions were led by secondary school students, who “had worked through what it was to have good conversation and [protocols for] how we’re going to listen respectfully and [ensure] everyone’s ideas are contributed” (Fiona, School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2). Fiona observed:

The discussions were really high level; they provided a lot of clarity. I had so many parents saying later on, ‘I just didn’t know how much thought went into many of the things’; or the other side was, ‘I didn’t know that the school did that’... So the conversations that came out of that [meeting] and then the follow up conversations that influenced our strategic direction... were very powerful. I think that cogenerative dialoguing was nice to see where students were talking to parents— and not their own parents; it was mixed tables and really having a conversation about why the school even exists and what could occur that would be better. (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2)

A second example was Fiona’s approach to parent-teacher interviews where early years teachers were encouraged to consider:

What is the intent of the parent-teacher interview? How does it occur? Whose voice are we hearing? How do we check in with the parents as to what it is that *they* want to

talk about, as opposed to, ‘Here are the things that I need to tell the parent’. And then from there, ‘How to coplan a way forward with specific goals?’ and that will often lead to, ‘Well, this meeting isn’t long enough. Let’s look at another time so we can really sit and unpack this in the future’. (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2)

Fiona commended approaches where teachers seek to control the narrative less, and aim to encourage parents to contribute more to home-school conversations. She noted, “I know [my approach] is not leading to curriculum development per se, but I think it does allow that opportunity for parents and teachers to both have a voice in the child’s education” (Fiona, School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2).

Fiona’s third example referred to a shift in the school’s approach to individual learning plan (ILP) meetings. She described how:

[These meetings] have moved from the school being the *only* expert into a much more collaborative approach... I think that’s something we’re getting better at. Yes, we might develop a draft, but that’s simply so parents have got some sort of a framework [to work with]; but out of the meetings, we’re very hopeful to hear their expertise, what they’re wondering about, what they’re concerned about, and what they can contribute. So, I think the ILP meetings are starting to move to a more *equal footing*. (Fiona, School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2)

Each of Fiona’s examples demonstrated changes in the school’s traditional practices away from “the teacher being the lead expert” towards more cogenerative ways of working aimed at equally valuing parents’ voice and contributions alongside those of teachers and school leaders (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2).

### Opportunities, challenges, and complexities of parent engagement

The professional learning sessions for Groups 1 and 2 highlighted a number of similar and different parent engagement opportunities, challenges, and complexities. The middle and senior secondary years group detailed the school’s current practice of compiling a daily communicate which was emailed to parents each afternoon. The communicate included information and news items which could be tailored to a particular group of students so that reminders about homework or upcoming assessment due dates were not received by the whole school. Jill elaborated:

It could be an item from me which talks about the COVID-19 counts for today... In lieu of having lots and lots of emails, it appears as one email, but they (referring to

parents) can click in and it’s a series of news items... [In addition] they’re not having to remember passwords; they just click on it and it’s all there. (Principal, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 1)

Jill explained how the school’s publication team had helped the staff “understand the level of email traffic to parents on a daily basis at random times” (Principal, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 1). The new system’s capabilities included archive and RSVP functions—so parents could check on previous information or go back and confirm if they had already responded to an invitation. Hence, the system enhanced efficiency and effectiveness in managing communication between school and home, while simultaneously better supported often busy, time-pressed parents.

Group 1 recognised engaging parents in the curriculum presented an opportunity for further focus. Natalie felt that they (referring to the middle and senior years teachers and school leaders) “talked to parents about curriculum and what their child was doing, but we haven’t probably given them much opportunity to input to the curriculum” (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 1). Referring to when teachers communicated with parents about their child’s learning, she observed, “It’s not really the language of invitation” (Natalie, School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 1). Jill suggested that not including parents in the curriculum might be more a secondary school practice. Vivian concurred, relaying her recent experience of engaging secondary school parents:

Last year I took on Year 9 classes and the teachers said, ‘Oh no, we don’t do that (referring to emailing parents about upcoming units of work) in Year 9’... So, it might be there’s a level of independence [that comes with] the students’ growth through the years, that they (referring to secondary school teachers) feel it’s up to the student and parent then to have those conversations that don’t necessarily need to be facilitated by teachers. (Classroom Teacher, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 1)

Vivian subsequently commented that, “... although I know I could have emailed [the Year 9 parents] and that would have been fine, because there’s no reason you can’t, but I needed to sort of blend in” (Classroom Teacher, School C, Cogenerative Dialogue 5). Teacher expectations and concomitant practices of tending to engage parents of middle and senior years students less throughout secondary school thus emerged as a parent engagement challenge.

Group 2 highlighted challenges in the past around offering opportunities for parent engagement which were not well supported. This outcome was despite parent surveys to identify suitable times, meeting options (e.g., face-to-face or online), and areas of high interest. The idea of parent podcasts with one or more participants speaking about

an area of expertise also had been explored over the last few years. Fiona described this particular initiative as “a very slow-moving horse [that’s] not getting much traction” (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2). These experiences highlighted further parent engagement perplexities related to: timing of opportunities; the disappointment felt at perceived past lack of success; and teacher and parent fatigue.

However, the early years teachers reported some success in parent engagement when they followed up specific conversations that arose during school activities such as parent information evenings. These conversations—on topics such as phonemic awareness, early literacy homework, or how to teach number sense—had seen teachers create informal opportunities to meet with interested parents to enhance their knowledge and understanding of different aspects of the curriculum. Fiona commented that parents felt they had “learnt very differently (referring to their own school experiences)” and “many were concerned about mirroring the school’s approach” (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2). The school subsequently offered further and more formal opportunities for early years parent professional development in literacy and numeracy learning and teaching which Fiona observed assisted them to “feel they were contributing more to their child’s education at home” (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2). This example of how parent interest organically encouraged parent engagement in the curriculum afforded the group ideas for thinking about upcoming planning for effective parent engagement.

Like Group 1, Group 2 found that before School C adopted the new communication system, early years parents had been overwhelmed by the amount and flow of information between school and home. One teacher, Grace, also highlighted that, “with the younger generation parents, not everybody has a computer and it’s not just a cultural thing... They don’t have a desktop, the students don’t know what a desktop is...” (Classroom Teacher, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2). Hence, being aware of what devices were available for students to use at home was changing how the early years teachers interacted with parents (Grace, Classroom Teacher, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2). Fiona agreed that greater awareness of this aspect of families over the last several years had seen the school “move away from a belief that everyone has a laptop or a desktop at home to, ‘Well, we know they’ve got mobile phones and so they may not afford anything else, but they’ll afford a phone’” (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2). The ubiquity of mobile phones gave teachers a degree of confidence that messages they might send parents would be received “because they do have their phones with them” (Fiona, School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2).

CASE STUDY 2 SCHOOL C CONTINUED

Both groups of participants spoke about the complexity of variations in understanding among parents regarding what parent engagement means in practice. For example, Fiona stated that, “We’re working with parents who have a differing understanding of what it is to engage and to help with their child’s learning journey (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2). In Group 1, Natalie felt there could be “possible negative impacts on some students whose parents—for whatever reason—choose not to engage” in their child’s learning (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 1). Invitations sent to everybody in the class or the year level might increase the possibility of negative impacts. Natalie suggested that “how [teachers] manage those parents and students” was something teachers and school leaders would need to work on together (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 1). In Group 2, Fiona also spoke about “managing that valuing of parents”—which she indicated was about being clear that, “As educators, we really take our responsibility seriously and that we are not *deferring* to [parents] or expecting them to pick up teaching load per se. It’s more to enhance what we’re doing and to both contribute” (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 3, Group 2).

Within this complexity, Group 2 identified a further challenge linked to the number of students who identified as English Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D). For example, Fiona pointed out that over 17 per cent of junior school students were EAL/D (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2). Many EAL/D students were from tertiary-educated families which assisted them to navigate the linguistic and cultural diversity between home and school. Nevertheless, Fiona noted that among the school’s culturally diverse parents, “Some see education as very much we’re (referring to teachers) the experts and the [students are] in our hands, and others really feel they would appreciate voice within that learning journey” (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2).

Among some parents there was also a view toward the school that, “We pay you a lot of money to do the education. So we don’t want to feel like we’re constantly being expected to super engage in everything” (Fiona, School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2). In contrast, Fiona said:

[Many parents] would jump at the opportunity to be actively involved—to the extent where their involvement is less about contributing to the richness of the education, [and] more about making sure that their child has got every pencil lined up, ready to go. (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2)

Margot further observed:

I was thinking about the different investment in that sort of dialogue from different families—some that are highly

invested, well across things happening and really engaged in all of it—and the ones where the nanny does things and they really don’t have any idea or any real interest and not following [what is happening with their child at school]. (Classroom Teacher, School C, Professional Learning Session 1)

Groups 1 and 2 agreed that how they positioned parents to have the opportunity to engage in their child’s learning and wellbeing was just as important as building their understanding that, “It was okay for them not to engage every time” (Fiona, School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2).

For both groups, it was important to see parent engagement as a journey. Natalie observed that, “there are opportunities within many of our activities to tweak things that may not require a huge amount of change to our current practices because they’re really good in terms of inviting parents in and having those warm relationships” (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 1). Heather felt similarly about possible changes she could make in her role in the boarding school (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 1). Fiona noted:

Sometimes you move away from good practice and you just need that little reminder that there may be opportunity to have the children more active, for example, in inquiry-based learning. And that sometimes we do get sucked into, ‘Just do these five worksheets and my unit is over’, as opposed to, ‘Here’s an *I wonder about* question’, ‘What do we think we know?’ ‘How might we figure it out?’, and ‘Who can help us with our learning?’. (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2)

At other times, Fiona continued, it could be making small adjustments to current practices “and that [engaging parents] doesn’t have to be a big thing” (School Leader, School C, Professional Learning Session 2, Group 2).

ILLUSTRATIONS OF PRACTICE

The findings below from School C of one middle and senior secondary years teacher, Vivian, and one early years teacher, Prue, provide representative illustrations of pedagogies, practices, and processes for engaging parents in their child’s learning and wellbeing.

Illustration of practice 3: Vivian—Middle and senior secondary years teacher

Vivian was an experienced teacher in Group 1 who had taught across the educational spectrum—commencing in the early years and working in the senior secondary years and various tertiary settings throughout her career. She currently taught Years 7 and 8 Science. Vivian described herself as a “lifelong learner” who was proactive in learning new skills and putting them into practice as the need arose or circumstances

changed (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 1). Her approach to learning and teaching was well demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic when she set up classes on Zoom and made additional video- recordings of teaching content available to increase accessibility to the curriculum for all students.

During the professional learning sessions, the participants described Vivian’s pedagogies as naturally aligned to an inquiry style. Vivian attributed her approach to her ITE program where she studied science and mathematics and early childhood courses:

I remember our science being all about inquiry-based learning and maths was the same [in that it] was about asking very open-ended questions... It’s also what you do in early childhood education. It’s not about them (referring to students) already having answers or me having to be the spoon feeder of information. (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 1)

Her initial school experience built on the foundation of her ITE program: “And everything I did in my first job working in a multi-age school teaching Years 1, 2 and 3 together in an open double-teaching space was like that (referring to inquiry learning and teaching)” (Vivian, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 1).

Invitations

Vivian was excited to participate in EPIC 2022. She usually engaged parents using emails or newsletters to communicate information about: what students would be learning; what else students needed to complete upcoming projects; and events parents might attend. She briefly chatted with parents once a term at school calendar events such as the Principal’s Welcome and swimming carnival. Vivian approached parent engagement at School C from the perspective that, “Everyone’s busy here, including parents, and there’s never been a huge response to things I’ve sent out before. I can send out 100 emails and you get four back, so I don’t have high expectations” (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 1). Vivian regularly contacted parents using the school’s internal communication platform. The platform was easy to use however, she found that she needed to keep reminding parents and students to use it. Speaking about the effectiveness of the platform, she iterated, “So that’s all very well, but it’s only going to work if parents are looking at it and if students are looking at it” (Vivian, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 1).

Speaking specifically about the challenges she encountered when trying to engage parents, Vivian said:

My biggest thing is with emailing. When I’m writing an email, it takes me a long time because I like to make sure I’ve got it correct and I’m worried I’ll make a spelling mistake or that I haven’t said something in the right tone

or I didn’t double copy someone in. (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 1)

Vivian indicated that her approach to parent engagement “wasn’t curriculum focused” (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 2). During EPIC 2022, she was keen to see where she might put into practice ideas discussed during the professional learning sessions of engaging parents in quick and easy ways. This was especially important given the number of different classes she taught. To maintain her new focus on engaging parents effectively in their child’s learning and wellbeing, Vivian relayed that now, “Every time I’m thinking, ‘Is that short? Is that sharp? Is that often?, Is it optional?, and Is it personal and with a purpose?’” (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 1).

Conversations

Adopting this approach (i.e., SSOOPP<sup>6</sup>) to parent engagement (see above), Vivian initially sent an email during class time to her Year 7 Physics students’ parents with the open-ended inquiry question: “How are forces used in everyday contexts?” (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 3). She explained how she hoped to engage students [in the topic of forces] around them thinking of their own lives and the classroom (Vivian, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 2). Vivian further encouraged parent engagement with the message that, “We’d love your input. Send us through a response” (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 3). Before the lesson finished, Vivian described how a parent who lived thousands of kilometres away replied with an email titled, “A typical day mustering or working at home illustrates a number of different forces” (Classroom Teacher, School C, Parent Email Communication). The email included detailed descriptions of nine different forces (e.g., gravitational, electrical, magnetic), together with illustrative examples from everyday farming activities such as starting a motorbike, installing paddock fencing, branding cattle, and putting a saddle on a stable rail (Vivian, Classroom Teacher, School C, Parent Email Communication). To accompany the email, the parent sent a short video titled, “Forces of a helicopter” (Vivian, Classroom Teacher, School C, Parent Email Communication). The video showed a mustering helicopter creating clouds of dust as it landed outside the front yard of a farmhouse and included the labels “lift”, “thrust”, “weight”, and “drag” to show what and how different forces affected the aircraft’s maneuverability (Vivian, Classroom Teacher, School C, Parent Email Communication). Vivian described her reaction when she received the parent’s quick reply, saying:

‘No’, I went, ‘Whoa’. I was taken aback when I saw my laptop and [thought], ‘Oh, how exciting’ and I opened the email up... It just blew me away... And I was able to just engage straight back with the parent and reply and share it with the class as well. (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 3)

6 For more information, see Appendix 2 or the SSOOPP Framework Infographic.



## CASE STUDY 2 SCHOOL C CONTINUED

Apart from the timeliness of the response, Vivian observed how the students “were getting that knowledge about forces, not from me—the teacher—it was actually being facilitated by the parent body” (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 3). Soon after she received the first email, other parents responded with emails, photographs, videos, and letters about forces. Vivian declared, “And suddenly we’re all learning and all seeing the different forces in other people’s workplaces and homes” (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 3). She added, “I didn’t need to say anything. It (referring to the information about forces) all just came forward through that natural approach of seeing parents as this great resource” (Vivian, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 3). Vivian also was surprised that parents responded during the day:

You tend to think that parents, they’re working—which most of them are—and therefore won’t be touching base with us until later in the evening... so to have that immediate response within the classroom, I was like, ‘They’re thinking about us in the middle of the day’ and it was great to let the students know that as well. (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 3)

Vivian replicated this approach using different topics. Throughout the time of the research over half the parents in the class responded to her invitations. She noted, “Different parents responded for different things” (Vivian, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 3). Vivian described how she used the school’s online platform to post all the information that different parents shared. This ensured the information “was accessible to all the students” (Vivian, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 3). Subsequently, Vivian described how the class often “sat in circles—the double circle—and shared the information... on the class page which included every response... from parents” (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 3). At other times—such as when parents responded to an invitation from their child to share their revision strategies before exams—she and the students brainstormed the parents’ ideas on the board. She heard the students utter, “What did your parents say?” and commented how “just putting [the ideas] up on the board” allowed them to discuss different ideas with their friends and compare parent responses (e.g., “Oh, that’s what my parents did too”) (Vivian, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 3). Vivian concluded that using these strategies enabled her “to dispense [the parents’] knowledge” and “just build that natural conversation” among the students (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 3).

### Transformations

Vivian described how her parent engagement practices changed, saying, “What I’m doing now is allowing that engagement with the curriculum” (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 2). Since her usual practice reflected an inquiry curriculum approach, she found ways to expand each inquiry

to also include parents in what their child was doing. Hence, engaging parents became a more natural part of everyday pedagogical practice:

I’m finding that I’m doing and thinking as I’m planning and as I’m implementing things within the classroom or talking to other teachers, I’m suddenly having these little moments of, ‘Oh, I could use that or I can do that in this context with parents or with the students.’ (Vivian, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 3)

Speaking about the flow and pattern of student-parent-teacher interactions in her Year 7 science class, she described what happened as: “Opening up spaces that weren’t open before, [but also] once [they were] opened the spaces became regularly available” (Vivian, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 2). Vivian elaborated:

It (referring to her approach) just allows an *ongoingness* I suppose with those spaces. So previously you could have those conversations with parents, but they were sort of situational, whereas now you can call on them because of what you’ve laid down... So you can have more of those spaces and the spaces are more comfortable to be in, so the students feel it, and you do, and the parents do too. (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 2)

Vivian recognised that changes in her pedagogical practices and processes created affinity spaces for learning and teaching alongside her students and their parents that previously did not exist. Her sense of the ready availability of these spaces and the ease, comfort, familiarity, and safety with which she described them signal the idea of *collective wellbeing* (OECD, 2018). Drawn from the OECD’s (2018) concept of global competence, this idea is a holistic way to describe the overall health of a learning and teaching community. It refers to an awareness and understanding of the value and need for members to collaborate and support one another to optimise positive outcomes for all involved. Significantly, Vivian also spoke about classes in which she had not encouraged a culture of engaging parents, commenting, “[In] other classes you just noticed the difference” (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 2).

In addition, Vivian found engaging parents afforded a richness to learning and teaching she always worked towards, “but with the business of school” seldom experienced (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 3). She described how happy the students were to receive emails from their parents. If students were comfortable sharing, they forwarded their parents’ responses to her. Vivian reflected:

It was just lovely for me to see the banter between the parents—particularly the dads. It’s really nice to see the responses from dads, you think, ‘Oh, that’s so cool’ and just the way they sign off to their children... So that’s like a little snippet into their home life, which you would never

really get teaching middle school students. So, I was really excited to have that as a teacher. (Classroom Teacher, School C, Cogenerative Dialogue 7)

The atmosphere in the classroom changed. Vivian found that, “[It was more] natural to talk about what [the students’] parents might be doing. And we know more about each other” (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 3). She observed that she did not need to spend time playing getting-to-know-you games with students because changes in her pedagogical practice had built authentic relationships with them and their parents. Vivian also observed positive changes in some students’ behaviours which she said were, “Because they know that their parents are in contact with them... And they know just how much their parents actually do care about [and are interested in] what’s going on in the classroom” (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 3). She concluded:

As parents, as teachers too, we get so busy, don’t we? We tell people they’re important, but we [aren’t] necessarily able to show that. But this (referring to engaging parents and her changed pedagogical practices) can show it in really small little ways. And I think [the students] find that really lovely. (Vivian, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 3).

Vivian was emphatic that changes in her pedagogical practices and processes for engaging parents in their child’s learning and wellbeing had not only enhanced her joy and passion for teaching, but also helped her become a better teacher.

### Illustration of practice 4: Prue—Early years teacher

Prue had worked at School C for almost a decade and currently taught Year 2. She also had been a past parent at the school for almost two decades. Prue felt that opportunities for parents to engage in their child’s learning were essential, elaborating, “They should be involved as much or as little as they would like to... [as] some parents just think that it’s our job to do the educating and others want to be very involved” (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 1). The idea of providing students an “holistic, collaborative education” informed Prue’s teaching philosophy (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 1). She explained:

Collaboration is one of our values at [School C] and that includes every person who works at the school, every person who steps in the gate, any person who would like to come in. They’re all very welcome and very welcome to put their expertise in there as well. (Prue, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 1).

Prue believed that engaging parents by enabling them to connect to their child’s learning in ways that value-added to the curriculum aligned with the school’s goals (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 1).

### Invitations

From working cogeneratively with her early years colleagues in the professional learning sessions, Prue decided to focus on a unit on water. She was guided by science units of work in Primary Connections (Australian Academy of Science, 2022) and Inquisitive (Australian Trade & Investment Commission & EduGrowth, 2016) which use inquiry curriculum approaches such as Bybee’s 5 Es (Bybee, 1997). Prue brainstormed possible approaches for including parents in her proposed unit. These included: connecting with parents whose occupations used water (e.g., a student’s aunt who was a hairdresser, parents and grandparents who were farmers); having students go on a *water walk* at school and home; inviting a parent whom she knew had previously worked in Cambodia to talk about how different communities use, save, and value water; inviting the school’s kitchen staff and/or gardener to talk to students about their use of water; and sending questions about the topic home on wristbands to guide home-school conversations (Prue, Classroom Teacher, School C, Professional Learning Session 3, Group 2).

In implementing her unit, Prue appeared to draw on several ideas that she and others raised in the professional learning sessions. Margot, for example, had reflected that when teaching inquiry units she mostly started with a given question, rather than asking students what questions they might have about a topic (Classroom Teacher, School C, Professional Learning Session 3, Group 2). Before starting her unit, Prue talked with her students about water, asking them what they wanted to know, what they knew, and what they wanted to know more about. She said, “And some of the questions [were] just hilarious—‘Why is water clear?’ ‘Why does it have no taste?’—just lovely thoughtful questions. You just never know what they’re wondering until you ask them” (Prue, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 1). Prue shared:

[The questions] were what we were supposed to be doing in the classroom. But we did them in the classroom, and then I sent the same questions home for the parents. It was an optional activity, it wasn’t homework! And every single person came back with answers to the questions. They’d either discussed them [at home] or a lot of the parents had written quite long answers. I had a PowerPoint. I’ve had a booklet. (Prue, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 1)

In describing her reaction to the parents’ response, Prue declared, “It was great. And it was just simply re-saying what we’ve done in the classroom. It wasn’t inventing anything new. It was literally typing up the questions we’ve done” (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 1).

## CASE STUDY 2 SCHOOL C CONTINUED

From the professional learning sessions, Prue decided to act on another idea which was to invite Ken, a parent of a student in her class, who had worked in Cambodia for 10 years, into the classroom. Given her knowledge of Ken's experience and interests, she considered he possessed deep knowledge about the topic of water and would be well placed to answer most of the questions (e.g., What happens to farmers when there is no water?) that she hoped to cover in the unit (Prue, Classroom Teacher, School C, Professional Learning Session 3). Prue emailed Ken to invite him into the classroom to talk about the topic. She wrote, "[The class] is doing water and we would like to have a comparison to a developing country" (Prue, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 2). For points of comparison between Australia and Cambodia, she suggested Ken might talk about "access, uses, effects, and attitudes towards water" (Prue, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 2).

### Conversations

Ken was delighted to accept Prue's invitation to coteach the students. He worked for a non-government aid organisation (NGO) over the last decade and had been responsible for large development projects in Cambodia that included building bamboo houses. Prue spoke about Ken's session:

He came in [to the classroom] and talked about the different ways water was collected and the attitudes, appreciation, and difficulties of accessing water for the people in Cambodia. He had over 100 slides on a PowerPoint. He talked for an hour and 10 minutes and the students would could not stop asking questions. It was amazing! He's very passionate, but he was so good at delivering it all... He had the most incredible photos... It was a lot of pictures of children their age... So, the students resonated with the photos, which was really clever of him I thought. He had photos of rubbish in the rivers, so we talked about pollution and how the people get their food from the water, and if the water is polluted, the fish die, and the whole cycle of that. I could never have done it that way. (Classroom Teacher, School C, Cogenerative Dialogue 2, Group 2, & Interview 3)

Ken agreed that his session coteaching the students was successful, adding, "I love speaking to any children, any age, but engaging them in things in the third world, particularly the work we (referring to the NGO's work) do, I think it's phenomenal. It opens their mind, it opens their worldview (Year 2 Parent, School C, Interview 1). Ken described his approach as trying to bring the students on a learning journey with him. He showed them things he thought would be new to most of them and encouraged their thinking using questions (e.g., "What are polluted water sources? What happens if they (referring to polluters) dump rubbish in that river right next to your village? How do you live off grid? How does water work off grid?" [Ken, Parent, School C, Interview 1]). Ken noticed how the students were "really trying to

understand and piece it (referring to the information he spoke with them about) together" (Year 2 Parent, School C, Interview 1). He brought his daughter, Willow (pseudonym), who grew up in Cambodia, into the story by showing photos of her living there. Her classmates exclaimed: "Oh wow, you lived here?" (Ken, Year 2 Parent, School C, Interview 1). When asked about her father's presentation, Willow recalled:

Some of the pictures were of me and some of the pictures were of people in Cambodia. When dad walked in, I felt really happy and excited because Dad [has] never [come] into my class [before]. I feel really proud of the work dad does. My friends were listening and I think they were excited too. I really want Mum and Dad to come to the classroom a bit more often. (Year 2 Student, School C, Interview 1)

Commenting on the value of parents coteaching the curriculum, Ken said:

I would absolutely support parents being invited into the classroom to share their professional story and to teach from the real-world understanding and knowledge. I think that's very powerful. You can learn all the theory and read all the books, but if you get someone that's been a professional being immersed in it for years—we've been living on the ground for eight years there in Cambodia—it's great to be able to share it and I think you're going to be a lot more powerful in bringing the students on a journey to inspire them to be involved. (Year 2 Parent, School C, Interview 1)

He also felt many parents and grandparents would be open to accepting invitations to coteach in the classroom, especially if the topics were ones about which they were knowledgeable or had expertise. He understood however, that not all parents would feel comfortable in a classroom. Prue similarly had recognised that:

Sometimes [parents] are a bit nervous or their personality doesn't suit coming in and talking to a whole lot of children. Even though we (referring to teachers) talk to children and then [we're] probably more nervous to talk to adults, they're the opposite way around. (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 1)

Ken felt it was important for teachers to scaffold parent engagement in the classroom by providing structure and a framework for them in which to work. He said:

Prue gave me some great parameters on how she wanted me to approach it (referring to his session) with some really pertinent questions around the Cambodians' attitude to water—Can you present visuals? From your story? From Willow's story? So that made it quite easy and it was very enjoyable. (Ken, Year 2 Parents, School C, Interview 1)

Prue emailed Ken after the session to thank him for:

... The very special work you do, and the knowledge and passion you have, [which] truly resonated in your presentation. The students (and myself) learnt so much about Cambodia today: the culture, family, connection, happiness, and appreciation for life. I feel they will remember for many years to come, your words, photos, and connections to people. I can picture the students in Year 11 hammering in nails, walking through the muddy roads, picking up the rubbish from the waterways, watering the bamboo plants, chatting to the families, and making a real difference through service to others as they build more of the Bamboo Village... (Classroom Teacher, School C, Email Communication)

Prue described how Ken's session generated more discussions afterwards about other developing countries. She highlighted that, "The students were borrowing books on Cambodia from the library. There was just a genuine interest which was way beyond just the water lesson" (Prue, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 3). The students also reflected on their learning together as they wrote and drew pictures about what they saw and heard. One student wrote:

Cambodia is a very poor country. Cambodians live in houses made out of bamboo. The government let them throw rubbish in the only river in the whole of Cambodia. The rain and the sun damage the bamboo houses. The river is polluted. The Cambodians eat rice, fish and veggies. They like to keep their gardens beautiful. When COVID started, the Cambodians had to wash their hands so they invented a thing called Tippy Taps. It was when you would hang a carton of water which was tied to a string which was tied to bamboo. Then you would step on the bamboo and water started flowing out of the carton. (Anonymous, Year 2 Student, School C, Student Work Sample)

Prue concluded:

Having Ken in was a really good example of me being a *facilitator* and not the *fount of all knowledge* and he had much more experience and knowledge and passion than I had in that topic. I think allowing grandparents and parents to play different roles as co-educators or coteachers allows them to feel valued and that the students see them in a different light. (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 3)

### Transformations

For Prue, the most significant pedagogical shift was to "put it (referring to parent engagement) in the forefront of [her] mind all the time... for everything (referring to planning and teaching)" (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 2). This thinking differed from what she had done in the past. Now she asked herself, "How can I engage parents more?, How can

I do it easily?, [while simultaneously] not making too much work for myself" (Prue, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 2). Prue's new thinking changed her pedagogical practice. Ken's presentation to the class was a memorable educational experience for Prue and her students however, she iterated, "[He was] only one parent... I engaged all of them!" (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 2). She sent home: photos, samples of student work, emails, diary notes, discussion prompts (e.g., on wristbands on the students' hands at the end of the day to enable informal conversations in the car or around the dinner table), and YouTube clips of dances and songs from the classroom for students and parents to do together (Prue, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interviews 2 & 3). Prue indicated that she "didn't want parents to get sick of [one sort of opportunity to engage]" (e.g., sending home student questions), so she was conscious of inviting parents to engage in many different ways that were informal and fun (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 2).

Prue found that most of the opportunities she created for parents to engage in their child's learning and wellbeing "just made every part of the curriculum richer", while not adding to her usual workload (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 2). Ken's visit was planned, but ultimately required more organisation because of what happened afterwards. Nevertheless, Prue indicated, "There was definitely return on investment. It was extra work, but it was satisfying in doing it as well" (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 2).

She elaborated:

But as it (referring to the water unit) went along, I just thought, 'Oh, if I were a parent (which I am), I'd like to see that or I'd like to know that. That's interesting. It's interesting for me'. And then, 'Keep the students interested in it, so let's just share it'. So, it just became, 'Take the photo of the whatever and send it home'. It wasn't all planned. It just unfolded quite organically... I think you definitely need a plan, but sometimes you don't know [the reactions of the students]. If the students are really excited about something, then obviously you just go with it. (Prue, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 2)

Reflecting on balancing her investment of labour against the sense of reciprocity she experienced, Prue observed:

Parents receive a load of logistics from the school... [They get told,] 'Your student is doing this'; where they're going; when they're going. And I think it's quite a breath of fresh air to get something back from the actual teacher when they've (referring to parents) had to get all those emails and get everything organised. (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 2)

Prue's experience of engaging parents changed her practices to reflect an even greater sense of connectedness to her students and parents. She demonstrated *valuing* towards



## CASE STUDY 2 SCHOOL C CONTINUED

parents by showing that she was interested in what they were interested in and being part of their child's learning journey. At the same time, Prue showed *gratitude* and was comfortable letting parents know they played a vital role in enhancing student learning and teaching.

### SCHOOL C—FINAL OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

At the end of the research, Jill observed a pedagogical shift among teachers and school leaders from practices of involving parents in the school, towards practices of engaging parents in their child's learning and wellbeing. She said:

Before EPIC, we (referring to the school) were very comfortable with our level of parent engagement and... what I realise now, is that we were very comfortable with volunteerism opportunities and event opportunities... but [parent engagement] is so much more than having opportunities to volunteer and opportunities to attend events; it's about the engagement around curriculum, and that's been the big shift in my understanding. (Jill, Principal, School C, Interview 3)

EPIC focuses on the curriculum (subject matter)—in particular, inquiry curriculum approaches, but the idea of curriculum more broadly incorporates all spaces where students, parents, and teachers meet and find affinity. This broad sense of curriculum harks back to Schwab's (1973) notion of milieus—where milieus encompass commonplaces in schools, classrooms, homes, and communities in which learning and teaching happen (see also Theoretical Framing section). This understanding is not diminished in EPIC—indeed, the promised benefits of engaging parents are difficult to achieve without first laying the foundation of trusting, respectful relationships with parents by inviting their involvement in all aspects of school life (Willis & Exley, 2020; Willis, Povey et al., 2021). The shift Jill observed highlights an important point of difference however, where teachers and school leaders also see the formal curriculum as an opportunity to move their pedagogical practice more towards engaging parents on the parent involvement-engagement continuum (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014).

Like School A, school leadership was necessary for the success of engaging parents at School C. Very early in the research, Jill, who co-taught Year 7 Health and Physical Education (HPE) and Year 12 English, described how she invited her Year 7 students to email their parents during class time to ask them for their top 5 wellbeing practices. Commenting on the nature of the students' invitation to parents, Jill said:

It was a safe and relatively easy part of the curriculum that parents could exhibit confidence and the students were so excited that they could email their parents during class time; so it was *breaking the rules* and it was a *safe* area to allow parents to demonstrate expertise. (Principal, School C, Interview 1)

During cogenerative dialoguing, Jill described to her Group 1 colleagues how the email was received positively by parents and the value of parents' different contributions to student learning and teaching. Her example appeared to encourage others in the group to follow her lead—not only in the use of real-time emails to engage parents in the curriculum, but also in showing professional courage in *having a go* at putting into practice their deepening knowledge and understanding of parent engagement.

Vivian, for example, subsequently emailed the parents of her Year 7 Physics class to invite them to share examples of forces at home and work (see Illustration of Practice 3). Natalie emailed questions to her middle years students' families to prompt discussions about the nature of relationships and the challenges individuals and families are facing around technology use—themes the students were studying in the novel, *Fahrenheit*, which remain highly relevant to modern society (School Leader, School C, Cogenerative Dialogue 6, Group 1).

Jill's *responsiveness* to the challenge of implementing innovative parent engagement practices, positive experience of engaging parents early in the research, and her *willingness* to share what she did were often talked about by participants in subsequent cogenerative dialogues. Indeed, her example and enthusiasm appeared to help set the tone and direction for engaging parents at the school. Moreover, Jill continued to deliberate on what she *learnt* and *why* her approach was effective. Student engagement in the curriculum heightened because she felt her actions were instrumental in *legitimising* conversations about learning at home with parents. This language for describing and explaining her experience furthered knowledge and understanding of parent engagement among the participants. Her insights are reminiscent of Justin's (School A) words who spoke about teachers as *catalysts* for parent engagement (see Illustration of Practice 1) and further illustrate her role as a change agent.

Grace also appeared to derive inspiration and support for engaging parents from Group 2 colleagues who played informal leadership roles. These included Prue and the example of Ken (parent) who cotaught an inquiry unit on water that featured developing and developed countries (see Illustration of Practice 4). In similar vein to Prue, Grace welcomed a student's parents and grandparent as coteachers into the Prep classroom who responded positively to her invitation to help them investigate an inquiry unit on special places. The family collaborated with Grace in preparing a PowerPoint slide deck to support learning and teaching about South Africa and Albania—the countries in which the different family members were born. The students were a "captive audience" for an hour as they listened, asked questions, and talked about what they saw and heard from the parents and grandparent (Grace, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 3). The parent coteachers kept the students engaged by sharing detailed local knowledge of their special places,

teaching them different languages, and making connections with other curriculum areas such as science and maths. Grace found she became more pedagogically *adventurous* (e.g., "thinking outside the box") in seeing how she might engage parents and community members by "tapping into other people's knowledge" (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 3). In particular, she became more "confident" and "comfortable" from listening and talking with her colleagues and the researchers as well as "bouncing ideas off" another early years teacher and feeling encouraged by them (Grace, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 3). Grace's example further highlights the importance of leadership in parent engagement—notably informal leadership where colleagues lead by example and can provide support and encouragement in understanding that changing pedagogical practice takes time and opportunity.

Cogenerative dialogues were again shown to be a powerful vehicle for collaboration and professional learning, and concomitant pedagogical change. Vivian indicated, "Coming together with the bigger group, you just get to hear more of what's happening around [parent engagement], so you get more exposure to ideas" (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 2). There was considerable appreciation among participants for the value of these conversations with others who experienced "the same sort of situations" and "kept the different variables at the school in perspective" (Vivian, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 2). Information and ideas from cogenerative dialogues seeded other conversations between pairs of teachers about how to apply ideas of engaging parents to different settings within the school (e.g., substantive discussions between Heather and Tesha about engaging boarder parents). The teachers and school leaders reported many further instances of cogenerativity where what they heard and learnt from talking together about parent engagement continued and expanded during informal and formal conversations with other staff (e.g., year-level team members, teacher aides, specialist teachers). A further finding was evidence of this "ripple effect" among students and their parents (e.g., Tesha shared a story that connected her personal recipe book and the Year 10 curriculum that created a wave of sharing similar stories among parents and students) (School Leader, School C, Interview 2). The process of dialoguing cogeneratively and regularly-scheduled meetings not only expanded teachers' knowledge and repertoires of parent engagement practices, but also created the conditions for pedagogical change across the school from low- to more high-impact practices.

The large size of the school that included day and boarding school offerings created complications and complexities which necessitated a systematic approach to coordinating and balancing communication with parents. A new operating system which enabled a daily communique to be compiled and sent to different groups of parents smoothed many of the issues parents reported due to the amount and flow of information between school and home. These issues were

amplified for parents with multiple children at the school. The teachers in the research were conscious of not overwhelming parents by invitations and opportunities to engage in their child's learning and wellbeing. During the research, teachers and school leaders in the middle and senior secondary years group (Group 1) chose to focus mostly on one class and they each chose different classes so the same parents were not being called upon every time. Group 1 often activated student agency (e.g., where students might send an email directly to their parents) to engage parents. They also revisited past parent engagement practices, while evaluating current practices. This process revealed the value of many existing practices and the need to sharpen and strengthen others to better reflect changes at the school because of the availability of more sophisticated digital technology platforms and the context of the COVID-19 pandemic which altered the needs of parents and students. Despite the challenge of "looking at [her] practice" more critically, Heather welcomed the opportunity as she felt it was easy to become complacent about the positive difference to learning and teaching small changes can make (e.g., "... it would be easy to be lulled..." [School Leader, School C, Interview 2]). As a result of reviewing her pedagogical practices, Heather recognised opportunities to improve the timing and type of information boarder parents received to enable more productive conversations with their child.

Teachers and school leaders in the early years group (Group 2) were especially conscious of the amount of information parents received from the school. Group 2 participants often encouraged parent engagement using existing means of contact and communication with parents such as student diaries and homework activities. However, they reported adjusting their previous practices from mostly *telling* parents what their child was doing to *inviting* their participation in their child's learning and wellbeing and including more specific information, questions, and examples to support them. Margot, for example, relayed how, as part of the students' homework, she included more opportunities for parents to have input to class topics and provide feedback on aspects of teaching and their child's learning (Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 2). She reported that while the changes she made were "subtle", they yielded a greater return for the effort she invested (Margot, Classroom Teacher, School C, Interview 2). The teachers thus respected the need to manage communication in the early years, while simultaneously encouraging more dialogic processes in working with parents to enhance student learning and wellbeing as a regular feature of pedagogical practice.

# Case study 3 school D



### BACKGROUND

School D was a small, independent, coeducational, multi-age primary (P-6) school set in bushland in an inner-city location. Students were taught in Prep/Year 1, Year 2/3, and Year 4/5/6 classes by Bob (Principal) and a team of classroom and specialist teachers. The school adopted a strong, student-focused approach that emphasised personalised learning. Learning partnerships among students, families, and teachers were encouraged to create a community that constructively supported students to achieve their full personal and educational potential. During EPIC 2021, Bob participated as a school leader.

EPIC 2022 comprised four participants—Bob (Principal), Paisley (Year 4/5/6 teacher; Curriculum Leader), Abigail (Year 2/3 teacher), and Naomi (Prep/Year 1 teacher) (see Table 4 page 35). Bob and Paisley were experienced teachers who had enjoyed long professional careers that included leadership roles in several different schools. They, along with another part-time teacher, shared teaching responsibilities at School D for students in Years 4/5/6. Abigail and Naomi were both early-career teachers and were responsible for Years 2/3 and Prep/Year 1 respectively. Paisley was also responsible for curriculum development at the school and worked closely with Abigail and Naomi to plan units of work.

School D's website highlighted the school's rich learning environment. An association of parents met regularly for the purpose of enhancing the students' educational experience. The group provided feedback and advice on school policies and activities and resources to support the school and students. Parents and grandparents were strongly encouraged to volunteer at the school.

### Professional learning sessions

In EPIC 2022, the teachers and school leaders initially participated in a one-hour, professional learning session on Microsoft Teams and subsequently met in-person, on-campus after school with the researchers for two, two-hour professional learning sessions. In Term 2, the teachers were relieved of their usual school duties for a day to plan the Term 3 curriculum. They collaborated in-person, off-campus and were joined by the researchers for three hours. Throughout the research, the participants met with the researchers online for four cogenerative dialogues and kept in contact between times using email.

### Engaging parents

School D's teachers and school leaders took pride in the close relationships they built with parents. This closeness reflected their view, "We're all the teachers of all the students" (Bob, Principal, Cogenerative Dialogue 4). Paisley opined, "Family connections for us aren't just about teacher-parent relationships. It's like a large family at our school. We're all very connected. We're very close" (Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 2). For Bob, being in a small school as the principal and a classroom teacher over a period of time enabled ongoing interactions with parents (Principal, School D, Sharing Session 2). The strength of these interactions allowed him to draw continually on the knowledge and experiences of parents and the broader community to make curriculum connections (Bob, Principal, School D, Cogenerative Dialogue

Table 4: School D – EPIC 2022 participants

NAME	ROLE	AREA	OTHER INFORMATION
Bob	Principal; Years 4, 5 and 6 Classroom Teacher	Whole school; Middle years	EPIC 2021 school leader participant; Experienced teacher
Paisley	Years 4, 5 and 6 Classroom Teacher; Curriculum Leader	Middle years	Experienced teacher; Previous school principal
Abigail	Years 2 and Classroom Teacher	Early years	Early-career teacher
Naomi	Prep and Year 1 Classroom Teacher	Early years	Early-career teacher

2). It was considered effective practice when planning upcoming units of work for teachers to ask how they might actively involve parents and grandparents (Bob, Principal, School D, Sharing Session 2).

During the professional learning sessions, the participants brainstormed the multiple avenues they already used to engage parents. These included: oral reporting—colloquially called *show and share*; weekly emails; fortnightly newsletters; goal-setting meetings; unit overviews; meet-the-teacher events; Town Hall meetings; incursions and excursions; the school survey; parent speakers; the school's parent association; community events (e.g., ANZAC Day commemorations); movie nights; community dances; Prep Playdates; and the use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Microsoft Teams (School D, Professional Learning Session [Artefact 2]).

Brainstorming together generated questions among the participants. Paisley, for example, wondered about the effectiveness of the school survey as a parent engagement practice. She said, "My question is, how do we measure that (referring to the survey's impact on parent engagement)?" (Classroom Teacher, School D, Professional Learning Session 3). Bob responded, "The school survey leads to school-based reflection on our engagement, teaching, and learning outcomes. So, we're constantly reassessing [what we do]" (Principal, School D, Professional Learning Session 3). In the questions and answers which flowed, it was apparent that inquiring about current practices, reflecting on experiences and available data (e.g., parent feedback), and adopting new pedagogical practices (i.e., responding positively) was characteristic of School D's approach to improving aspects of learning and teaching (e.g., engaging parents). Indeed, Bob saw the cyclical process of inquiring, reflecting, and responding as *serving* the needs of the school community, while simultaneously marking the quality of educational experience at the school (e.g., "It sets us apart") (Principal, School D, Professional Learning Session 3 [Artefact 3]).

### Inquiry curriculum

The teachers and school leaders were committed to the idea of inquiry curriculum and used various approaches such as project-based learning—particularly in subjects such as design technology. The school's small size made it possible for the teachers to adopt a common theme (e.g., sustainability) across all year levels each term, so the whole school often

enjoyed inquiry learning experiences such as incursions and excursions together. The students were currently investigating different units of study centred on an inquiry question/s. These were: "How do we belong?" (Prep/Year 1); "What/how do I belong? What makes a healthy/safe relationship with myself and others?" (Year 2/3); and "Do you see me, how I see you?" (Years 4/5/6) (Professional Learning Sessions 2 & 3 [Artefact 3]). The teachers adopted a number of principles—framed as probing questions—to guide their pedagogical practices during inquiry learning and teaching. These included: "How can we make sure our student voices are heard?"; How can we make sure they are being given the opportunity to discover?"; and "What are our community connections? How can we best utilise these—not only to engage our parents/community, but also enhance our students' learning?" (Professional Learning Sessions 2 & 3 [Artefact 3]). The teachers viewed inquiry as a vehicle to enhance student agency (e.g., setting their own goals; student-led inquiry) and facilitate discussions with parents at home (School D, Professional Learning Sessions 2 & 3 [Artefact 3]).

### Affinity spaces

During the professional learning sessions, the teachers and school leaders spoke about affinity spaces with parents as "happening constantly in small ways without thinking about it because [staff are] *there* (referring to teachers being physically present) saying goodbye or hello to students as they leave and arrive for school" (Bob, Principal, School D, Professional Learning Session 2). The participants felt the school's emphasis on building positive, trusting relationships with parents encouraged affinity spaces where conversations about student learning and wellbeing were integral and essential to the school's culture.

Speaking on behalf of the group, Paisley proposed that affinity spaces could be represented in three overlapping categories: *place*, *activity*, and *element* (Classroom Teacher, School D, Professional Learning Session 2). Place might include the classroom, school, playground, and nearby nature reserve. Activity might include incursions and excursions and ideas such as interviewing parents about family history. Element might include discussions with parents and children and parents being together (Paisley, Classroom Teacher, School D, Professional Learning Session 2 [Artefact 1]). Paisley also proposed that affinity spaces could be conceived on a continuum from *closed and singular* (e.g., a student



writing a personal learning journal) to *open and collective* (e.g., discussions with students in the classroom or online learning spaces afforded by platforms such as Microsoft Teams) (Classroom Teacher, School D, Professional Learning Session 2 [Artefact 1]). These ideas provided a structure and framework for the group to ask interrogative questions (e.g., “Can your classroom be an affinity space?” and “Is our school survey an affinity space?”) about affinity spaces and the possible opportunities they afforded to engage parents and/or improve their parent engagement practices (Paisley, Classroom Teacher, School D, Professional Learning Session 2 [Artefact 1]).

### Cogenerative dialogues

The teachers and school leaders were familiar with the idea of cogenerative dialogues from Bob’s participation in EPIC 2021. They understood, for example, that a cogenerative dialogue was not the same as a regular meeting or discussion (e.g., “It’s a different way of thinking” [Paisley, Classroom Teacher, School D, Professional Learning Session 3]). They also recognised some affinity spaces, such as routine conversations at the school gate or among parents at the school’s parent association meetings, often catalysed cogenerative discussions that expanded to include students, parents, teachers, and community members (School D, Professional Learning Session 3). Hence, Bob noted that cogenerative dialogues could include multiple affinity spaces (Principal, School D, Professional Learning Session 2).

Paisley observed changes in the classroom when students dialogued cogeneratively: “I feel like there’s a different atmosphere when it’s cogenerative dialoguing. We’re doing something more together—it’s not just a conversation—but something greater is coming out of it at the end” (Classroom Teacher, School D, Professional Learning Session 3). She noted that once the culture of cogenerative dialoguing was established in a classroom, it was possible for the teacher to “step back and let the students own the process a bit more” (Paisley, Classroom Teacher, School D, Professional Learning Session 2). Paisley observed that when this happened, “Students were not quite as dominant as before (referring to their participation in classroom conversations), but [they] were a lot more inclusive and had a *gentler* approach with one another” (Classroom Teacher, School D, Professional Learning Session 2).

Paisley referred to Glissant’s (Drabinski & Parham, 2015) work to describe the nature of cogenerative dialogues, illustrating her thinking by calling on his distinction between “trees or their root [and] the rhizome [which] connects any point to any other point” (p. 62). She metaphorically described how a cogenerative dialogue “moves around, it goes different places, it learns from its new environment, and it grows from the experiences there, but it still maintains its own essence” (Paisley, Classroom Teacher, School D, Professional Learning Session 3). She opined:

That’s kind of what you want (referring to the experience of participating in cogenerative dialoguing). You want everyone to still maintain their sense of self, but you also want them to have had the experience of someone else’s understanding of something—and some of that you’ll take on board, and some of it you won’t. (Paisley, Classroom Teacher, School D, Professional Learning Session 3)

In similar vein to Bob’s notion that cogenerative dialogues involved multiple affinity spaces (see above), Paisley felt they were not so much two-directional and dialogic, but more multi-directional and multi-logic (Classroom Teacher, School D, Professional Learning Session 3). Staying with her ideas, she said, “I’m just trying to think through myself, when is an experience truly cogenerative? Meeting parents at the gate, how can we make that more of a cogenerative dialogue? Emailing parents, how can we make that more cogenerative?” (Paisley, Classroom Teacher, School D, Professional Learning Session 3). Paisley’s thinking afforded the group opportunities to think even more deeply about cogenerative dialoguing and the processes involved, while simultaneously critically examining where and how their pedagogical practices for engaging parents might be strengthened or improved.

### Opportunities, challenges, and complexities of parent engagement

The increasing diversity of parents and students at School D presented a potential parent engagement challenge. At the same time, Bob felt increased diversity enriched the learning and teaching environment by broadening students’ knowledge and experiences and encouraging dispositions which welcomed, accepted, and celebrated difference (Bob, Principal, School D, Professional Learning Session 1).

The COVID-19 pandemic created new challenges and opportunities for engaging parents at the school. Every child was equipped with their own digital device, so during lockdowns the school video-called families every day. Parents gained insights into what their child did at school and were intrigued by the different strategies teachers used (e.g., “instruction, modelling, independent completion” [Abigail, Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 1]). As restrictions eased, when a student was away, the staff often arranged for their device—which they may have left at school—to be delivered home (Abigail, Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 1). Bob observed, “So the learning [didn’t] stop even though there might be an isolation at home. It’s an interesting phenomenon because it wouldn’t have been perhaps something that you’d considered before” (Principal, School D, Professional Learning Session 1).

While teachers taught online, they were also often privy to conversations in the background among family members and realised many students were bilingual. Bob was aware of the linguistic diversity among the students, but when he observed a father speaking with his daughter in Portuguese,

he uttered, “But that’s (referring to the child’s bilingualism) never come through—as in it’s (referring to connecting to students’ homes online and seeing what was happening first-hand) actually made that quite clear” (Principal, School D, Professional Learning Session 1). In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic saw the teachers become more conscious of bilingual students’ (and their families’) abilities and needs. The school consequently included more information about bilingual students in its profile and teachers actively discussed the implications of bilingualism for student learning and wellbeing during planning and sharing sessions.

The ability to connect virtually during lockdowns and the use of students’ own devices changed practices at the school where it was now common for parents to request work for a sick child to complete at home. From the school’s perspective, being responsive to such requests from parents aided continuity of student learning and teaching, while simultaneously supporting student and family wellbeing.

Abigail and Naomi were both early-career teachers. During the professional learning sessions, they relayed how parent engagement featured minimally in their ITE programs. There were more opportunities to engage parents during professional experience courses, but they described these as somewhat ad hoc. Neither teacher reported feeling well prepared for engaging parents in their child’s learning and wellbeing.

Naomi described another challenge around choosing social media platforms for use with early years students and parents. She and Bob discussed possible platforms such as Seesaw and Microsoft Teams. Referring to Microsoft Teams, she commented:

But I just need to work out how to use it a little bit better to be able to do something a bit more daily, even if [I take] just a couple of snaps of, ‘Oh, here, that’s what we’re doing today’—like an Instagram story. There’s got to be something (referring to a suitable platform) [that would work]. Just something easy that we (referring to teachers) can do in the breaks that isn’t going to take up a lot of time and isn’t too hard, but it’s still beneficial for the parents. (Naomi, School D, Classroom Teacher, Interview 1)

Bob understood Naomi’s dilemma:

- there were many different platforms that could be used;
- parents needed to be comfortable with any platform the school chose;
- it needed to satisfy cyber safety standards (e.g., Australian Government eSafety Commissioner, 2022);
- it needed to integrate easily into teachers’ existing pedagogical practices; and
- the platform needed to support home-school interactivity in line with the school’s vision and values for engaging parents (Principal, School D, Professional Learning Session 3 & Interview 2).

### Illustrations of practice

The findings below from School D of one middle years teacher, Paisley, provides a representative illustration of pedagogies, practices, and processes for engaging parents in their child’s learning and wellbeing.

### Illustration of practice 5: Paisley—Middle years teacher

Paisley was an experienced teacher who had recently taken up a new position at School D teaching a Year 4/5/6 class part-time. She had previously taught students across the full education spectrum—from kindergarten to university. Paisley’s different roles included: Classroom Teacher, Learning Support Teacher, Head of Curriculum, Deputy Principal, and Principal. As the principal of a small, remote, western Queensland school during the COVID-19 pandemic, she stated, “Obviously parent engagement [was] very high and [I developed] a lot of close connections with parents in a whole variety of ways” (Paisley, Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 1). The experience helped her realise “the value of understanding [your students’] parents” (Paisley, Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 1). Drawing on the work of Mapp (e.g., Mapp & Bergman, 2021), Paisley became more aware of possible *invisible* barriers to parent engagement, including: “The things that are not necessarily obvious that keep parents outside [schools]... sometimes it’s blinds being pulled down; it’s doors being shut; sometimes it’s car parks—but none for parents; sometimes it’s not communicating that they’re welcome to come in” (Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 1). Given the number of different home languages at School D, she wondered, like Bob, if language was an *invisible* barrier and emphasised the need to “communicate in a way that *communicates*—that *actually* communicates” (Paisley, Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 1). Throughout her career, Paisley often talked with parents about the many different pathways to success for their child at school and in the future. She explained, “Individualising education goes across every role I’ve ever played. It’s about making sure parents understand that schools have the potential to individualise for every child and that’s what we should be doing” (Paisley, Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 1). Paisley approached parent engagement with the belief that, “If a parent knew better, they would do better... [In other words,] every single parent would want to do better for their child if they possibly could” (Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 1).

Invitations

School D’s focus in Term 2 was the topic of sustainability. Paisley instigated a Visual Arts inquiry unit for her Year 4/5/6 students using the *Social Issues Process*<sup>7</sup>—an approach she developed which was guided by the following phases:

- **Community** (Get to know your community. What is happening? What challenges you?);
- **Ideate** (What more can I find out? Can I answer my question already?);
- **Share** (What am I thinking? What would others say or add if I shared it? Have I found fit in my thinking? Do I have a position?);
- **Enact** (What can others offer my thinking? Who can I share my unit with? Where can I gather differing opinions? Who knows more about this than me?);
- **Rework** (How can what has been read, heard, and seen, be combined, and processed, with what was recently learnt and known? How does this new information make a difference? What new story does it tell? How can I document it?);
- **Develop** (How can everything be brought together?).

Paisley initially invited the students to brainstorm ideas about the topic. Out of this process two overall themes emerged:

- Making and breaking; and
- Nature and energy.

Together they also formulated three overarching questions:

- Can artists work sustainably?
- How can we, as artists, use natural materials to create an artwork?
- Can we discover new techniques by experimenting with natural materials?

Each student set up an individual inquiry in response to the overarching questions that included their own sub-questions. The students began by experimenting with natural materials and processes and reflecting together on their learning. They created artworks from natural materials to represent different foods which Paisley photographed and posted on the school’s Facebook page with an invitation to parents and community members: “Can you recognise the food we (Year 4/5/6) made using natural materials yesterday? We would love to see your ideas in the comments. We will post what we made next week.” (Classroom Teacher, School D, Facebook Post). The students moved through the cycle of inquiry at their own pace which meant that some were at a different phase in their investigation compared to others “as they reworked their questions or completely started a new question” (Paisley, Classroom Teacher, School D, Cogenerative Dialogue 1).

Conversations

Early in the unit, Paisley taught the students art theory. She explained her rationale:

Teaching art theory gave [the students] a way to talk about artworks that they were creating and artworks that they were seeing. Without the theory, it’s really hard to have a discussion; it goes down to, ‘I like this or I don’t like this’. Whereas once they learn a terminology, and once they learn a theory behind it, they’re able to talk to you about how line affects the work, how colour affects the work, the different ways they can use tone or shape. It just changes their approach to the artwork, what they can see and do with it, and the level they can access art and admire it. (Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 2)

Paisley gave the students handouts—not unlike homework sheets—which were “essentially a two-page blackline master. One page explained the terms and the other page described activities for students to do” (Paisley, Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 2). Once Paisley went through the theory with the students in class, she sent the theory and activities sheets home—a process she described as *flipping* the classroom (Paisley, Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 2). Paisley observed that flipping what she usually did proved “really beneficial because it gave the parents the language to be able to talk to their children about art” (Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 2). She expounded:

Previously, I felt that I gave the students a language and then they took the language home. But this (referring to her idea of *flipping* the classroom) was a much better way of doing it, because the parents got to see the language and understand it, whereas I always assumed a level of understanding by students’ parents which was unfair as a teacher. (Paisley, Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 2).

Paisley continued to regularly post photographs of the students’ art inquiries on the school’s Facebook page. She adopted a conversational style which incorporated art terminology and processes to describe what the students were doing or talking about. Some examples included:

- Year 4/5/6 created paints opaque and watercolour using crushed rock, some sculptures using mud and sticks, and some other students made brushes—all with natural materials.
- Experimenting means not having an end product in mind, but playing with materials. Today we learnt that mixing pigment with water takes some time and effort to get a satisfying look.
- We found ways to continue our art inquiry today despite the rain. We made collagraphs, did nature rubbing, and nature printing too.

From Paisley’s conversations with parents, the arts inquiry appeared to pique parents’ interests. They provided positive feedback about her social media posts. She also heard from students in the classroom about conversations about art learning with parents at home who asked them questions such as: “Did you really use line here or did you use texture here?” (Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 2).

Transformations

Paisley commented on the changes she observed as a result of shifting her pedagogical practices and processes for engaging parents:

It was normal as a principal to make sure I was always communicating, but I did it much less as a teacher. I did it a lot more as a teacher this time... I became more aware of having short, sharp interactions (referring to SSOOPP<sup>8</sup>), so I used social media (referring to connecting parents and student learning). It was interesting to hear what the parents said to us at the gate. It was interesting to hear what the children said to parents having seen something on social media and then [they] came back to the classroom and spoke to us about it. It was a very different avenue of communication in terms of being a teacher. So, there’s a big difference. (Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 2)

Speaking about providing parents with resources to support teaching art theory, Paisley commented on shifts in her role:

I’ve always taught art theory, but this time I was trying to help the parents access it as well... It’s probably fore-fronted that role as a teacher, I want to say as an educator, as part of the process of *educating*, and if you can get a parent to engage in the learning at home, it’s almost like you’ve doubled the learning time in a way. (Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 2)

Paisley added:

Not only that, it’s (referring to a child learning with their parents at home) done in a more natural environment and, I think when it happens in that more natural space, it tends to land a little better. It tends to be taken on board a little more and it also shows [their child] that a parent values what’s happening. If you’re (referring to a child) having a conversation with a parent, you feel like that’s valued, and we can’t do that as teachers because, as teachers, we’re teaching the curriculum, but [coming from] a parent they (referring to their child) see it as valued. I think there’s a big difference there. (Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 2)

Paisley also noticed changes in the students. These were obvious when she was able to observe a parent engaging in conversations with them at school during their art inquiry. The parent and students were:

... talking about texture and they were talking about, if they left some material in water longer that it would sort of soak into the paper more. They would get a better pigment. They were using the word pigment. They were ‘getting a better pigment stick’ is how they were referring to it—which aren’t the words I would use, but it works. It absolutely works. It shows a level of understanding [among the students] that wasn’t there before. (Paisley, Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 2)

Paisley commented, “Finding the language to express yourself is part of the challenge, especially in the arts” (Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 2). Significantly, she felt the conversations between the parent and students were richer because of their shared understanding of the language of art: “Even though they were making up terms and making up language to describe things—because they were all sharing that experience—there was an understanding that everyone would understand what they were talking about and everyone did seem to” (Paisley, Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 2). Changes in Paisley’s pedagogical practice which expanded the learning and teaching community to include parents appeared to increase possibilities for deepening student learning and enhancing wellbeing.

It should be noted that Paisley often spoke about the challenges and complexities of engaging parents given her unique situation in the school. Being a new staff member who worked part-time and ongoing disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, affected the possible time and opportunities available for her to build the kinds of long-standing, positive relationships with parents she always enjoyed. Nevertheless, the evidence shows that Paisley’s thoughtful, creative response to engaging parents in an arts inquiry made a positive difference for students, parents, and herself as a teacher.

SCHOOL D—FINAL OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The teachers and school leaders agreed that engaging parents was now fore-fronted whenever they worked together as a team to plan learning and teaching. Paisley observed, “We continually reminded one another that parent engagement was important and continually considered different ways we could approach [engaging parents]” (Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 2). There was also more emphasis on inquiry during team planning meetings. Paisley explained:

[As] a predominantly young teaching team, our priority has been around helping them (referring to Abigail and Naomi who were early-career teachers) to understand the curriculum first—with the intention that once they knew the curriculum, then we could move towards a more inquiring approach. (Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 2)

7 Reference not included to protect the participant’s anonymity.

8 For more information, see Appendix 2 or the SSOOPP Framework Infographic.



CASE STUDY 3 SCHOOL D CONTINUED

The success of adopting inquiry curriculum in 2022 by all staff members however, paved the way for the school to move to a more “integrated inquiry approach across all subjects” (Paisley, Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 2). Abigail’s experience illustrates this finding. She developed a Year 3/4 HASS inquiry on sustainability using the TELSTAR model (Nayler, n.d.; see also Willis, Exley, Singh et al., 2022a). She observed:

The level of student engagement across the term was just great. They were connecting it into their English learning, into their maths learning when we were doing graphs—because we started graphing plastic in the ocean—so it (referring to the inquiry) kind of flowed through all the subject areas in the end—even though I didn’t intend it to be that way. (Abigail, Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 2)

Abigail attributed the high level of student engagement and their ability to transfer learning from one subject area to another to a confluence of factors including: conversations with parents at home; students connecting their learning to the outside world; positioning students as inquirers (alongside parents); and substantive discussions in the classroom. As a result, students were able to apply the concept of sustainability in many new and different ways (Abigail, Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 2).

Bob reported that participating in EPIC 2022 had “woken [him] up” to the transformational potential of engaging parents, inquiry curriculum, affinity spaces, and cogenerative dialogues (i.e., the EPIC pillars) to create opportunities for students to enjoy a transdisciplinary education (Principal, School D, Interview 2). At the same time, he appreciated the potential of these ideas to facilitate not only teachers’ pedagogical practices and their continual professional learning, but also a more coordinated approach to the processes for engaging parents across the school. The idea of affinity spaces, in particular, helped Bob examine how he worked with colleagues. Instead of turning to one or two others, he began working more “collectively” and saw a shift in the staff towards becoming *decentralised* (Bob, Principal, School D, Interview 2). Similarly, he used the concept of affinity spaces to rethink his teaching and noticed student-parent-teacher interactivity became more focused—which in turn facilitated better information sharing, while simultaneously broadening student knowledge of inquiry topics and deepening their engagement in learning.

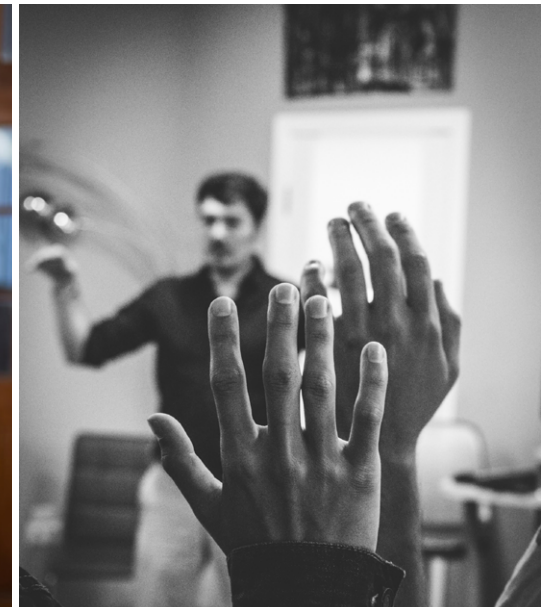
As for Schools A and C, Bob’s leadership role was crucial in facilitating changed pedagogical practices for engaging parents. As the principal, he was chiefly responsible for leading curriculum improvement, innovation, and change (AITSL, 2017a), but the school’s small size and Paisley’s experience opened the opportunity for the two of them to share this role throughout 2022. Paisley described how Bob articulated his vision and values for engaging parents to teachers when he stated, “This is important to me. This is important to our school. This is what I want to see you doing” (Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 2). She concluded, “So, he’s given us the direction that parent engagement is valued and important and we need to do it” (Paisley, Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 2). Paisley worked with Abigail and Naomi to infuse parent engagement throughout curriculum planning and implementation. Their collaboration benefited from Bob’s leadership in arranging student-free, planning days for the teachers—which Paisley applauded because these opportunities not only respected teacher workloads, but also supported their wellbeing (Classroom Teacher, School D, Interview 2).

For Bob’s part, he felt it was vital for school leaders to “give [time to] dialogue and to support your teaching staff—especially at the moment with staff shortages right throughout the nation” (Principal, School D, Interview 2). Equally important during these conversations was for teachers to have “the license to *experiment*, the license to *adapt*, the license to *adopt* (referring to curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment) ... according to what the needs are of the students” (Bob, Principal, School D, Interview 2). Bob iterated that leaders needed to feel “comfortable” with this leadership style (e.g., “I don’t want to micro-manage my staff”) (Principal, School D, Interview 2). Instead, he based his approach on the principles of reciprocity as he strived to encourage “something (referring to the experience of learning and teaching) that can be innovative, creative, abundant, and fluid” (Bob, Principal, School D, Interview 2).





# Overall findings, conclusions, and implications for practice and research



The final section of the EPIC 2022 report brings together overall findings, draws conclusions, and suggests implications. The research focused on teacher and school leader collaborations to investigate how effective parent engagement *pedagogies* and *practices* might be embedded in the regular work of teachers and *processes* for a more coordinated approach across a school. Findings and conclusions are organised under three subsections: knowledge and practice; theory and concepts; and research design and methods. Implications within these subsections consider practice and research from different micro, meso, and macro perspectives (e.g., classroom, school, system, and policy levels).

## KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE

The teachers and school leaders who participated in EPIC 2022 played varied and often complex professional roles in their schools and were at different career stages. There were marked differences in the size, geographical location, and socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds of students and parents at each school with: School A—a growing, coeducational, P-12 (Preparatory or Prep to Year 12) school located in a rural setting; School C—a large, single-gender, P-12 day and boarding school located in a rural metropolis; and School D—a small, coeducational, multi-age, primary (P-6) school in an inner-city location. The teachers and school leaders taught a range of year levels (P-12) across a number of subject areas. Data collected during the research featured a wide range of whole-school and year-level activities and events. This diversity among the schools and participants is a distinctive feature of the research which contributes to the quality and value of the findings. The considerable differences among the schools—yet consistency of findings—is significant for other schools and educators as well as decision makers and public policy makers for creating lasting, positive change in the pedagogical practices and processes of parent engagement.

The EPIC 2022 teachers and school leaders furthered contemporary knowledge, understanding, practice, and research in parent engagement. The participants consistently accepted the challenge of: evaluating their pedagogy; critically reflecting on their practices and school processes; thinking creatively about what and how the curriculum might open up opportunities for parents to engage in their child's learning and wellbeing; and sharing their experiences and insights. Against the backdrop of *doing school*, they showed how often small changes in parent engagement practice were quickly rewarded with noticeably enhanced: student learning and engagement; teaching effectiveness and teacher satisfaction; and collective and community wellbeing. These differences were obvious in the nature and richness of conversations in the classroom, which evidently benefited from conversations—in the car, over the dinner

table, in virtual spaces, and other places at home and in the community—between parents and their child. The teachers and school leaders consciously *embedded* parent engagement in their regular planning and teaching, while simultaneously demonstrating *adaptive expertise* in-the-moment as they capitalised on emerging opportunities. The participants benefited from the collaboration, *reflexivity*, and continuous *on-the-job professional learning* that *cogenerative dialogues* afforded as they listened, learnt, talked, and reflected on parent engagement. The transformative potential of cogenerative dialogues for schools and teachers is well demonstrated throughout this report. Creating and maintaining time and space for these substantive conversations will be important for schools to develop more coordinated approaches to parent engagement, while simultaneously supporting teachers and school leaders to progress, champion, and celebrate this work.

Throughout the research, the role of school leaders, especially principals, came to the fore. Each principal championed the value and necessity of engaging parents and the power of parent engagement to make a positive difference in the lives of students at school and beyond. They actively contributed to practice and research—formally and informally—throughout EPIC 2022. They embraced their roles as *change agents*, while simultaneously playing equally-important roles as *facilitators*, *co-teachers*, *sounding boards*, and *cheerleaders* alongside teachers in the work of parent engagement. Adopting collaborative, reciprocal leadership styles was evidently vital to enabling and supporting effective pedagogical practices and processes for engaging parents. This finding reflects previous research (e.g., Willis, Povey et al., 2021) and speaks to education stakeholders, decision makers, and public policy makers about the type of leadership necessary to facilitate a culture of parent engagement.

A significant legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic was an increased willingness and ease among teachers and school leaders to contact and connect with parents and students

using digital technology platforms. Some participants reported how previously, even telephoning a parent was uncommon! Although necessity drove the use of more and different online platforms, there was an abiding sense among participants that the facility to connect easily, frequently, and flexibly should not be lost as pandemic restrictions eased. Parents generally welcomed the opportunity to return to school campuses and classrooms, but also appreciated offers of hybrid meetings and opportunities to connect with teachers asynchronously through meeting recordings and social media (e.g., online school platforms). At School C, some secondary teachers called on digital technology platforms (e.g., setting up a regular Zoom room) so vulnerable students could join classrooms online. When other students were unable to attend school physically (often due to COVID-19 infections), the teachers said they easily accommodated such absences by inviting them to join existing online spaces. These examples highlight not only the commitment and versatility of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also the affordances of different digital technology platforms to expand and improve parent and student engagement practices. As the findings showed however, as such opportunities emerge, new structures and resources may be necessary to support teachers and school leaders to integrate changed pedagogies, practices, and processes into their everyday work.

The teachers and school leaders felt *joy* at seeing the positive effects on students of changes in their usual practices for engaging parents. Student engagement increased and learning was broadened and enriched. There was more excitement (*abuzz*) and a different *atmosphere* in classrooms that spoke to a greater sense of *collective wellbeing* (OECD, 2018) among students, parents, and teachers. The presence and interest of parents in their child's learning and wellbeing became more *visible* and tangibly *felt* by students. At the same time, the participants (and students) gained insights into the diversity of parents and students in their classes. They appreciated each family's unique knowledge,



expertise, experiences, stories, and networks of connections. The participants spoke about how changing their parent engagement practices and processes was revelatory—evoking an emotional response through a deepening *respect* and *valuing* of parents in the context of their child’s learning and wellbeing. The findings challenge the perceived barrier to parent engagement that most parents lose interest in their child’s formal education as they get older. On the contrary, this research showed that parents of children of all ages were often *waiting in the wings*, they just needed to be *invited* into their child’s learning in a way that worked for them.

THEORY AND CONCEPTS

All three EPIC 2022 schools demonstrated a strong appreciation of the value and importance of parent engagement hence, they placed considerable emphasis on this aspect of students’ education. Each school was well advanced in their parent engagement journey—offering many and varied opportunities for parents to contribute to their child’s learning and wellbeing. Despite widespread knowledge among the teachers and school leaders about *what* and *why* parent engagement is integral and essential for the success of students and schools however, the findings showed a persistent lack of understanding and/or inconsistencies about *how* to effectively engage parents in practice. The participants repeatedly described moments of epiphany when they examined their current pedagogical practices to realise they were mostly *telling* parents what students were doing (i.e., involving parents), rather than also *inviting* them to participate in their child’s learning and wellbeing (i.e., engaging parents).

In moving towards more impactful parent engagement pedagogies, practices, and processes and ultimately cultural change, schools and teachers need to *clarify*—and to some extent *demystify*—what parent engagement *is* and *is not*. Engaging parents is about bringing parents and their child’s learning and wellbeing closer together. As this research showed, engaging parents is not about asking parents to be their child’s pseudo-professional teacher or parents taking on a share of teachers’ workloads; nor does it rely on students and/or parents filtering information to try to make sense of what is important or determine relevant connections between home and school learning. Rather, engaging parents involves teachers and school leaders letting parents know *why* they matter and about the *power* of everyday conversations to improve their child’s school and life success, then *scaffolding* parents to support their child’s learning and wellbeing in ways that are natural, authentic, and fun. Engaging parents is not about increasing teachers’ workloads, but encourages teachers to adjust their existing practices—often making only small *tweaks*—to maximise learning and teaching gains for the efforts they invest.

One implication of these findings is the need for educators, decision makers, and public policy makers to sharpen their knowledge and understanding from the research of involving parents and engaging parents. This conceptual differentiation is *fundamental* for enabling teachers and school leaders to develop more effective parent engagement pedagogies, practices, and processes. A second implication—especially for school leaders and higher education providers—is to make the ideas of parent involvement and parent engagement and their relationship to pedagogical practice *explicit* for teachers as early as possible. Describing, explaining, and illustrating how teachers can shift practices for involving parents in schools towards engaging parents in their child’s learning and wellbeing will assist to strengthen teachers’ knowledge and understanding of theory-practice connections. Avenues to further this work could include: enhancing teacher induction and mentoring programs in schools; creating dedicated parent engagement school leadership positions (e.g., Deputy Principal—Parent Engagement); strengthening the APST through illustrations of practice directly relating to parent engagement; and improving ITE programs and courses.

Through EPIC 2022, teachers and school leaders became more conscious, mindful, and reflective about parent engagement and subsequently adopted more deliberate parent engagement practices. Several teachers and school leaders articulated the value of heuristics such as CHANGE (see Appendix 1: CHANGE Framework; see also Willis & Exley, 2020) and inquiry models such as TELSTAR (Nayler, n.d.; see also Willis, Exley, Singh et al., 2022a) when planning for engaging parents. They also embraced the mnemonic, SSOOPP (see Appendix 2; see also the SSOOPP Framework Infographic), and concepts such as *Closing the loop* and *Who’s at the table?* when developing and interrogating or *filtering* effective parent engagement practices. The participants contributed to new concepts such as the idea of *legitimising* conversations to describe and explain how engaging parents increased the number and enriched the quality of authentic connections to the curriculum. Other concepts such as *collective wellbeing* (OECD, 2018) emerged as potentially useful for enhancing knowledge, understanding, and practice in parent engagement. These conceptual tools developed shared understandings and supported a common language among teachers and school leaders for thinking and talking about parent engagement. Importantly, their use assisted teachers and school leaders to *apply* their knowledge and understanding of parent engagement during planning and teaching in the classroom, while simultaneously enhancing their pedagogical confidence, courage, and creativity.

As indicated above, the idea of *engaging* parents in student learning and wellbeing—rather than *involving* parents in schools—is not new (i.e., the *why*). The point of departure in EPIC projects is a strengthened focus on formal aspects of the curriculum (i.e., the *what*) as a mediator of opportunities

to engage parents and assist teachers and school leaders to develop more impactful practices. The concepts and associated pedagogies of inquiry curriculum, affinity spaces, and cogenerative dialogues used in EPIC supported the *processes* (i.e., the *how*) that teachers and school leaders used to develop more effective practices for engaging parents. There are many useful parent engagement frameworks however, most lack an interconnected, theoretical base that clearly aligns with practice. At the end of the second year of the research, EPIC’s theoretical framing and practical focus evidently provided a strong foundation for schools, teachers, and researchers to *drive* knowledge creation and pedagogical change.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The real-world of teachers and school leaders in classrooms and schools during the COVID-19 pandemic presented a complex research context. The scale and intensity of the research added to its complexity. Design-based research (DBR) aligned with EPIC 2022’s underlying conceptual frameworks, principles, purposes, and processes. DBR afforded an *agile* and *flexible* approach for responding to emerging research challenges and changes, while simultaneously taking advantage of new research opportunities. The approach was *robust* in providing a design capable of *redesign* as cumulative findings from longitudinal research expanded and deepened the parent engagement knowledge, theory, and practice base. The approach was also *dynamic* as fresh findings quickly became *springboards* for new and different research directions.

DBR supported *innovative, sophisticated* research methods such as cogenerative dialogues for investigating effective teacher and school leader pedagogies and practices for engaging parents as well as processes for developing a more coordinated school approach. The *intersubjectivity* (Matusov, 1996)—a concept which speaks to human connections—of these conversational spaces generated *finely-detailed, nuanced* data that included participants’ descriptions (what), explanations (why), and interpretations (how) of research happenings. At the same time, cogenerative dialogues enabled participants to clarify, sharpen, supplement, enrich, and/or challenge their own and others’ ideas about these research aspects—in-the-moment and/or in subsequent cogenerative dialogues. Hence, the use of cogenerative dialogues in concert with a DBR approach generated a rich data set on which to base the findings of EPIC 2022. This combination for researching parent engagement is both novel and strong. The scale of EPIC 2022 and size and currency of the corpus of data enhance the significance and value of this work.

Data collection during cogenerative dialogues was assisted by the use of Microsoft Teams. The use of an online platform was a deliberate choice to accommodate the uncertainty around changing COVID-19 pandemic restrictions which disrupted regular face-to-face meetings. The decision later proved prudent when coinfections of COVID-19 and Influenza during the winter months exacerbated staff and student absences due to illness. The further advantage of Microsoft Teams was the ability of participants to join meetings *conveniently* from any location in the school (or at home) and also *flexibly*—given they sometimes needed to leave early or join late to accommodate work and other commitments. The functionality of the digital technology platform allowed conversations to be video-recorded and transcripts to be generated which were tidied (given the platform’s use of predictive text) by replaying recordings and adjusting transcripts accordingly. The *efficiency, synchronicity, and built-in quality assurance* of this process for capturing an accurate representation of the data exceeded what is possible with audio recordings alone. The process amplified the transformative potential of cogenerative dialogues to further contemporary practice and research in parent engagement. At the same time, the process speaks to the *rigour* of the research and the *quality* and *value* of the findings. The use of a DBR approach that incorporated innovative methods is a further contribution of EPIC 2022 to the field of parent engagement research. EPIC 2022 sets the scene for EPIC 2023 when teams of teachers, school leaders, and parents will work collaboratively as part of a cluster of schools to further explore pedagogical practices and processes for better engaging parents in different contexts and settings.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Limited data were collected from parents and students. Future research would benefit from more inclusion of these stakeholders and their voices. Data collection often relied on school structures and resources to support research opportunities which were disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Embedding the necessary structures and resources to support data collection from parents and students in the design of future research is recommended.

At the time of report writing, time, space, and resources precluded detailed data analysis of some areas of the research. Data analysis of EPIC 2022 is ongoing. Additional findings will support knowledge, practice, and theory in different areas such as engaging parents of boarder, early years, and middle and senior secondary years students once publications and other outputs become available.

EPIC 2022 presents other parent engagement research opportunities such as investigating: cogenerative dialogues as professional learning spaces; the idea of expanding affinity spaces; integrating the notions of collective wellbeing (OECD, 2018) and intersubjectivity (Matusov, 1996) into parent engagement theory and practice; the use of online digital platforms; and the processes, benefits, and challenges of researchers, schools, and industry partners working together. More research in more schools that offer more points of difference—especially disadvantaged schools in different contexts and settings—will add to the body of work on parent engagement.

Finally, there is a need to investigate the cumulative impact of engaging parents on student learning and wellbeing over time. As EPIC 2022 showed, parent engagement is not about teacher checklists, or tricks and tips, or a single event, or even a series of events. It is a journey. For schools that adopt collaborative, dialogic processes and pedagogies as part of the *fabric* of working with parents, teachers, and students, data collection will need to be systematic, yet *respectful* of and *sincere* and *sympathetic* to the *principles* and *purposes* of working in these ways. Schools and teachers actively researching parent engagement to gather data to respond to key questions such as What’s happening?, What’s working?, and What can be improved? is a first step towards building this data base. A strong research-informed base will ultimately be necessary to shine light on the processes, pedagogies, and practices that support a coordinated approach at each school and to enable sustainable models of parent engagement.

FINAL WORDS

Natalie eloquently conveyed the transformational potential of teacher and school leader collaboration to develop processes to promote a more coordinated school approach for engaging parents. Her words revealed the power for students and teachers of adjusting her pedagogy which reflected in small, impactful changes in everyday practice:

I think now I value parents and what they can bring into my classroom far more than I have ever done before. I’ve always thought my classroom is me and my students and the work that I can present to them and the ideas that they can bring into the classroom. And now I think I’m a much better teacher because, of course, those students are products of their homes and they are products of their families, values, beliefs, and opinions. And it’s so good now to respect that... to value that a little bit more, to demonstrate to the students that I value the homes that they come from and the parents that support them. (School Leader, School C, Interview 3)

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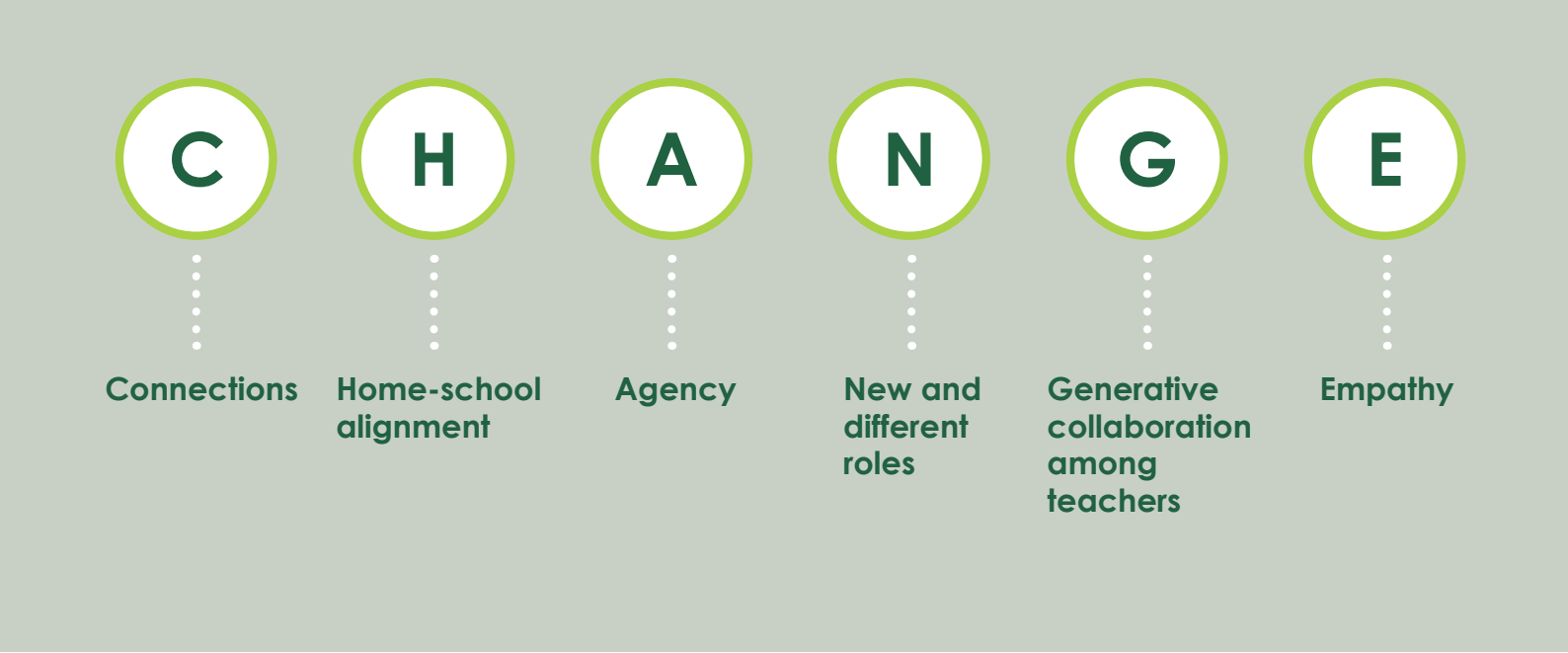
# Appendix 1

## CHANGE Framework—Planning for Engaging Parents

The parent engagement CHANGE framework was developed by Willis and Exley (2020) using secondary data reported by schools, principals, teachers, parents, and students about their experiences of learning-from-home during the COVID-19 pandemic. The concepts represented by each letter of the heuristic are briefly explained below and include examples of questions for teachers and school leaders to guide and filter their pedagogical practices when planning for engaging parents.

CHANGE is a useful heuristic that teachers use when planning for engaging parents. It stands for: **c**onnections, **h**ome-school alignment, **a**gency, **n**ew and different roles, **g**enerative collaboration, and **e**mpathy.

CHANGE Concepts	Guiding and Filtering Questions
<b>Connections</b> is about contact and communication to create open, trusting, equitable relationships between home and school. It implicates the necessity for schools to use suitable digital technology platforms as channels of communication with parents and students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How will you encourage early, positive, respectful relationships with parents?</li> <li>Have you let them know about the literature on parent engagement?</li> <li>Do you share recent research findings with them?</li> <li>Do you regularly let parents know their knowledge is welcomed and valued as part of their child’s learning journey at school?</li> <li>Have you let parents know how, when, where, and why you will contact them and vice versa?</li> <li>Do you give parents advance notice of your approach to parent engagement and a sense of your upcoming plans?</li> </ul>
<b>Home-school alignment</b> relates to creating alignment between learning at home and school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How will you align what parents know or do at home/work with what their child is learning at school?</li> <li>What opportunities to engage parents in the curriculum are obvious, yet simple, meaningful, and authentic?</li> <li>Do you connect with parents with a sense of timing and timeliness around what their child is learning in the classroom? (i.e., Is it the right invitation? Is it the right time? Is it the right amount of information?)</li> </ul>
<b>Agency</b> is important for students as well as parents when it comes to engaging parents in their child’s learning and wellbeing. The interrelationship between parent and student agency is critical for parent engagement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How will you call on student agency to enable parent agency? (e.g., Can students email their parents with an inquiry question? Can you email parents on behalf of students? Can they make a short video about their learning to discuss at home?)</li> <li>What significant others or co-agents can you call on to facilitate student learning and wellbeing (e.g., parents, grandparents, siblings, peers, teachers, teacher aides, specialist teachers, past students, community members)?</li> <li>Have you created an inventory of parents’ willingness, interests, occupations, backgrounds, and skills to support student learning in the classroom/school?</li> </ul>
<b>New and different roles</b> often feature in EPIC research as parents and teachers, as well as students, adopt different practices. For example, parents might take on roles as coteachers by drawing on their knowledge and skills to engage in their child’s learning and wellbeing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What opportunities, information, and resources might you make available to parents that will assist them to support, reinforce, and value-add to what their child is already learning in the classroom?</li> <li>How can you scaffold parents to play more educative roles at home with their child?</li> <li>How will you position parents to know they are not expected to be their child’s at-home, professional teacher?</li> <li>How will you help parents and their child know they are not expected to engage in every engagement opportunity offered?</li> <li>How will you share information and resources made available for student learning by parents with all students and families?</li> </ul>



CHANGE Concepts	Guiding and Filtering Questions
<b>Generative collaboration</b> refers to interactive social spaces in which teachers, parents, and students engage in regular, rich conversations which continue and expand ideas—facilitating shared understandings, personal and professional development, innovative practices, and collective actions—to improve learning and teaching.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you champion the idea of generative collaboration (i.e., cogenerative dialogues) and articulate the difference in philosophy and purpose between these conversions and regular discussions?</li> <li>Do you make time and space regularly available to support generative collaboration?</li> <li>Are these opportunities organised horizontally (e.g., teachers across a year level) and vertically (e.g., teachers from early years and middle and senior secondary years working together)?</li> <li>Is parent engagement a focus of your collaboration?</li> <li>Are parents and others invited to collaborate regularly?</li> <li>Do you use generative collaboration in your practice with students and parents?</li> <li>Are there opportunities to regularly share innovative practices and collective actions which emerged from generative collaboration with others?</li> </ul>
<b>Empathy</b> is present when parents, students, teachers and schools can see and respect each other’s diverse perspectives and circumstances that influence possibilities and opportunities for their agency and engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you take account of different parents in terms of busy family lifestyles (e.g., shift-workers), preferences for connecting face-to-face and online, offering flexible meeting times, offering sessions for parents more than once and at different times, hosting hybrid meetings, making meeting recordings available?</li> <li>Do you make opportunities inclusive of all families (e.g., single parent, blended families, LGBTQ+ parents)?</li> <li>Do you chunk information for parents to manage the amount and flow of information and opportunities to engage in their child’s learning?</li> </ul>

**Note:** Teacher case studies by Willis, Exley, and Daffurn (2021) (EPIC 2021 Final Report) provide detailed examples of how the CHANGE framework informed planning and teaching.



# Appendix 2

## SSOOPP Framework—Developing Effective Practices for Engaging Parents



SSOOPP (pronounced SOUP) is a mnemonic teachers can use to develop and filter their practices when engaging parents. It stands for **short, sharp, often, optional, with a purpose, and personalised** to parents and their child.

	Some useful questions to develop and interrogate your pedagogical practices when planning for engaging parents.	Examples from research – middle and senior secondary years and early years.
S SHORT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Will the activity take you long to prepare and/or organise?</li> <li>Will the activity be onerous for parents and/or students?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have older students email their parents directly to ask questions relevant to the curriculum such as: <i>How are forces used in your everyday home or work context?</i></li> <li>Ask younger students and their parents to respond to personal/high-interest questions or find photos together: <i>Where and when was I born? What is your special place?</i></li> </ul>
S SHARP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Will the invitation to engage parents value-add to what you are already teaching in the classroom?</li> <li>Have you included specific details about what the topic/activity is and the process involved?</li> <li>Have you included examples to illustrate what you mean?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have older students video one another in pairs talking about their learning (e.g., a book study). Let students email the video to their parents, with the invitation to: <i>Ask me about my video at home.</i></li> <li>Develop a survey for parents to interview younger students about some aspect of learning (e.g., redesigning  classroom spaces).</li> </ul>
O OFTEN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you let parents know why, when, and how you will communicate with them about their child’s learning and wellbeing (e.g., email, newsletter, class website, text message, homework, diary).</li> <li>Do you communicate with parents at the beginning of each week and also let them know how learning and teaching went at the end of the week?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For all students, let parents know specific topics and areas of focus each phase or week of inquiry.</li> <li>‘Close the loop’ with students by regularly inviting them to share what they talked about at home.</li> <li>‘Close the loop’ with parents by letting them know what happened in the classroom when students listened and learnt together.</li> <li>Share with the class what each parent contributes through discussions, or using physical (e.g., library) or online spaces accessible to all students and parents.</li> </ul>
O OPTIONAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are opportunities to participate framed as invitations?</li> <li>Do you use friendly language?</li> <li>Do you remind parents (and students) they don’t need to accept every invitation to engage in their child’s learning?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For all students, invite parents to contribute in different ways (e.g., photos, emails, letters, videos, PowerPoints, stories, songs, poems, objects, games, social media posts, classroom visits, demonstrations, presentations).</li> </ul>
P PURPOSEFUL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you make the connections to students’ curriculum learning and wellbeing clear?</li> <li>Do opportunities encourage parents’/students’ curiosity, interest, enjoyment?</li> <li>Will opportunities invite meaningful, relevant, parent-student discussions?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Help parents navigate conversations with their child by providing them with conversation starters.</li> <li>For older students, email suggestions to parents after each lesson/lesson sequence.</li> <li>For younger students, put suggestions on student wristbands before they leave for home.</li> </ul>
P PERSONALISED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do invitations call on parents’ knowledge of the world, topic, experiences, and/or their child?</li> <li>Are opportunities to engage personalised to parents as well as their child?</li> <li>Are there opportunities for intergenerational conversations?</li> <li>Are engagement opportunities inclusive of different families (e.g., single parent, blended families, LGBTQ+ parents)?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have older students ask their parents to share a story, comment, opinion about a theme in a current book study (e.g., <i>Can you share an anecdote about a first meeting? Why was it memorable? What happened next?</i>)</li> <li>Have younger students talk to parents/grandparents about life in the past (e.g., <i>What has changed/stayed the same? Can we find pictures together of our talk?</i>)</li> </ul>





# Appendix 3

## Cogenerative Dialogues—Engaging Parents in Inquiry Curriculum (EPIC)

The word, *cogenerative*, is an amalgam of *co* and *generative*. The affix, *co*, denotes teachers and school leaders working together or jointly with others such as parents and students to plan and/or teach. The stem, *generative*, describes unfolding processes in developing shared understandings, new learning, and fresh insights about some aspect of planning and teaching or, in this case, engaging parents in aspects of the curriculum (e.g., an inquiry project). Cogenerative processes describe the successful formation, continuation, expansion, and transformation of communities of practice as members work together to enhance learning, teaching, and the wellbeing of all involved.

When teachers and school leaders cogenerate about effective pedagogical practices for engaging parents in curriculum, they: deepen understanding about what is possible in their context; reflect on what's working and what can be improved; develop new practices which they may not have thought about alone; gain confidence and feel supported to implement their ideas; and celebrate successes together.

### Cogenerative dialogue purposes and principles

- describe interactive social spaces for substantive conversations;
- inscribed by ethics of responsibility—with and for one another (not *on*, *over*, or *against*);
- designed to transcend traditional boundaries (e.g., age, gender, cultural and linguistic background, educational achievements);
- participants demonstrate a willingness to participate;
- participants adopt an open disposition to learning from one another.

### Inclusive and respectful practices and processes

- generous listening that includes radical listening (i.e., listening for what's *not* said);
- inviting one another to participate;
- allowing participants equal talk time;
- accepting and valuing all ideas;
- suspending judgement;
- responding positively to the contributions of others;
- discussing one issue fully before moving on;
- seeing differences as opportunities to learn from one another;
- playing different roles (e.g., facilitators, sounding boards, encouragers, supporters, motivators, empathisers);
- debate without necessarily reaching consensus;
- respectful disagreement.







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