

# Engaging parents and communities in children's learning and wellbeing EPIC 2021 Report



OUR SCHOOLS – OUR FUTURE  
RESEARCH REPORT  
**November 2021**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Dr Linda-Dianne (Linda) Willis** is currently the Program Director, Bachelor of Education, and Senior Lecturer, in the School of Education and Professional Studies at Griffith University. She has a long career in schools and universities having taught for over four decades. Linda has held senior teacher and leadership roles in government and independent schools and was the inaugural Program Director of the Master of Teaching (Primary) program at The University of Queensland. She completed her PhD research on parent-teacher engagement in 2013 and has since won four prestigious competitive grants to lead parent engagement research. Linda uses dialogic approaches throughout the design and implementation of her research projects as she works alongside participants to generate authentic partnerships for enhancing student learning and wellbeing. Her work focuses on how usually marginalised individuals such as parents in schools may be enabled to play more participatory roles as co-educators in their child's learning and wellbeing. Linda has published widely in the area of parent engagement. She is lead author on a recently-published international volume, *Principal leadership for parent engagement in disadvantaged schools: What qualities and strategies distinguish effective principals?* Linda is the National Publications Director of the Australian Literacy Educators' Association.

**Narelle Daffurn** is an experienced senior teacher who worked as a Primary Classroom Teacher, Literacy Coach, Support Teacher and Acting Head of Curriculum in Australia, and as a Classroom Teacher in three different Middle Eastern countries. Narelle is passionate about linguistics, language use and language learning and believes strongly in personalised approaches to literacy education. These passions have led Narelle to take on the leadership role as Queensland State Director in the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA), as well as supporting her ALEA Local Council as Secretary. Narelle moved to tertiary education in 2015. She has worked as Course Convenor, Lecturer and Tutor across the Queensland University of Technology, the University of Southern Queensland, Griffith University, and The University of Queensland—while also commencing PhD research. Her past research focused on students who experience difficulties with literacy; and her current research is focused on the multiliteracies of students and their multimodal communication in our culturally and linguistically diverse society. Narelle's research assistant work in Parent Engagement with Linda Willis and Beryl Exley has afforded her the opportunity to promote the vital role that parents and teachers play in supporting student learning and wellbeing.

**Professor Beryl Exley** is an experienced early years and middle years classroom teacher. She is currently Professor and Deputy Head of School with the Griffith University School of Education and Professional Studies. Connections with students' life experiences and their communities of support and practice has always been central to Beryl's educational philosophy. She brings to this project on Parent Engagement her expertise in English Curriculum and Literacies Education, use of inquiry pedagogies for deep student-centred learning, and the use of virtual technologies for social and academic interaction. During Covid-19, Beryl and colleagues have been actively researching the affordances and challenges of learning and teaching in highly flexible physical and virtual environments. Beryl has published over 150 sole-authored and co-authored research manuscripts, and has been awarded over \$1M in research funding from high esteem competitive grants including Australian Research Council Discovery and Australian Research Council Linkage grants. She has supervised 14 higher degree research candidates to completion. Beryl is a former National President of the Australian Literacy Educators' Association and in 2019 was awarded Life Membership for her services to the profession and professional associations.

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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. All research reports are available to members on the ISQ website.

# Foreword



Engaging parents in their child’s education journey – and the powerful impact this can have on student achievement levels and wellbeing - is not a new concept in education circles.

More than five decades of national and international research prove that nurturing strong school-home partnerships is worthwhile for both students and schools. Parent engagement is also a priority for governments, cemented in key national education policies and standards, and increasingly features in Queensland independent schools’ strategic plans.

Despite all of this, rich examples of effective parent engagement strategies and approaches at the classroom level are scarce.

That deficit was the impetus for creating the parent engagement research project – Engaging Parents in Inquiry Curriculum (EPIC) - that in turn led to this important report.

EPIC was a rigorous research program that ran throughout 2021, led by internationally recognised parent engagement experts – Dr Linda Willis and Professor Beryl Exley - and was jointly funded by Independent Schools Queensland and Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network in partnership with Griffith University.

Through in-depth interviews with independent school leaders and important classroom level work, EPIC investigated ways school leaders and teachers can bring parents closer to their child’s learning using inquiry curriculum approaches and digital technology.

The findings from this report significantly add to the existing body of research around parent engagement. As the researchers write, the case studies featured in the report contain “rich detail to begin to fill a gap in the literature about what parent engagement looks like and how it may be achieved in practice”.

I would like to thank the six independent schools who took part in EPIC in 2021. Their work with the Griffith University research team has not only resulted in this report, but also three evidence-based parent engagement snapshot documents that will be able to be used immediately by any educator wanting to begin or deepen their parent engagement journey.

**Christopher Mountford**

**CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER  
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The project was conducted by Griffith University researchers, Dr Linda-Dianne (Linda) Willis and Professor Beryl Exley. Research assistance was provided by Ms Narelle Daffurn. The research team wishes to acknowledge the close collaboration with Ms Shari Armistead (Director, Strategic Relations, ISQ and Board Chair, QIS Parents Network) and Ms Amanda Watt (Project Coordinator, ISQ and Communications Officer, QIS Parents Network).

The research team also wishes to acknowledge the contribution of the school principals, school leaders, teachers, parents, students and other school staff who participated in and/or provided support for this research. Finally, the research team acknowledges the 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 Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network does not necessarily support all of these views.

The case studies and other findings represented in the report draw on data collected by the research team during participant interviews, professional learning days, and conversations with teachers about their work with students, parents and colleagues to promote parent engagement. Data were collected 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 research team 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.

1 Short title: Engaging parents and school communities in children's learning and wellbeing.

# Executive summary

**This report presents research findings from the latest Engaging Parents in Inquiry Curriculum (EPIC) project. EPIC 2021 furthers the proposition that parent engagement may be conceived as a continuum from involving parents in school at one end to engaging parents in their child's learning and wellbeing at the other (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). Although research evidence over many decades describes parent engagement as the gold star in education (see Willis & Exley, 2020), the involvement-engagement continuum recognises that involving parents may be a first step to engagement. The continuum also accommodates a view of parents participating in their child's learning in many different and changing ways along the journey. EPIC projects seek to work alongside schools and teachers to research current strategies and practices for engaging parents. Using inquiry curriculum approaches, cogenerative dialogues, and the affordances of online platforms and channels, these projects investigate how shifts philosophically, pedagogically and practically enable schools and teachers to better engage parents and students. In other words, how can parents and their child's learning and wellbeing be brought closer together? The research in this report is unique—offering a window into parent engagement in schools and classrooms in a broad range of contexts at a time when schools and the greater community experienced COVID-19 restrictions.**

The research was conducted over nine months and used a design-based research approach (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Bell, 2004; Brown, 1992). Data were collected using: principal, teacher and parent interviews; cogenerative dialogues with teachers during professional learning days and weekly 10 to 15 minute phone or Microsoft Teams meetings; and metalogues among the research team (Linda, Beryl and Narelle) (Willis & Exley, 2021; Willis et al., 2018). School

and principal data were analysed using a framework which extends Schwab's (1973) notion of commonplaces when planning curriculum. Advanced by Willis et al. (2021b), this framework discusses a curriculum of parent engagement under three headings: key players (students, parents and teachers); school learning (classrooms, curriculum and digital technologies); and school culture (schools and communities). Teacher, parent and student data were analysed using the C-H-A-N-G-E framework for engaging parents. Developed by Willis and Exley (2020), this second framework examines parent engagement using six interconnected themes—connections, home-school alignment, agency, new roles, generative collaboration, and empathy—which emerged during analysis of secondary data from stories shared by ISQ member schools during learning@home in 2020.

EPIC 2021 was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 involved six ISQ member schools and principals and/or school leaders and Phase 2 involved collaboration with the case study teachers to innovate on an existing inquiry project to better align it with the parent engagement agenda and then to research with classroom teachers in two of these schools. The findings are presented as six school case studies (Phase 1) and four classroom teacher case studies (Phase 2). The case studies contain rich detail to begin to fill a gap in the literature about what parent engagement looks like and how it may be achieved in practice.

The report also offers concise findings for schools and classroom teachers, identifies challenges at school and classroom levels, and draws conclusions and implications based on the opportunities and challenges to parent engagement which emerged from the research. EPIC 2021 faced limitations created by COVID-19 which disrupted the usual work of schools and teachers in Phase 2 and at times necessitated the cancellation and/or re-scheduling of research and/or school and parent activities.

2 Parent is used to refer to a child's biological parent or grandparent, family, relative, guardian, caregiver, or other person or persons such as Elders in an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander family or community with primary care and responsibility for creating an environment that supports a child's learning and wellbeing (Barker & Harris, 2020).

# Phase 1: School case studies

## PHASE 1

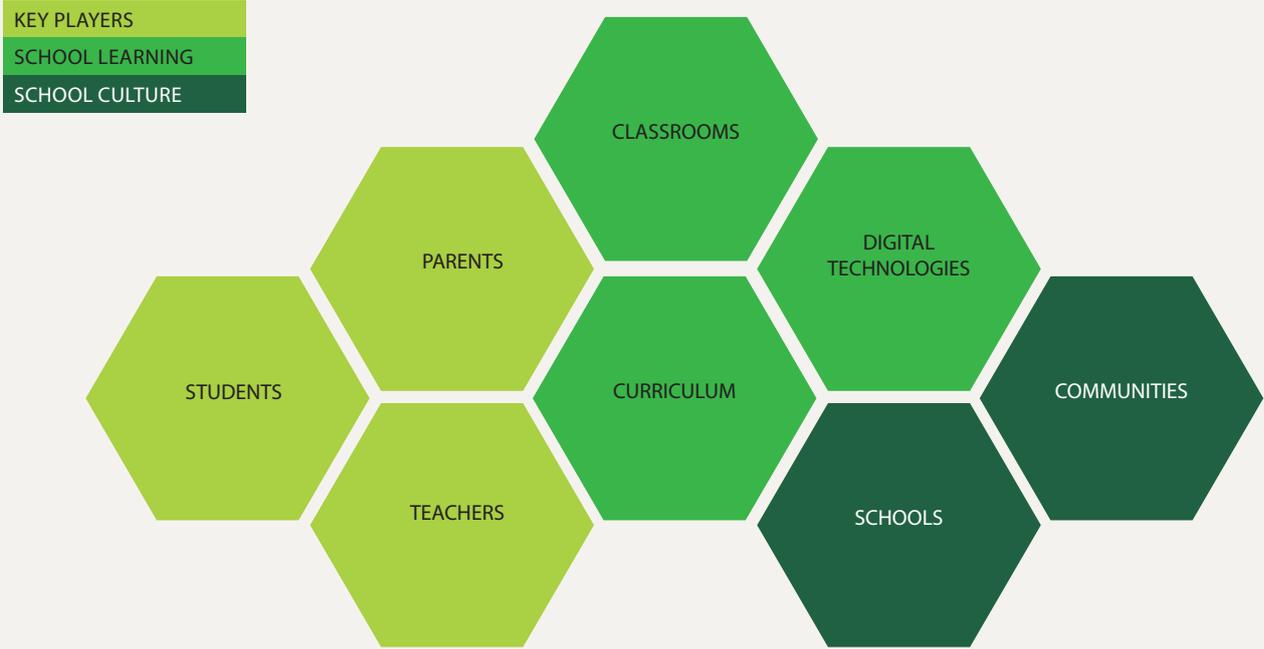
Six schools were selected to participate in EPIC. Phase 1 occurred in March 2021. ISQ and QIS Parents Network working with the researchers (Linda and Beryl) selected the schools based on expressions of interest from principals and school leaders which indicated they: were already active in engaging parents; wanted to learn more about effective parent engagement; used inquiry approaches to curriculum; and worked collaboratively with staff, students and parents. There was no expectation that selected schools were currently demonstrating exemplary parent engagement strategies and practices.

During Phase 1, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with the principals and school leaders in each of the six schools (Schools A to F) (n=10 participants). The interviews were audio and video recorded using Microsoft Teams and data were later transcribed verbatim and cleaned for the purposes of reporting. (See Appendix 1 for full data collection and research activities tables.)

Data analysis used a framework developed by Willis et al. (2021b) which extends Schwab's (1973) notion of commonplaces when planning curriculum. Schwab felt that the three traditional school dimensions of students, teachers and curriculum (subject matter) limited understanding of student learning by excluding "where and with whom children live, and their social, cultural, religious and economic contexts" (Pushor & The Parent Engagement Collaborative, 2013, p. 10). Other spheres of influence (or milieus) such as parents and communities should be considered equally important when planning for student learning (Schwab, 1973). From their research, Willis et al. proposed virtual classrooms and spaces (digital technologies) were a further commonplace. Developed by Willis et al., Figure 1 visually represents Schwab's elaborated framework of four commonplaces (students, teachers, curriculum and milieus) under three broad headings: key players (students, parents and teachers); school learning (classrooms, curriculum and digital technologies); and school culture (schools and communities). The commonplaces should be thought of as non-hierarchical and coordinated—none of which should be subordinated and all of which should be included from the start of planning for curriculum (Schwab, 1973).

The six school case studies which follow use the commonplaces framework for engaging parents to: provide information, ideas and insights into each school's parent engagement journey; articulate effective parent engagement strategies and practices; and describe perceived challenges and future aspirations. Note: All case studies in this report use pseudonyms for school and participant names.

Figure 1 Phase 1 commonplaces framework for examining parent engagement in Schools A to F (Schwab, 1973; Willis et al., 2021b)



# Case study school A

## INTRODUCTION

School A is a comprehensive K-12 school of approximately 470 students, with approximately 100 of these students in the early years. The lower primary classes up to Class 4 are currently double-streamed. A burgeoning student enrolment and building program in upper primary and junior and senior secondary will see continued growth in the years ahead. School A is part of a system of education with global reach that seeks to develop mutually supportive relationships between students, staff and families through an education focused on global citizenship with individual responsibility for an ethical future. School A prides itself on a curriculum that meets the developmental needs of learners and personalised learning for students, and a commitment to a large range of activities and celebrations that involve not only the students and their teachers, but also the students' families and the wider community.

This case study was developed after an interview with the researchers in which, Dana Wilson, the school's principal, participated. Dana is an educator with approximately 25 years of experience, teaching in Queensland, in a coastal town in New South Wales, on the north island of New Zealand, and in a metropolitan city in Italy for two terms. When she was a classroom teacher, Dana taught in schools where she looped up to the next year level with the same cohort of students, journeying with them for seven years from the beginning of the early years to the end of the primary years on two occasions. Dana explains that these seven-year teaching cycles bring the teacher very close to students and their families. Dana describes the experience, "like a whole class family... they become very close to you." Dana has also held national and international leadership positions with the peak body of an education system and education associations for a number of years. Dana has been at School A for two and a half years, with the last two years as the principal.



## CONTEXT

Dana said that she volunteered to participate in the parent engagement research project because she “wanted teachers on board to trial it” and then “gauge and get feedback from parents: ‘How was that for you? Is this something that we want to roll out across the whole school or from Class 6 up?’” Dana was especially keen to find out, “How can we use these online platforms that we now have at our fingertips?” and “How can the online platforms be used “to improve communication and connectedness within our community?”

## FINDINGS

Data analysis used a framework developed by Willis et al. (2021b) which extends Schwab’s (1973) notion of commonplaces when planning curriculum. This case study presents descriptive findings of the project using the commonplaces framework to discuss a curriculum of parent engagement at School A under three broad headings: key players (students, parent and teachers); school learning (classrooms, curriculum and digital technologies); and school culture (schools and communities).

## KEY PLAYERS

### Students

Dana described the students as fairly independent, an attribute that is valued and is consciously nurtured alongside the attribute of resilience. Dana talked about developing a student’s “will”, that is when students build the resolve to keep with tasks that are both difficult and beautiful and carry a balance across intellectual and artistic pursuits. The greater goal, according to Dana, “is to have balanced human beings” who can “cope with change and have purpose and direction in their lives.”

Reflecting on the outcomes when parents engage with the students in their learning, Dana asserted that “parent

engagement increases the wellbeing of students.” She provided a number of examples of parent engagement that are already part of everyday practices at School A. For example, Dana recalled:

Today we had a primary school assembly, and some of the classes were performing, and we had a smattering of parents up the back who could come. Students love to see their parents interested in what they are doing and coming to watch them perform.

Dana also talked about the hardcopy books that all students curated as they worked through inquiry-based projects on multiple occasions in each year level:

For the first few hours of every day, the students engage for three weeks on one topic so that the students can be deeply immersed in what they are learning. Each child actually creates their own main lesson book, so that the whole 15 days of learning results in one beautiful book that’s full of artwork, their writing, poetry, their thoughts, whatever it is, maths, science, history etc. At the end of that three weeks, once the teacher’s marked it, that book goes home. At the end of the year the students have 12 beautiful main lesson books. I know adults who’ve still got their main lesson books from when they were a child and they are highly valued.

### Parents

Dana clearly articulated the vision for parent engagement at School A:

Parent engagement is about parents taking a deep interest in what their children are learning in the school, in wanting to engage in the school community, in being open to hearing what’s going on in the class, for them to come to all the opportunities, or as many opportunities as possible that we offer, so they can hear about what’s going

## CASE STUDY SCHOOL A CONTINUED

on in the classrooms. This really builds community... When you have engaged parents, you've got an engaged community, and that, to me, is a healthy community.

The school proactively foregrounds the school's values and vision for the parents in multiple ways. For example, parents are first invited to take a school tour and attend an information night before enrolling their child and attending an interview. Dana reflected on the information night held the week before the interview, describing it as "fabulous." She outlined the evening, saying:

I gave an overview of the school and the curriculum and child development, but then prospective parents broke off into different faculty groups and had the opportunity to see students' work and hear teachers talk about what we offer at the school. Prospective parents had the opportunity to also ask questions, not only of the teachers present, but also alumni who had attended to come and talk about the school and their experiences, which was greatly received.

Dana explained, "It feels really proactive to be doing that, because then parents are making an informed choice that is right for their family."

Dana continued:

It's also about student retention, because we don't want to have revolving doors with students leaving and new students coming in all the time. I really want to have parents who understand what we're doing and why we're doing it and for them to be partners in that learning journey. That's the goal for me.

Once a student is enrolled at School A, parent agency is afforded through opportunities for parents to cogenerate and come up with their own communication processes and community actions. Dana explained some of the typical dialogues that happen within groups of parents of a class.

What will we do with birthdays? Okay, let's make sure no one's excluded. So everyone has to come to a birthday party, or don't have it, or when it's your child's birthday, bring in a fruit platter because there's too many children in the class with allergies or food intolerances. Or in other classes the parents might say, 'Let's all make a commitment that if there's a party, that no one's allowed to watch R-rated movies or M-rated movies.' So it's an opportunity also for the parents to support each other and support each other in their values for raising their children

Since becoming Principal of School A, Dana has observed that the parents of the early years and primary years students are more engaged, whilst parents of the older students may tend to return to the workforce, and engage less with their child's school learning. This could also be due to the fact that students are more independent in their learning. In a bid

to increase parent engagement, all parents are expected to come to a class meeting once per term. Dana outlined the typical points of discussion:

What the curriculum is for this term, what the children will be doing in class, we talk about the developmental age of the child and give parents tips for parenting as well, especially when they're reaching adolescence, and key points where their child's developmental changes come in... It gives an opportunity for specialist teachers to come and talk about the camp program or the language program or the music program. I'll sometimes attend and I'll talk about what's coming up with NAPLAN or things like that, or the Primary Director or the High School Director will attend.

To ensure there is a means by which all parents have easy access to Dana and easy opportunity to raise new agenda items, Dana explained that she hosts a 'cuppa morning' once a term:

I bring in some morning tea, and it's up in the parent hub, and I'm just there for a chat to whoever attends. It's advertised in the newsletter and open to all parents. It's usually for an hour and I might say, 'I'm doing a 15-minute talk about this aspect of the curriculum,' but then it's just questions and answers. And that's when I get a lot of feedback of what parents want to know more about and this is invaluable feedback for me.

### Teachers

Dana outlined multiple ways that teachers added to the teacher-parent-student triangle at School A. Dana explained that the "parent-teacher-child triangle, has to be strong. The parents and the teacher have to be on the same page to support the child..." She explained, "A lot of teachers send weekly newsletters just to their class, and photos about 'This is what we're doing.'"

The teachers each host parent-teacher meetings twice a year. In these meetings, the teachers show the parents samples of their child's work and discuss their progress. In addition, the teachers are available to the parents on an as-needs basis throughout the year.

Dana explained a new parent engagement initiative the teachers had taken up recently:

And the other thing we've started this year is, once a term, teachers are giving a two-hour main lesson at night for parents. This term it was the Class 3 teacher. And they came in and the teacher treated them like they were Class 3 children and ran them through what it would be like for the day. And even a Class 11 parent came to that. But next term it's going to be a high school lesson... And it's also important, because we're upskilling the teachers to actually get more involved in parent engagement as well.

To nurture parent engagement, and not to overload the classroom teacher, each class has a nominated volunteer class carer who supports the families and the class teacher. The teacher can also ask the class carer to filter communication to the parent group, such as, "Can you just remind everyone there's swimming tomorrow?" This parent communication network also nurtures families in need, such as if someone's had an operation, that class carer may provide support and say, "Who can make a soup?" and will deliver it to the family.

## SCHOOL LEARNING

### Classrooms

Dana explained that the school's parent engagement strategy consciously brings the parents into the classroom space for the parent class meetings. These termly meetings are:

...deliberately interactive and provide the parents with an opportunity to experience some of the curriculum the way that it's delivered in the classrooms. The early childhood or primary teachers might say, 'Okay, today we're actually going to be doing morning circle. This is how the children do morning circle,' or, 'This is how we teach a certain maths concept,' or, 'This is how we do water colour painting.' The high school teachers may focus more on social and emotional issues of the class, social media, or aspects of the curriculum. It is also an opportunity for parents to meet each other and ask questions of the teacher.

### Curriculum

In the early years, students are engaged in learning and pre-literacy and pre-numeracy through creative play, building, wonder, curiosity, creating and designing experiences. Dana provided an example:

When the teacher is teaching the class the letters of the alphabet, it's from a story. Everything is from a story. And the teacher will tell the story and there'll probably be an adventure about some creative characters who discover the letters in the world. The teacher might say, 'Oh, and they saw this. ...,' and at the end of the story, 'There was this amazing magical tree.' And the children will go home and say, 'We know what the next letter is. It's going to be a T. We're sure it's a T.' And then the children will be coming back in the next day and saying, 'It's a T. I've been learning about T words.'

Although School A is part of a global education system, the school draws on the Australian Curriculum from Prep onwards, introducing new topics via a story to be shared that leads to a set of extended inquiry-based projects about the natural world. Students are not rushed through this part of their learning, as the focus is on what Dana calls, "deep, engaged learning." She elaborated:

So again, it's this inquiry and learning through experience. We don't tell students the answer. Even in Class 2, they're learning about the social realm. They'll hear stories about animal fables, but we don't tell the moral of the story. So that inquiry basis, it's really about wonder. For us, wonder and curiosity and the imagination are the cornerstone of the way we teach.

It's really about student engagement, because you need student engagement as well as parent engagement across all ages. For example, in Class 7 when they're learning Pythagorean theorem, you don't start with, 'C squared equals A squared plus B squared.' You actually start talking about the Greek philosophers and the secret brotherhood and Pythagoras, who was this amazing philosopher, and then you say to them, 'Imagine, what would they do?' Then you can give the children graph paper and eventually they work out, with graph paper, that if you put graph paper on the square of the hypotenuse, it actually equals a square on both sides of the triangle.

When students are younger, these inquiry-based projects take three weeks and the discoveries and outcomes are carefully curated by the student in a project book. When the books are sent home, students and parents have an opportunity to go through the book together, revisiting the learning and the teacher's assessment.

In their final year, senior secondary students plan their own year-long inquiry-based projects. Each project includes a community service component, and the final outcomes are presented and assessed by representatives from the school and an expert from the external community. Dana explains that, "the parents are also engaged in that project, because they're often supporting their child through it... because it's a big ask, and they usually choose really big things." By way of example, Dana recalled one particular project from 2020:

The girl that I supervised last year, she chose to buy a 20-foot container, you know the shipping containers, and convert it into sustainable living and it's now her bedroom. She did it all herself. Cut out walls, put in windows. She had to have a mentor who was a builder, and then she did her whole research about sustainable living, around tiny homes. The students live and breathe their project. The whole family had to support that, because they had to lift the container up and put it over the house. She had to organise the crane driver, research which crane drivers would be responsible and not drop the container on her family home. She felt such a responsibility. So, it's that engaging with parents, 'Can I do this? This is what I need to do.' And then she had to fund it herself, so she got herself a job to fund her project.

### Digital technologies (virtual classrooms)

School A carefully considers the students' use of digital technology. Importance is given to both child safety, and the harder questions about using digital technology as a tool for learning versus individuals being used by digital technology. Dana explained, "We don't teach technology [at School A] in early childhood or primary school. We don't start with technology until Class 8 and 9, and even then it's a very slow introduction." With the COVID-19 lockdown, Dana continued:

We did snap up that opportunity and we had to quickly give every student an email account. And the teachers taught online in the high school through Microsoft Teams. But there was a little bit of feedback from parents that they didn't want their children on the computer very long, so we were trying to shorten the time the children were online. The students who have high anxiety, it actually worked really well for them. They loved learning online because they didn't have to cope with that social time in the breaks or the noise in the classroom, especially those children who just are very noise sensitive. So, for some children, it worked really well.

School A also explored using digital technology to advance the parent engagement agenda using Microsoft Teams for class meetings and a few other initiatives.

### SCHOOL CULTURE

#### School (vision and values)

Dana proudly stated, "We have very strong community. Our vision for our school is social and cultural renewal. So that's what we're about. It's not to have the highest ATAR score. We're really about people, very much. That social realm is important to us."

#### Communities

Community engagement is an ever-present element in the lives of students from School A. Dana explained that parents are at the school:

...all the time... they stand and talk and they want their children to play after school so that the parents can really connect together. They come to our school for community. That's what they're wanting. That's why they choose us. And so we need to be responsible and responsive to that and this has been a huge challenge with COVID-19 and restricting parents onsite.

As another example, Dana recalled:

Like today I had a father come to see me, and he's a basketball coach and he wants to setup some basketball teams. I thought, 'Oh wow, that's so good' because so many of the staff are female in the primary school. To have dads come in and offer things, that's just gold.

### CONCLUSIONS

This case study provides a detailed account of existing parent and community engagement practices at one medium-sized independent school in Queensland. The catalogue of practices that were shared by the school principal were both regular and pre-planned (e.g., the parent information evenings), and in the moment and ad hoc (e.g., the dad who is a basketball coach).

Importantly, school-parent communication at School A was not a one-way push out of information from the school to the parents, but an ongoing productive dialogic process that ebbs and flows in response to the students' inquiry-based projects and the school-based and community-based partnerships that evolve. Parent engagement was extended to parents supporting one another with their children's social activities, and when families were in need. As evidenced by Dana's quotes, School A is taking a responsible approach to the use of digital technology to advance students' learning and to further the parent engagement agenda.

# Case study school B



## INTRODUCTION

Established in the 1940s, School B is a dual-campus, faith-based school in south-east Queensland. The research was conducted on the more established suburban-based campus which enrolled students for Preparatory Year (Prep) to Year 12 education. This campus is split into three sections—Primary Years, Junior High, and Senior School. This campus services a high socio-economic area and attracts a diverse multicultural student population.

This case study was developed after an interview with the researchers in which three school leaders participated: Mr Phillip Kennedy—Head of School, Ms Susan Chisholm— Head of Primary, and Ms Judy Martin—Head of P-6 Curriculum.

Phillip was drawn to education after being inspired by the example of his Year 8 Physical Education teacher. Throughout his career, he taught in various faith-based schools in south-east Queensland and New South Wales. At the time of the interview, Phillip had been Head of School for four years.

Throughout a career in education spanning four decades, Susan taught in small rural as well as large metropolitan—state and independent—schools in south-east Queensland. For over the last decade, she took on roles as a curriculum leader, including at School B, where from 2014 onward she was instrumental in managing change associated with the introduction of the Australian Curriculum.

Judy came to education having previously studied psychology and working with homeless adolescents. During her teaching career, she taught in various schools in different roles including working with gifted students and as a classroom and specialist teacher. Judy had been in her current role for over three and a half years.

### CONTEXT

Phillip described School B like “a small town.” He explained that there were around 2,500 students—making the number of parents approximately 4,500—so that, with 20,000 old scholars and 700 staff, the school was somewhat “self-sufficient.”

Phillip highlighted the difference between parent involvement and parent engagement, saying:

I think lots of people use the terms interchangeably, as if they're the same thing. And so I define parental involvement as helping out at the tuckshop, managing your child's sporting team, those sorts of things. And that's not to diminish those, they're important, they help to build social capital, they help to build community.

In comparison, he identified two distinguishing elements of parent engagement. The first was “the school-family partnership relationship” which views parents as “the primary educators of their children” and “what schools do is add their expertise to it.” The second element was “around parent-led, home-led learning.” A simple example of parent-led learning would be “parents reading with their child at night.”

Phillip and his leadership team volunteered to participate in the research because they were keen to explore not only the impact of parent engagement on student learning outcomes, but also to find out which parent engagement approaches may be more impactful than others. He also noted how the school's participation in the research aligned “really well with one of [its] strategic intents, which is for each parent to develop a deep engagement with their child's learning journey.” As an International Baccalaureate (IB) school, School B used the IB Primary Years Program (PYP) curriculum framework hence, Phillip further noted that, “inquiry learning is the predominant pedagogy, so it (referring to the research) dovetails nicely.”

Susan added to Phillip's ideas about what School B might gain from participating in the project, saying, “[It's] around bringing parent engagement to the front of our consciousness.” Although she agreed that the School B engaged parents “quite well” and they (the School) were “proud of what [they] have achieved,” they wanted to do more. Specifically, she said she wanted to learn, “How to engage the various cultures and the various people that we have in our community better.” Further, she was keen to discover how this engagement could be “a mutual learning experience.” In other words, Susan was looking for ideas about how all members of the school community—students, teachers, and parents—could be brought together in authentic ways to enable co-learning.

### FINDINGS

Data analysis used a framework developed by Willis et al. (2021b) which extends Schwab's (1973) notion of commonplaces when planning curriculum. This case study presents descriptive findings of the project using the commonplaces framework to discuss a curriculum of parent engagement at School B under three broad headings: key players (students, parent and teachers); school learning (classrooms, curriculum and digital technologies); and school culture (schools and communities).

### KEY PLAYERS

#### Students

One successful recently-adopted parent engagement strategy at School B involved student goal-setting conferences with teachers and parents. Susan explained how this strategy comprised part of a “journey” around mandatory reporting to parents which occurred four times a year—where the school provided written reports twice a year (Terms 2 and 4), conducted a parent-teacher interview in Term 1, and facilitated a student-led conference in Term 3. Susan clarified the meaning of student-led conferences, saying, “students are actively involved in showing and sharing their work with their parents, and it's not just with the classroom teacher. So it's with our specialists and so on.”

Restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 however, caused School B to reconsider the openness of student-led conferences which allowed for many parents to be on campus simultaneously. Susan elaborated, “instead of having a student-led conference, we had a three-way conference [which involved] the student, the teacher, and the parent.” Susan and Judy were keen to continue this initiative in 2021 given they observed many benefits for each of these key players. Susan explained:

... it really showed the modelling of the teacher-student relationship. And while the student was leading the conference in a lot of ways, the role of the teacher was to share some of the feedback, some of the goal setting that the students and the teacher had done together, and then to be able to work with the parent on new goals.

#### Parents

Each school leader iterated that parents are “partners” in their child's learning journey. Judy commented that the school's multicultural community constituted “a real strength of the school.” At the same time, language differences created barriers to engagement for some families. Developing strategies to minimise these barriers was a particular focus of the school. Judy identified, “formal sessions”, hosting “coffee and chat mornings to try and reduce that formality of sessions”, and putting “lots of information out in the digital space for our parents to interpret” as among the different strategies used.

Judy highlighted a promising new strategy used in 2021 which involved, “inviting our parents into what we’re calling, ‘community mornings.’” She reported that these mornings (3), run by the Prep teachers, attracted “100% turn-up” of parents—whom she observed were also “incredibly grateful and really engaged in the process.” She expanded on these mornings, saying that parents were invited into classrooms as “observers of a lesson.” A lesson might start with students sitting on the carpet (with parents also sitting on the floor or choosing to sit on seats) and then as students moved to their desks, parents sat alongside their child. She gave an example of a lesson to develop “understanding (for parents), particularly in those early years, [about] how we go about teaching literacy and the sorts of words and processes that they can then emulate at home to support their learners, but also as participants in learning.” Another example involved inviting parents to donate to the Prep garden “and then helping to participate in populating that Prep garden.” Judy declared, “And certainly the gardening experience was very much elbows in and off we go.”

Judy felt the community mornings were “something that our parents really connected with,” while simultaneously facilitating multiple benefits “in terms of having them (parents) as partners and also to help them to upskill and to be part of that community.” The success of these mornings had challenged her and Susan to consider how they might adopt similar initiatives in other year levels.

## Teachers

Like parents, teachers at School B were considered essential in the learning triad of students, parents, and teachers. Judy repeated a common PYP phrase used at the school, “parents as part of our learning community,” which she interpreted as “... the whole idea that not only are our students learners in our community, so are our teachers and so are our parents.” The leadership team thus spoke about the kinds of qualities they looked for in new staff. Susan stated that, “One is we want practitioners to be reflective. We want them to be always improving their practice and to be open-minded. ... [so] they are able to reflect on and learn from their experiences.” She added, “We do take quite a long time to on-board people. Even once we’ve decided on a person, then we will take some time to just make sure that that holistic nature of education is at the forefront of those teachers’ minds.”

Phillip added that, being a faith-based school, new teachers were required to undertake a program:

... where they spend 30 hours over three years—so 10 hours a year—unpacking, in a non-threatening way, and meeting people where they’re at in terms of their own journey, helping them understand, the ethos and the values, but also some of the theology... just to help them understand, why is it we value a holistic education, why is it pastoral care is a really important part of this school, why

is it that we have, essentially, an open enrolment policy where we do not only take the best and the brightest, we do take students that do struggle as well.

Phillip noted that this preparation for teaching at the school permeated all of its operations: “So, it becomes part of who we are. Even things like devotions in chapel, we’ll talk about those core values. And so teachers, as well as students, learn this is who we are.”

## SCHOOL LEARNING

### Classrooms

The parent engagement dimensions of classrooms and curriculum were closely allied at School B. Students in P-6 undertook six units of inquiry a year. This meant teachers often invited parents into the classroom to share information and experiences about a topic. Judy cited a recent example in Prep of a unit around housing globally, explaining: “So, one of the parents was an architect. So they’ll come in and speak to the students about designing a house.” Depending on the year level and unit of study, the school connected with individual community members such as authors and entrepreneurs as well as organisations such as South East Queensland Water to work with students.

Different strategies were used to match parents with different units. Judy said, “One of our reports that we can run off our database is around parent occupations. So, we already have that built-in to tap into.” A second strategy involved the weekly blog which Judy described as “a bit of an update [from teachers to parents] of what’s happened this week.” When teachers moved into a new unit, they could call out to parents through the blog: “We’re moving into this unit. We’re looking at heat from a scientific perspective. Does anyone have any experience or work in an industry where that may be of use?”

### Curriculum

Apart from having parents and community members assist in delivering aspects of the curriculum (see above), school leaders spoke about curriculum and parent engagement from the perspective of student reflection on learning. Susan described how during PYP units, teachers often said to students, “Well, you’ve learnt all of this, but so what?” She enumerated:

So, there is an element of action always inbuilt into a unit. And that could be just personal action. It could be just going home and talking to their parents about what they’ve been doing, or it could be something that’s a bit more conscious. And so, particularly when our students are starting to get a little bit older, we’re asking them, ‘Well, what does that mean for you and how might your learnings then change your behaviours or the behaviours of others?’

## CASE STUDY SCHOOL B CONTINUED

Students were thus encouraged to take appropriate action such as writing a letter about an issue to the school principal or a local council member to bring about positive change. Teachers supported students in these initiatives. Susan pointed out, “So that’s them reaching out to their broader community, not necessarily asking the community to come in to us... which is a little bit unique to what we do.”

### Digital technologies (virtual classrooms)

The leadership team described many different forms of communication with parents using digital platforms and channels. From a classroom teaching perspective the Learning Management System (LMS), Firefly, was used together with emails and the weekly blog (mentioned above). Students in Years 3 to 6 also kept a digital portfolio that was part of Firefly. Judy indicated that teachers at the school used the portfolio to engage parents by asking them to provide their child with feedback on aspects of learning.

Phillip was emphatic about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic saying, “It’s certainly changed the way that we’ve communicated.” The biggest shift was from print communications to multimedia presentations. He commented:

And I think initially when we moved, we thought it had to be really polished and it was like a Hollywood movie. It had to have proper titles and all that sort of stuff, and the sound had to be perfect. As we moved through COVID-19, it was less and less about polished communications; it was just parents, and students for that matter, just wanted to see your face and hear from people.

Phillip noted that since the pandemic, “So many of our events now are live-streamed or recorded” hence, parents—especially parents of boarders—who cannot attend, can watch these events in their own time.

Susan described a day in the life of a primary student during the COVID-19 lockdown. Using ZOOM, she described how there was “a mixture of live connection with the students each day, and then we also had pre-recorded lessons that could be used at the leisure, I guess, of the families’ needs.” Activities were also included in the student’s Firefly pages.

ZOOM represented a way to “check-in with the children each day” which, Susan conceded, “parents could tap into as well.” She further remarked, “... quite often we got tours of homes and all sorts of interesting things that were a really nice journey.”

After lunch each day, students were offered a non-compulsory, interactive online session hosted by one of the specialist teachers. Susan colloquially called these sessions, the sand pit, because children and families were invited to create and enjoy their “passions” with one another and their teachers. She listed examples of passion projects: “making cubby houses out of sheets... or a LEGO project or cooking with mum and dad or feeding the dog or running a marathon

by doing it 10 times around the yard.” Susan noted that at the end of the week, students “could send videos in sharing the chosen product or their process that they had done.”

## SCHOOL CULTURE

### School (vision and values)

Susan emphasised the importance of spending time with parents—especially in Prep and the early years—when students first come into the school “to just make sure that they’re really understanding of our values and our ethos at the school.” Equally important for Susan was for new parents “to understand that, again, there’s that difference between engagement and involvement and that we really do believe, I guess, the old adage of, ‘It takes a village to raise a child.’”

Susan added that, for parents, given the school is “a very global school, we’re a very multicultural school... our school has become their village, because they are disconnected physically, geographically, from the rest of their families.” According to Susan, this also highlights the importance for parents to recognise that,

We all have different roles within that village. And so we do talk about what parents’ roles are, what the school’s role is, and that we keep the child at the core, [in other words], that ‘triangle of education’, that the child’s at the top, and then there are parents, and then there’s also the school that helps support that.

As a faith-based school, Susan indicated that School B’s values about the importance of engagement, respect, and inclusivity were well articulated to parents and the broader community. These also needed to be evident in practice. Susan described one way this happened was:

...to make sure that we listen to our parents and our families, because it’s really important to get an understanding of where they are and not put our values or our perceptions on their lives. But we actually really listen very hard to them, and I think that’s also a part of engaging parents, as opposed to just involving them. It’s a two-way street.

In “raising a village”, Susan expressed the view that education was no longer only about “traditional academics” (e.g., teaching reading and writing); nor was it something for which parents could be totally responsible. Rather, she said, “It’s [about], ‘We’re all in this together’” and, given this co-responsibility, she felt teachers and parents need to jointly consider (continuously), “Where does our responsibility lie with teaching and educating our young people?”

## Communities

This case study documented multiple school-parent-community connections to enhance student learning and wellbeing—especially in the context of the primary school’s inquiry curriculum. The leadership team also described other valuable connections. These included a strong relationship with the local Rotary Club where students and families attended the ANZAC Day Service. Susan described how the school recently secured a ‘peace pole’ from the club, saying, it had been installed and was “in four different languages around peace.” She added, “So every year we are now going to try and make a tradition that we will have a member of the Rotary out on World Peace Day.” Susan also described how, as part of a Year 6 inquiry, students worked with the Rotary Club to make ‘solar buddies’ for other countries such as Papua New Guinea. Judy commented that this project reflected the school’s emphasis on internationalisation—specifically, the idea of global citizenship.

In the secondary school, Phillip spoke about the range of partnerships which benefited student learning and wellbeing, from those with different universities and local sporting clubs, to “parents coming in at various lunchtimes to share about their career with students in Years 10-12” (e.g., an engineer with Boeing). In a shift away from traditional fundraising fetes and chocolate drives, he described how the Parents and Friends group had begun “videotaping different parents about their careers—Why they got into it? What does it actually involve?” He added, “So they’re actually just building up a resource, it’s going to be online, our students can click on, ‘What does a marine scientist do?’, and find out more.”

Phillip tied the prominence given to the notion of ‘service’ to the strength of relationships the school had built with many different service groups. He noted that these extended from students participating “in the ‘Mater Chicks for Pink Fun Run’ . . . right through to international service trips to Cambodia that we’ve been running for over a decade.”

Ongoing partnerships with three different Indigenous communities through the Northern Territory (NT) government, Cape York Institute, and the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation also reflected the school’s commitment to service. Phillip iterated that this commitment:

... stems from who we are. And we put a big emphasis on students realising that they’ve been given lots of gifts and talents, and it’s not about using those gifts and talents for themselves, it’s about how they use those gifts and talents to make a difference in the world.

## CONCLUSIONS

The interview provided multiple rich examples of how School B was ‘closing the gap’ between parents and their child’s learning and wellbeing—these included addressing some of the issues associated with serving a large and complex multicultural population. Concerted efforts evidenced genuine commitment by the school to exploring ways to better engage parents and facilitate a culture of co-responsibility between teachers and parents for each child’s education.

The strength of the school’s values of respect and inclusion, combined with reflective professional practice, meant listening to parents was actively encouraged. The COVID-19 pandemic improved home-school communication through expanded use of digital technologies. At the same time, the use of digital technologies afforded new and creative ways to enhance students’ learning and teachers’ parent engagement pedagogies.

# Case study school C

## INTRODUCTION

School C is an independent, day and boarding school for girls in regional south-east Queensland. School C began in the early 1900s as a school that attracted support from an evangelical church. As it grew in size, the school was moved to bigger properties, until it opened in its current location in 1917.

At the time this case study was written, the school enrolled students from Kindergarten to Year 12. School C is split into four sections—Kindergarten, Junior School (Preparatory Year to Year 6), Middle School (Years 7-9), and Senior School (Years 10-12). This case study was developed after an interview with the researchers in which, Dr Jill Brown—Principal and Ms Fiona Turnbull—Head of Junior School, participated.

Jill had a long career in education as a Physical Education teacher and an English curriculum teacher. She held leadership positions as Head of English, and Deputy Principal (Curriculum) at previous schools before moving to School C in 2003 as a Deputy Principal. In 2009, Jill became Principal, and still teaches a Senior School English class. Jill stated in her interview that teaching the English class helped to remind her of why she does her job.

Fiona also had a long career in education. She began her career as a teacher in the field of Adult Literacy and Numeracy in rural and remote communities. She then worked as a primary teacher across all year levels, an Education Advisor supporting small schools and multi-age classrooms, a Head of Department (Middle School), a Head of Department (Science), a Deputy Principal in both large and small government schools, and as Regional Manager in Science. In 2016, Fiona took up her current position at School C.



## CONTEXT

School C is located in an older suburb close to the centre of a regional city in south-east Queensland. The school has a long history of educating girls from the city and the surrounding regional area—including students from regional New South Wales. The provision of student boarding had always been integral to the services of the school, along with the day school.

School C boasted a strong foundation of parent involvement in the school community through committees and groups such as Friends of the Arts, Friends of Boarding, Friends of the Junior School, and a Parents and Friends (P&F) group. Jill and Fiona volunteered to participate in this research because they recognised that some parents wanted to participate in the school beyond its committees. In particular, they were keen to explore how parents could become more involved in “the curriculum provision within the school itself.” They also expressed a commitment to building relationships with parents and students and considered parent engagement closely aligned with relationship building.

## FINDINGS

Data analysis used a framework developed by Willis et al. (2021b) which extends Schwab’s (1973) notion of commonplaces when planning curriculum. This case study presents descriptive findings of the project using the commonplaces framework to discuss a curriculum of parent engagement at School C under three broad headings: key players (students, parent and teachers); school learning (classrooms, curriculum and digital technologies); and school culture (schools and communities).

## KEY PLAYERS

### Students

Student wellbeing is supported through a number of school-wide initiatives including its pastoral care program and wellbeing coaches. Wellbeing coaches are employed to work with, and support, staff, parents, and students. Students are grouped into multi-year level groups, to foster supportive relationships.

The leadership team, including staff who work directly with boarders, engage in rural home visits to meet with parents of their boarding students before they commenced at the school. Jill described the strategy:

So, we visit, where we can, [the student’s] small school, we go out to the property, and we spend time understanding where they come from because it helps us a great deal when they come to us as boarders. And that includes our Indigenous students, so [it involves] heading to [small towns in western Queensland] and spending a couple of days there before one of our students comes in. Because if you don’t understand that, well, you can’t hope to understand what it might feel like to be in a boarding house.

Jill and Fiona felt rural home visits of future boarding students was an area of the College in which they excelled in relationship building practices. They wondered how they might build similar sorts of relationships with day student families.

### Parents

Parents at School C were regarded as valued members of the school community. As Jill stated in her interview, parents were viewed as partners in students' education and the promotion of students' wellbeing. Fiona stated that communication with parents was focused on how students and parents were engaged with the school. When asked to elucidate her journey with understanding and fostering parent engagement, Fiona responded with her thoughts about communication between the school and parents and how it highlights the value of relationships:

The images that are put forward into the community are very rarely about teachers and nearly always about the students or parents engaging in some way there. Even through newsletters, the tone is always around, looking at the value of relationships and challenging that thought that you are giving us your child and your job finishes at the gate.

Jill connected parent engagement to parent agency. Jill explained that agency was about parents "having input into the needs that they have in terms of the way in which we partner in educating their child." While the school valued parent engagement and parents having agency in their child's education, Jill explained there needed to be mutual respect between parents and the school.

To understand the level of parent engagement at School C, the school conducted annual surveys with parents of Year 6, 9 and 12 students. Also, a 'Town Hall' meeting was convened in 2017 to determine the concerns or interests of the parents, previous students, and the wider community. Jill reported that:

Overwhelmingly, what came out was that parents wanted greater connection; they wanted a greater sense of community. And it was like this, 'aha' moment, certainly for me. I just thought, 'What do you mean? We do this and this and this and this.' But it has changed the way that we think about parent engagement and the value that we place on it.

### Teachers

At School C, teachers were included in the partnership between families and the school. For example, those staff who made rural home visits for the students who became boarders ensured the information they gathered was passed on to the students' various teachers. Fiona commented on the nature and benefit of these visits for building authentic student-parent-teacher connections:

...you sit and you look out the kitchen window and you see that [the students are] leaving their horse behind or you [go] to their school and you realise that there's only two of them in Grade 6 and they're coming into Grade 7; they've been in the one school, and now they're walking

into this different world. That information then is shared back with their teachers, with their home class teacher.

New teachers engaged in a two-day induction process before they commenced at the school. They were provided with information about the restorative practices used across the school community (with parents, students, and staff) in conflict resolution, and were offered a three-day training session. All new staff were connected with a mentor to support their understanding of the school culture. During the interview, Jill noted that the way new staff were treated "mirrored very much the way we treat our new parents and new students coming in. So, they have a sense of that culture implicitly" (i.e., the valuing of relationships and the school's approach to conflict resolution).

## SCHOOL LEARNING

### Classrooms

School C commenced a new building plan in 2019. Although parents were involved in the master plan development, Fiona explained that parent and community engagement was being explored to move "beyond fundraising for a refurbished classroom." In particular, she expressed being "interested in how [parent engagement] might look within the classrooms, within the curriculum." She also expressed a desire for parent and community engagement to be more than just an "add-on." In 2021, parents and community members were invited to another Town Hall meeting about future classroom pedagogy and classroom design, unfortunately a COVID-19 lockdown meant that the proposed meeting did not proceed. Apart from launching the building program, Jill explained the meeting's purpose was, "to bring [parents] on board in terms of directions for learning and [to fold in] their understandings and what they valued."

### Curriculum

Speaking about the Junior School, Fiona stated that the leadership team was attempting to move away from information provision to adding richness into the curriculum through interaction with the community. School C considered this interaction was achievable through: networking with other schools, participating in STEM projects with the local university, and drawing on the knowledge and skills of parents and community experts. Fiona reported that the Junior School was being more deliberate in finding ways to include parents and communities, and links with the 'real world', into planned Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS) and Science units. She felt that parents enjoyed being able to share their expertise and passions with students.

The process of creating opportunities for parent engagement in curriculum units depended on finding the expertise or passions that parents could share with students. Fiona stated that this was being achieved through letters to parents at

the commencement of each term, inviting them to share something in Science lessons, for example. School C had begun being more proactive through “tapping people on the shoulder.”

In response to a question about parent engagement in the curriculum, Jill spoke about the “learning pathways” for Year 10-12 students. Essentially the learning pathways were subject selection plans created with Year 10 students and their parents. However, the school developed a strategy that involved “mentors who... journeyed with [each] student and [their] parents through Year 10, Year 11, and Year 12.” As a mentor for a small group of students, Jill reported that her practice was to meet with students and to converse with parents throughout each year, as needed.

As Jill explained, the parents were less involved in Year 12, to give the students more agency. The meetings, however, continued “right through to the last meeting [when the students had] finished [Year 12] exams” and were preparing a “CV [and] backup plans” as they considered future study or employment. Fiona reported that the mentors would also “touch base [with students and parents] in the New Year to see again [how the plans had gone].”

According to Jill, the benefits of these on-going mentoring conversations with students and parents played out when students experienced difficulties such as disengagement with the curriculum. Jill provided the following example:

I’ve rung, well, both mother and father... of a Year 12 girl because I was worried about her. She was so stressed and so disengaged, really. Well, it was an easier conversation because we began it in Year 10 and they [knew] that [I was] tracking her.

Fiona further explained the benefit and uniqueness of the learning pathway mentoring at School C when comparing it to practices at other schools. Fiona stated:

... it’s easier to adjust and change things as you go. It’s more difficult for a child to slip through the cracks and 18 months later [they feel they] have been absolutely in the wrong subject, it’s been breaking [their] heart that [they’ve] been struggling through. So, it allows that more point-in-time response, I think, which is particular to here (referring to School C).

## Digital technologies (virtual classrooms)

The planned Town Hall meeting in 2021 was to be used to develop parents’ understanding about future classroom pedagogy and classroom design. Fiona explained that students had “come up with, ‘What might the school look like in 50 years?’”, and had used CAD (computer added design) mapping and 3-D printing, in a community project with a local university. Parents were invited in to hear about the inquiry process that was used.

During 2020, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the school had to rely (at times) on virtual learning through the school learning management system (LMS)—Schoolbox. During the interview, Jill said that all of the teachers became much better at using the platform for virtual learning. Jill believed that teachers still used the platform as an adjunct to student learning by, for example, posting a Senior School lesson on the platform before it was delivered, so that students could preview the lesson. In response to a question from the researchers about opportunities for parents to possibly view lessons, she stated that College staff were discussing opening up the use of the technology for parents to view live lessons. Jill stated that parents were able to view videos that teachers had recorded of themselves teaching.

Fiona said that the school had not been able to maintain the same level of communication parents had experienced during the first 2020 lockdown, when the school campus was closed. The school used, “Schoolbox to share... parts of lessons, or celebrations of completions of things or assemblies and chapels... as a cultural fit.” Fiona explained that the leadership team wanted to make sure “staff [were] confident in what they [were] creating and sharing, and being consistent with the quality expectations that come with that,” if this type of communication were to continue.

During the first COVID-19 related 2020 school campus closure, virtual meeting technologies were used to facilitate parent-teacher meetings. Jill reported that with some parents she experienced more open sharing through the virtual platform than she had experienced with parents in face-to-face meetings in the past. She stated she was amazed by the level of sharing as “there was so much more information that [she] got on a telephone than [she] would have gleaned otherwise.” As a result, a hybrid approach to reporting to parents about student achievement was being explored for future reporting. Fiona and Jill agreed that although it was anticipated that face-to-face reporting would still occur for day students, teachers would also use digital technologies to make themselves available for virtual reporting to parents.

### SCHOOL CULTURE

#### School (vision and values)

Student wellbeing was a priority at School C. As previously mentioned, wellbeing coaches were employed within a pastoral care program. Fiona reported in her interview that community experts had been brought in to work with parents and staff members—sitting “side-by-side”—in learning about wellbeing and psychological safety. Psychologists and other experts had also been invited into the school for conversations about such topics as sleep, anxiety, and study skills.

The value of relationship building with parents is a strongly held belief. Both Jill and Fiona spoke about the benefits of relationships with parents and families. Jill elucidated her belief in a link between relationship building, parent engagement, and student achievement, as follows:

...you can have P&F and you can have those bodies, but that doesn't necessarily equate to engagement. I think the most important thing is that we value the relationship. And if you value the relationship, that will play out in any structure that you have within the school community. And if you don't have that relationship, and I think about a lot of the work that we've done with our Indigenous families, with boarders who come from very remote communities, if you don't have relationship and you don't have respect for one another's situation, you can't hope to engage with them or with their child at the level required to get the best from the student.

Jill stated that a focus on restorative approaches to conflict resolution and the valuing of relationships underpinned the school's philosophy for engaging with parents.

#### Communities

Fiona reported that parents signed a 'community contract' upon enrolling their child at School C. A focus on community was thus fore-fronted from the moment a student commenced at the school. This included fostering relationships that supported students, and engagement with the wider community to bring in experts for the pastoral care program or to support teaching and learning opportunities through curriculum units.

Parents were afforded various opportunities to engage with a number of groups and committees within the wider school community, but the leadership team had come to recognise that parents wished to engage with the school on a deeper level. Fiona reported that changes to the school's philosophy about parent and community engagement were evident in the way the Junior School was focussing on developing

knowledge of wider community members and parents. The Junior School personnel were developing a list of parents and community members located within a three-hour radius from the school, whom they could invite to be experts with knowledge that would support students' learning.

### CONCLUSIONS

School C possessed a strong foundation in relationship building and supporting students' and families' wellbeing. All parents were viewed as partners in their child's school learning and achievement and personal wellbeing.

The leadership team expressed a need for more clarity around parents' roles and the roles of school staff when exploring parent engagement across different aspects of school life. There was an acknowledgment that parents wished for an even closer sense of community. At the same time, the leadership team was open to supporting ways for parents to engage more closely in the curriculum.

# Case study school D



## INTRODUCTION

Established in the 1940s, School D is a small urban school located on Brisbane's southside. The school's unique bushland setting creates a feeling reminiscent of a small rural school. The school has a long history, first opening in the late 1800s in Queensland's Darling Downs region. The school building was moved from its original location to its current site in 1979. The school opened to classes in 1987, closed in 2013, and then reopened as an independent school in 2014.

The school's principal, Mr Bob Clifton, has been in his role since 2015. Bob is currently in his 39th year of teaching. At the time of interview, he had been a Deputy Principal for 22 years and a Teaching Principal for over 10 years.

## CONTEXT

In 2021, there were 45 students enrolled at School D. Being a small school, the students were grouped into an early years multi-age class, a middle primary multi-age class and an upper primary multi-age class. School D had one full-time teacher aide who worked in Years P-2. This deployment of the teacher-aide to support the P-2 students was strategic to provide early years students with a firm foundation for their future learning. Administration staff also worked within the classrooms, mostly in the older classroom.

Bob was drawn to participate in EPIC 2021 because of the school's positive experience with the school community in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. This increased his commitment to ensuring staff fostered and maintained connections with community. In participating, he sought to learn more about: how to maintain ongoing positive communication with parents; effective parent engagement strategies; new parent and community engagement ideas; and ways to increase accessibility of information for parents about what was occurring in classrooms.

## FINDINGS

Data analysis used a framework developed by Willis et al. (2021b) which extends Schwab's (1973) notion of commonplaces when planning curriculum. This case study presents descriptive findings of the project using the commonplaces framework to discuss a curriculum of parent engagement at School D under three broad headings: key players (students, parent and teachers); school learning (classrooms, curriculum and digital technologies); and school culture (schools and communities).

### KEY PLAYERS

#### Students

Bob indicated that “parent engagement is the heart of what we do. If you don’t have that heart, if you don’t have that passion, if you don’t have parents engaging, then a small school like this, you lose its heart.” Returning to teach in a small school, Bob found professional satisfaction in being able to work more directly and closely with parents, staff, and especially students. He made a habit each morning of greeting students at the school gate to ensure they started their day with a positive interaction. The positive relationships he developed with students continued into lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic when they would ring him on Microsoft Teams at 8:45 am if he was 30 seconds late, saying, “You are late, Mr C.” He stated, “It became that I had to be there on time. They were the bell.”

Bob emphasised the importance of student wellbeing. Their social and emotional development was as important as their physical and academic growth. When students returned to schools in Queensland after the first lockdown in April 2020, the school formed a Guard of Honour to welcome them back. Bob said, “I thought it was important that all the students celebrated that we have returned to the site. We are all individuals, but we are part of a community and we’ve survived this, we’ve come through it.”

#### Parents

At School D, parents are viewed as students’ first educators. Bob believes the role of school personnel is “to support the parents, but also, at the same time, educate the parents.” This support extended beyond academic advice to include advice about care and wellbeing. He compared the relationship between the school and parents to “a bilateral agreement” in which, “(parents) can share with us, we share with them.” One way Bob facilitated these relationships was through regular direct personal connections: “The beauty of this place is that I can go down to the car park and I can have a discussion, ‘Okay, can we talk about what happened today? This is my observation. Can we keep an eye on it?’” When asked during his interview about the strategy of being visible and easily accessible to parents (e.g., “going down to the car park”), Bob responded:

You have to be. I believe principals need to be out there. And let’s face it, if there’s anything happening in the car park, the principals are the first to know about it and probably the first to act upon it. So you’ve got to be proactive.

According to Bob, achieving bilateral agreement is possible if positive home-school relationships have been established and are ongoing.

School D used purposeful communication strategies to connect parents with their child’s learning. Bob relayed that these were enacted before the start of each school year and at the end of each school term. At the beginning of the year, he provided students and parents with a point of reflection by sending them photographs (with no words) of activities from the previous term or whole year to invoke positive memories of learning. During the COVID-19 lockdown different platforms and channels were used to contact parents depending on the year level: Microsoft Teams was used with Year 3-6 parents, while Skype and Microsoft teams and telephone were used with P-Year 2 parents.

The school also hosted community engagement nights to provide multiple opportunities for positive interactions among school community members. These events maximised two-way transmission of information. At the parent information night at the beginning of each year, parents, teachers, and students were invited to sit in a circle, communicate, and generally get to know each other—which Bob felt set the scene for what School D was trying to establish; namely, a sense of community. He commented:

And I think just walking up to another person and saying, ‘Hey Roy, how are you today?’ That’s the community that I would like to see develop and engage with; that parents can know each other—they know each other by sight and then they can say their first names. That’s how it works, I think.

Bob reported that social media platforms such as Facebook were used to facilitate communication with parents and the school community. During lockdown he used Microsoft Teams to host Town Hall meetings with parents every fortnight to “discuss about how things were going, what they saw at home, was there anything different, and how the kids were travelling.” This was a deliberate wellbeing strategy to “gauge what was happening in the school community and make sure everyone was travelling really well.” Bob also expressed a desire to learn from others about how to use social media more effectively. During his interview he described his social media use as “experimental”, sharing that he recently had created an online newsletter that resembled a PowerPoint slide show with an embedded video. He received positive feedback about the video message and online newsletter, but needed more time to determine the possible impact of this new style of communication.

## Teachers

Bob worked proactively with staff to engage parents and community. He remarked on the approach he adopted: "My strongest belief is that teaching has been good to me. I want to make sure that I give back." This approach saw Bob partner closely with a local university. Preservice teachers from the university often completed their professional internships at School D. Bob realised that subsequently hiring past interns allowed him to build effective professional teams for engaging parents. Speaking about these new staff, he commented, "I've mentored them... These were people that I know that we can build a team with." For Bob, being able to work in a team meant:

...being able to get on with people, I suppose, having the flexibility, being open to different ideas, wanting to have a go, not saying 'no' initially, but saying, 'Yeah, okay. Give me more information. I can certainly have a go at it.'

At the same time, he stressed:

And it (parent engagement) needs to be a foundation practice. If you bring a person into the school who cannot work in a team, who cannot actually work with parents, then you're cutting off your nose. It really needs to be the Earth of what you do.

Bob thus communicated clear expectations to new staff about working with parents. He noted, "I've actually said to them, 'Okay, you'll be standing at the gate. You'll be greeting the parents and the kids every day.'" He concluded, "So, I suppose the teachers of this school know that parent engagement is one of the pillars that we work on."

## SCHOOL LEARNING

### Classrooms

The teachers at School D planned learning and teaching activities collectively. Ways to actively engage parents in their child's learning comprised an express aspect of this joint planning. At the time of his interview, Bob's teaching team was planning themed learning around the topic of community. They considered parent occupations and experts from the broader community as possible resources on which they might draw to enhance student learning and teaching about a topic. Inviting parents into the classroom to talk about their different occupations (e.g., a geneticist or a transport department worker), would expose students to opportunities to: gain new knowledge; learn vocabulary and metalanguage associated with different occupations; extend their networks of connections with others; and expand their horizons about future possibilities for study and work. Bob's approach to engaging parents and the community in the curriculum also aligned with the futures-focused orientation he adopted, which had strengthened through the COVID-19 experience. He explained:

These students are going to be working at 2030... so I want to make sure they're prepared for whatever they encounter. And that's not only on the academic side, but also on that resilience side. That's what COVID-19 really has stressed for me. They need to have that resilience.

Planning for learning and teaching also included possible celebrations of classroom learning. Bob described an example of the school's Science Fairs held in the past where students who had conducted their own science-based inquiry at home, subsequently presented their investigations to a round circle of parents at school. The parents were invited to interrogate the students about their work. Bob commented on how the parents would ask questions that even he had not thought of asking. He felt that allowing the students to develop an inquiry around their interests, empowered their learning. He proffered that inviting active parent participation in the Science Fair deepened this learning by enabling the students to "tap into a body of knowledge that was present in the community." At the same time, Bob suggested the parents' participation enhanced student wellbeing by allowing them to "learn as part of a community."

### Curriculum

The multi-age structure of School D allowed for flexible curriculum provision, with students working to the year level content relevant to their capabilities. Teachers looped with students through some years of their schooling, which helped support their wellbeing and education. According to Bob, for parents, this means, "I know what their child can do and what they can't do." He added, "Then I might have a word to them to say, 'We're moving into fractions. Just be aware we're doing this. So you might see some of these experiences at home.'"

Inquiry learning was adopted at School D. Bob explained that this approach developed knowledge around a basic core question, encouraged authentic learning in real-world contexts, and developed long-term skills for students. No one model of inquiry-based learning was used at the school, but Bob considered his model of inquiry followed Vygotskian principles and foregrounded students' social-emotional learning.

Curriculum initiatives valued and supported the school's cultural diversity. Some students and their parents were born overseas, for example, in Sweden, New Zealand and Germany. Students were encouraged to investigate the stories and history of their family backgrounds. Speaking about his approach to cultural diversity for curriculum enactment, Bob explained, "...I really believe it's important, because we've got such diverseness in our community from where the children come from—the background, the parents—that I don't want to lose that richness." This commitment precipitated the introduction of a Japanese immersion teacher one day a week at the school (P-6). Seven students were fluent in Japanese—two of whom had recently come from Japan. Bob explained that establishing the program maintained the

## CASE STUDY SCHOOL D CONTINUED

cultural heritage of these students, while bringing benefits for other students associated with becoming bilingual (e.g., translanguaging). At the time of his interview, Bob was continuing to work with the parents of one Japanese student to communicate and write to their previous school in Japan. Through this initiative he hoped to establish a sister program with the Japanese school.

### Digital technologies (virtual classrooms)

Digital technologies were valued as a means of supporting curriculum provision at School D, particularly within the Years 3-6 classroom where different programs and apps afforded more flexible student groupings. The school boasted a 1:1 device program which meant every student had their own device. Microsoft Teams was used to create an electronic portfolio for each student to house their work. Bob highlighted the advantage of the portfolio for Year 6 students who could transfer their folder across to high school.

The school used computer apps to support the Japanese program. Teachers also used IXL Maths Online as it gave students immediate feedback. This feature was similarly appreciated by parents as they could readily see what their child was learning.

## SCHOOL CULTURE

### School (vision and values)

Bob described School D's vision colloquially as, "Success with a smile." He said that school personnel believed a community that smiles together can align itself to a common value system and consequently, achieve its goals. The school valued the partnership between students, families, and teachers for its power to create a learning community in which they worked together constructively to enable students to achieve their full potential.

Bob spoke about the importance of the "environment that you create" at school to support student engagement in learning and personal wellbeing. He said, "I want school to be interesting for the students. I don't want them sitting there." This went hand-in-hand with creating a positive climate for students' social and emotional development. Bob stressed, "You've got to get that right, then students will learn; they will enjoy it; and you've got to have a bit of fun with it too."

As previously mentioned, the school hosted community nights to encourage parent engagement. Specific points in the year were earmarked for these events. These included the start of the year (welcome evening), the end of Term 3 (Scary Dance night), and the end of the year (school concert). Bob described how Scary Dance night grew from students at the school several years ago creating their own dance and subsequently inviting parents to dance on the oval to Michael Jackson and Thriller. He added that apple bobbing and hitting piñatas and other games were among the growing number of activities parents and their children enjoyed together on these evenings.

The COVID-19 pandemic saw School D emphasise the importance of building resilience in students. As a result, the school created care packages for families—the first time was during the April 2020 lockdown which coincided with Easter, and then each subsequent term. Bob recalled in his interview how in April, "staff actually dressed up as a bunny and as the parents came around, we actually walked out to their car and handed them their care packages for Easter." He added the gesture of care packages was a tangible way of reaching out to families to say, "We care. We care about you; we care about your family; we care about what's happening; we care about how your children are going."

### Communities

Like many small rural schools, Bob considered School D the "hub" of its community. Bob described the school as having "tentacles", adding "...[it] just has connections upon connections." He provided an example of these connections, saying the school's original location on the Darling Downs meant that some of the students who went to school there were among the young men who completed the long trek from Warwick to Brisbane to enlist in World War I. He explained that the buildings carry the "legacy and memory" of "places of talking and learning" for these men and their descendants. Their association with the school had been documented in stories and photographs to preserve this local and national history for future generations. Speaking about their sacrifice, Bob relayed how each ANZAC Day, "we (the school) remember them and what they did," and it was not unusual for 90 people to "come from everywhere" to attend these ceremonies.

Bob commented that building networks was important, but equally important was the notion of “sustainable networks.” He explained:

Because people go, principals go, but you want those networks to keep on going. And in big schools that’s hard, but in the small schools, I think it’s sustainable. You can go back to people over the period of time and say, ‘Okay, can you come and talk about this or do this?’

Sustainability was possible only if positive relationships were continually built. Bob observed the process was “like a blanket that you weave.”

Bob was also proactive in building new connections between a local university and School D. The partnership the school enjoyed with the university afforded him opportunities to mix with many and different people. He invited guests from the university to speak with students to show them examples of professions to which they might aspire. He also attended university open days and spoke to members of the broader community to find out how they might contribute to the students’ learning and wellbeing.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

When asked in his interview about the strategies and processes he relied on to engage parents, Bob replied simply, “I just go and talk to people.” Positive relationships were paramount to engaging parents and community members at School D. Creativity, collaboration, communication and care were fundamental to a positive school climate for successful student learning and wellbeing.

# Case study school E

## INTRODUCTION

Established in the early 1980s, School E introduced distance education less than a decade later at the beginning of the 1990s. School E moved to its present location in the late 1990s and by the turn of the Century had experienced rapid student enrolment growth. This precipitated an expansion of School E to include all year levels (i.e., Preparatory Year to Year 12) by 2006.

At the time of his interview, school Principal, Mr Trevor Johnson, had been in the role for two and a half years. He had previously taught in several rural schools across western and northern Queensland. Trevor brought a background in business and theology to education which afforded him a wide and varied repertoire of knowledge and skills on which to draw to drive contemporary change at School E.

## CONTEXT

School E is a large co-educational school in regional Queensland catering for students from Preparatory Year (Prep) to Year 12. The school is split into two sections—a Day School (approximately 840 students) and a large Distance Education school (approximately 700 students). The Day School is located in a southern Queensland regional city. The Distance Education School involves online learning for international as well as Australian-based students. The school caters for a diverse clientele—ranging from rural farming families to parents working in a variety of professions. Geographically the school serves families from towns north, west and south which are between 35 minutes and an hour's drive away.

Trevor's interest in joining the research was piqued because he said parent engagement was "an area we (the school) really needed to do better in." He wondered how this might be achieved when "life's so fast-paced" and "people are so time poor." Through improved understanding of parent engagement and ways successful parent-school partnerships can be established, Trevor believed students were "going to have much better outcomes and be much better equipped for life." He stated that he expressed this belief to staff when he spoke about the "moral imperative of what we do." Trevor thus recognised that including parents in the education process of their child needed to be "integrated in every way"—not separated from—the work of schools.



## FINDINGS

Data analysis used a framework developed by Willis et al. (2021b) which extends Schwab's (1973) notion of commonplaces when planning curriculum. This case study presents descriptive findings of the project using the commonplaces framework to discuss a curriculum of parent engagement at School E under three broad headings: key players (students, parent and teachers); school learning (classrooms, curriculum and digital technologies); and school culture (schools and communities).

## KEY PLAYERS

### Students

During his interview, Trevor highlighted the affinity between distance education and the notion of engaging parents in their child's learning and wellbeing. He explained:

Because, in a lot of ways, the teachers [involved] are not just educating the children, but they're scaffolding the supervisor, which is the parent. So, I would say in distance education there's a much higher level of parent engagement because the parent is actively supervising the child's education.

There were different distance education options (e.g., purely online; blended = booklets + online). Parents who chose the blended option, not only had access to specially-prepared booklets to support their child's at-home learning, but also opportunities to join up to seven online curriculum sessions a week with their child if they wished. The distance education teachers developed a schedule for making phone calls to parents and students. Trevor reported that emails, despite being time consuming, were preferred to phone calls as a means of communication between teachers and parents. Both of these established lines of communication with families and ensured that teachers: engaged frequently with parents and students about aspects of learning; answered parent inquiries quickly; and were comfortable checking with

parents on a student's wellbeing, especially if they missed an online session unexpectedly.

Activity Days were another feature of distance education which encouraged parent engagement. Held in towns around Queensland, School E ran these days throughout the year for distance education students and their families. Trevor remarked how these opportunities "are just the best times in education because you've got all the key stakeholders together: you've got your teachers, you've got your students, you've got your parents." The nature and purpose of Activity Days and the dynamic of teachers, students and parents interacting online mostly daily meant distance education enabled possibilities of parent engagement in their child's learning and wellbeing in unique ways.

### Parents

In his interview, Trevor indicated that more engagement of parents onsite—including classrooms—was among his future aims. He saw the development of a volunteer registry to manage parent inductions to working with students and maintain a record of parents' interests and expertise as an important strategy to operationalise this aim. He considered the particular skills and experiences of families at School E—many of whom identified as traditional and/or hobby farmers, engineers, manufacturers, and hospitality workers—represented a vital resource to boost student learning and wellbeing that the school could tap into.

Trevor reported that parent engagement was strongest in the Middle School where the students were involved in project-based learning. These projects culminated in a Showcase event which parents and community members attended in high numbers. Teachers invited parents and community members with knowledge and skills relevant to each project (e.g., town planner, local council member, real estate agent) to provide feedback to the students. Trevor commented on the project-based learning Showcase, "I must admit, we

## CASE STUDY SCHOOL E CONTINUED

do multiple Showcase events here, and that one gets the biggest parent participation rates. So, potentially they have been involved in the background. They probably want to see where that project's landed." Trevor thus speculated that since students collaborated in small groups on their projects over many weeks, parents' awareness of their child's project, and likely involvement at home, explained the high level of parent interest in, and excitement about, seeing the completed projects at these Showcase events.

### Teachers

Apart from the work of teachers in distance education and project-based learning, Trevor spoke positively in his interview about the parent engagement potential of the "walkthrough culture" emerging at School E. He observed that previously staff saw teaching as "quite a private practice where, 'This is my room, you don't need to come in.'" Walkthroughs were not about "performance management," but rather a whole-staff strategy in which time was dedicated and structures were created to nurture a "safe environment" for teachers to examine their professional practice together with supportive colleagues. These opportunities allowed teachers to observe one another in their classrooms and offer feedback to improve the effectiveness of teaching strategies. At the same time, heads of faculty received coaching about this approach and Trevor deliberately modelled for staff ways of operating more openly with parents and the school community (e.g., various outreach initiatives). This investment in teachers' professional learning was valuable from a parent engagement perspective. Trevor enumerated:

Because that's really what I'm wanting them (teachers) to do with our families, is to be deliberate about engaging with them. It's okay to have the front gate to the school open. So really, it's about us now needing to take that next step in relation to who else can come into the room.

Although Trevor observed that teachers who taught "practical subject areas" such as dance commonly invited parents into their classrooms, School E was now poised to explore how to better engage parents in their child's learning and wellbeing across the school.

## SCHOOL LEARNING

### Classrooms

New and renovated buildings at School E reflected the open, transparent approach to teaching (described above) that the leadership team promoted. Trevor described the school's newest building: "It's been built double storey, six general learning areas, and two breakout spaces—all with the glass doors—so you (teachers) can open the whole thing up and team teach." He added that state-of-the-art audio equipment, including the use of teacher-worn microphones, and multiple connected screens, created "very flexible learning arrangements." Trevor agreed that inviting parents and community members to coteach with teachers in these

open classrooms was a logical next step in School E's parent engagement journey.

### Curriculum

During his interview, Trevor similarly iterated that parent engagement in the curriculum was still developing. Parents were invited to provide feedback from a user's perspective on aspects of the functionality (e.g., broken links to websites) or layout of materials, or the quality of education products (e.g., booklets used in distance education). Trevor considered project-based learning (discussed above) in the Middle School the closest example of parent engagement in the curriculum. The nature of these projects and their scope (completed projects required teaching and assessment across multiple integrated curriculum areas) led him to "visualise what (referring to parent engagement at home) must be taking place during those projects." Inviting parents to use their various parent knowledges (Pushor, 2018) to engage in their child's learning during project-based learning (i.e., by giving them permission to play more visible roles) presented an obvious launching pad to reveal and strengthen opportunities for parents to engage in the curriculum at School E.

### Digital technologies (virtual classrooms)

Virtual classrooms were a strong feature in its distance education offering. This offering came into its own during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. When asked about how School E managed during the first lockdown in April that year, Trevor responded:

You could nearly say, 'What COVID-19?' Because straightaway, as soon as we got a whiff that there was something happening globally, I reached out to the local disaster coordinator and got him and the key stakeholders together, so he could brief us on managing disaster and the process that we needed to be thinking about. So we got on it really early, and we were able to get our emergency planning done.

The rest of it was a piece of cake. I just went down to the print dispatch, because we've got our distance education product, and said, 'Print Prep through to Year 5'—10 weeks' worth of learning, because we didn't know how long we were going to be shut for. We sent the booklets home to every one of our families in Prep through to Year 5—the students all went home with the booklet, with the pack. So they had 10 weeks' worth of material. Each booklet has answer guides, it has the parent handbook. So, everything mums and dads needed was there...

In our high school, we were already online... So the online space was already happening. All we needed to do was a little shift in middle school to put more of it online, because we already offered a blended model.

When further asked about how teachers engaged with parents during the lockdown, Trevor observed:

People (parents) were working from home, so they had capacity, they had time. Especially if you were one of the Prep to Year 6s (teachers), the heavy lifting was done. So the only thing they needed to do was to engage with their families. So they did that pretty much like they do in distance education: having lessons daily, phone calls for people who we felt were on the fringe. And our chaplain and guidance officer had a program for those students who, on campus, required scaffolding. So, that (referring to student and family wellbeing) was all taken care of that way.

Opportunities for parents to engage in student learning and wellbeing thus increased during the lockdown given School E's capacity to shift quickly to online learning for all its students and changed ways of working which strengthened teacher-parent connections.

## SCHOOL CULTURE

### School (vision and values)

When Trevor was asked about the school's vision and values statement—developed during his time as principal and in collaboration with staff and an external consultant—he responded that, "Being a Christian school [it was] wrapped around one scripture: 'Well done, good and faithful servant (Matthew 25:21).'" Trevor explained that: well represented "excellence"; done connoted "teamwork"; and faithful servant was about "servanthood". Servanthood, Trevor elaborated, "was about anything we do, it's for the betterment of the whole, rather than individual pursuit." Ultimately the verse was captured in five single words: Excellence, Teamwork, Respect, Faith and Community. These words provided a simple yet powerful framework. Trevor commented:

The uptake of this (referring to the framework) has been incredible. When you go to assemblies, the students have really embraced it. The assistant principal has done a tremendous job in keeping that upfront. At any meeting, we start with that values framework.

Trevor felt the framework had been positively received by the school because inwardly it says, "This is our agreement here as a community"; and outwardly it communicates, "This is what our school stands for and this is what we're about." The framework provided a helpful reference point for the school to align its values, behaviours and actions. It follows that this will prove valuable and useful for helping shape new, and improving existing, parent engagement initiatives.

## Communities

When Trevor spoke in his interview about his role, he opined, "I would say, as a principal, my role is largely CEO (Chief Executive Officer) now." He adopted a strong outward-looking stance (Willis et al., 2021b) in seeking to connect with industry in the community. This included the state government through its regular community forums which invited community members to highlight issues of concern or of local import directly with the premier and ministers of state. Trevor described how participation in these forums meant he created connections that afforded him "next level" community engagement. Trevor also organised tours with groups of principals to visit potential industry partners. He explained that these were in response to continued calls from "Industry telling us (schools) we need [to graduate students with] 21st Century skills." Trevor commented that his experiences in connecting with government and industry provided a platform on which to build when furthering connections with families.

Trevor also outlined his approach to engaging the community and families using social media, saying, "I've deliberately increased that budget, got the right people in there." He relayed how parent engagement on Facebook had increased from about 300 followers to several thousand. He pronounced, "It was off the charts completely." Trevor identified that, "understanding our demographic," was critical to success in terms of, "catching the community's attention," and developing, "high quality [social media] posts." He asserted that recognising the characteristics of parents of students at the school—now and in the future—held the key to effective social media use.

Trevor also embraced an outward-looking approach to engaging parents and community members around the culture of Showcase events that already existed at the school. These events included a Visual Arts Showcase, Musical Showcase, and Junior School Showcase. He described the leadership team's approach to the newest building at the school, saying it was:

...strategically designed so that now all those showcasings are going to happen on the one night; so, all the curriculum areas... [it is] deliberately set up, so hospitality is next to Art; the shape of the building and the way it goes out to an outdoor performance area.

## CASE STUDY SCHOOL E CONTINUED

Trevor continued:

So when we do the next one (Showcase), we will probably be doing most of them on the one night. And parents, again, they're time poor. And if they're coming from [an hour away], they don't want to come six different nights. And not only that, I'm actually thinking of spinning that, and not just as a Showcase. I'm actually going to turn that into an open evening and invite community members to come. So that's going to be the 'wow' factor, when you connect from the Middle School project-based learning and you're seeing musicians and you're seeing hospitality people and you're seeing the Art and you're seeing the Drama.

Trevor concluded that, "You've just got to be clever about this (referring to engaging parents and the community through the Showcase events), so I'm developing the physical resources that facilitate it."

## CONCLUSIONS

During his interview, Trevor reflected on the meaning of parent engagement at School E, saying:

I guess parent engagement would be, to me, probably parents playing an active role in the education of their child. And that doesn't necessarily mean them being here onsite, but being a participant with us in that child's educational journey, is what I probably see engagement as.

School E is on a journey to achieve parent engagement. Its activities and initiatives are variously located on the parent involvement-engagement continuum (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). Considerations around distance education, classroom and building design, Showcase events, government and industry connections, and social media evidence a futures-focused approach to this work. Seeing these initiatives as opportunities to bring parents closer to their child's learning in ways that meld parents' and teachers' knowledges together (Pushor, 2018; Willis, 2013) to enhance student learning and wellbeing will further School E's journey along the involvement-engagement continuum.

# Case study school F



## INTRODUCTION

Established for approximately 40 years, School F is a dual-campus, faith-based school in a city in northern Queensland. One campus (F-1) enrolls students from Kindergarten to Year 12, while a second campus (F-2) enrolls students from Kindergarten to Year 6. The F-1 campus is split into two smaller school campuses—a K-6 Primary campus and a 7-12 Secondary campus.

This case study was developed after an interview with the researchers in which two leaders from School F-1's Primary campus participated: Mr James Gordon—Head of Primary School and Ms Tricia Barker—P-6 Coordinator and Parent Liaison as well as a teacher in an upper primary class.

James had enjoyed a long career in teaching. He commenced in Melbourne, working in mostly lower socio-economic schools. He moved into deputy principal and acting principal roles at different schools in Victoria where he also became involved in introducing information technology (IT) programs into classrooms.

Lately, James was approached by School F's principal to implement IT and other programs. He observed that what he initially thought would be 12-months leave from his previous school, "turned into a two-year process—because trying to implement something that's sustainable over one year takes longer." James was in his third year at School F and, throughout his teaching career, had learnt to adopt an inquiry approach to teaching and a research approach to the integration of IT in schools.

Tricia also commenced her teaching career in Victoria. She worked in government schools for over 30 years—teaching all year levels. Her roles involved student wellbeing, working as a numeracy coach, and acting as assistant principal. The move to School F was her first time of working in an independent school. Tricia had completed her Master of Education and had participated in several previous research projects.

### CONTEXT

The F-1 Primary campus is located in a socially and culturally diverse community which serves larger Indigenous Australian, Indian, and Chinese communities as well as smaller communities such as Papua New Guinean (PNG) families. James observed that the school's population "can be very transient—people move in and out all the time." He added that many students went to "quite a few different schools throughout their primary years."

James nominated growth in student numbers as having exacerbated the current complexities School F faced with parent engagement. Apart from the obvious challenges and complications created by social and cultural diversity—which included differences in parent occupations (e.g., brain surgeons, kebab shop owners, pilots, painters, World Bank employees, and dock workers) and cultural practices (e.g., some PNG students lived with adult siblings or relatives in Australia)—they elaborated that traditional parent involvement practices in schools sometimes also posed "a stumbling block" to parent engagement.

When asked why they volunteered to participate in the study, James and Tricia indicated that building effective relationships was a key focus in school decision-making. The school's student wellbeing program had witnessed the development of students in Years 3 to 6 building relationships with other students across year levels. The next step for the school was to involve parents more in this cross-year-level learning. Since parent engagement was "on the radar now," especially in light of the early years literacy project (see section on Teachers below), James indicated that the opportunity to participate in the parent engagement research was timely.

### FINDINGS

Data analysis used a framework developed by Willis et al. (2021b) which extends Schwab's (1973) notion of commonplaces when planning curriculum. This case study presents descriptive findings of the project using the commonplaces framework to discuss a curriculum of parent engagement at School F under three broad headings: key players (students, parent and teachers); school learning (classrooms, curriculum and digital technologies); and school culture (schools and communities).

### KEY PLAYERS

#### Students

James and Tricia worked closely to engage parents in School F-1 Primary. James noted that Tricia's pastoral care role—which included student welfare and behaviour management—established a "sort of layer" between him and the students. He added, "you don't want to make students panic, make them worry, make parents worry, when they come to the head of the junior school, so we've layered it." Creating a dedicated role for student wellbeing ensured

ready access to leadership for students, parents, and teachers. Tricia affirmed that students and parents saw her "as a familiar face." In the mornings both she and James were at "the school gate" or "out in the courtyard area welcoming students and parents into the school." She continued, "So, they know me. If James is away, then it's me, I'm their contact." Given the interchangeability in the way they enacted their roles, students and parents saw James and Tricia as equally approachable.

The school's wellbeing program for Years 3 to 6 (see Context section above) focused on holistic education to promote the whole child—social, emotional and academic. Teachers planned activities in monthly cycles with each week connecting to the Australian Curriculum. At the same time, they created safe, supportive learning environments which emphasised the notion of care and the importance of positive relationships. James credited the program for one reason why the school community successfully navigated the challenges of the pandemic, saying: "... when COVID-19 hit, our students were supporting each other—even online. Our parents were supporting each other, our teachers were supporting our parents. We had already built this strong relationship from the program..."

The structure of the wellbeing program meant that every student from Years 3 to 6 knew every other student and they each addressed one another by name in the playground. In moving to secondary school, James considered these connections would ease anxiety for Year 6 students—given they should have met students in Years 7 to 10 before. He explained:

In the program, every teacher throughout the year, actually teaches everything... So on yard duty, every student in Year 3 to 6, which is a separate playground, can name the teacher, knows the teacher, has been taught by the teacher.

School F-1 Primary's wellbeing program created a clear, strong focus on positive relationships through quality, personal, caring connections with all students and all teachers—the benefits of which also flowed to families and the wider school community.

#### Parents

Speaking about the strategy of personally welcoming students and parents into the school in the morning and farewelling them each afternoon (see above), James commented that, "You'd be surprised how many parents come [and say], 'Oh James, can I have a quick word with you about something?'" He said this allowed them to "troubleshoot" together whatever issues parents might raise. This was among several strategies James said were designed to communicate that they (school leaders and staff) were "always there and available to parents."

When James and Tricia first started at School F they discovered they shared the view that stronger partnerships between school and home were more likely to produce better student learning and wellbeing outcomes. They approached senior teachers on staff to talk about their ideas for better parent engagement. They starting the process of increasing parent-student-teacher-community engagement by asking, “Who are going to be our champions?” and recognised the need to “formulate a plan.” James noted, “We started to grow very slowly, we started to sow seeds.” Their approach saw the creation of a parent community group—a group that was open to all parents and met up to four times a term. Regular attendees numbered around 25 parents.

The advent and subsequent success of this group allowed James to develop positive relationships with the parents involved. He observed that these relationships were built through his “open door policy.” He explained that in the first year the parents expressed many concerns which led to important changes in the school’s administration processes. He declared he now enjoyed an “honest, open, but trusted position” with the parents, and the parent community group meetings ran more smoothly.

James shared how the school’s parent-led coding and robotic program—that included the teachers—stemmed from one parent community group conversation. He recalled saying: “Oh, I’d love to do a coding and robotics program, but I need to upskill our teachers. Who knows more about it?” He was surprised when one parent replied, “Oh, I’ve actually done a Masters in AI (Artificial Intelligence). I’d love to be involved.”

James elaborated on the cogenerative processes—from talking about the initiative at that first meeting, to disseminating the information on Facebook, to fundraising for the program, to celebrating its success. James said, “And now we run this amazing coding and robotics program in and outside of school hours.”

James and Tricia relayed how initiatives in other areas of the school curriculum, such as the school’s native garden project, had similarly taken hold. James iterated that key to the success of these ventures was not only having “all the students involved,” but importantly, “giving ownership out to the students and the parents and being open and confident enough to say, “You can come into the school and have a say.”

James further iterated that the parent community group’s success was attributable to its organic structure. Although everyone signed in and emails were recorded, he remarked, “It’s not a formal meeting [with minutes and] business arising.” For example, at the end of each meeting, James explained it was his practice to say:

‘This is what we did speak about,’ and then I’ll say, ‘Did I miss anything or do you want to put anything else?’ I’ll send that out to the group and then I’ll do a little bit of a report and put it in my newsletter to the whole

community. And then, again, invite anyone else who would like to come... [He concluded that] it’s pretty open. Every now and again I do have to bring them (referring to the parent group) back and say, ‘This group is about community building, so if you want to talk to me about school uniforms or something, or you couldn’t buy socks at the uniform shop, come and see me personally.’

## Teachers

James and Tricia saw the phonetics program they were running in the early years as the start of engaging parents in the curriculum. James indicated that parent engagement sat on “a bit of a scale, you’ve got involvement at one end and engagement at the other.” He further explained:

You can be the timekeeper at the carnival, that’s involvement...What we see as engagement [is], we want to be able to skill up our parents to actually teach phonetics first, mention [phonetics] when they’re reading with their child at home, and that’s what we see as engagement.

James and Tricia were therefore committed to approaches which enabled parents to actively participate in their child’s learning in-the-moment at home. James elaborated that this approach encouraged “feedback from the parent to the teacher and the teacher to the parent, especially when they can actually dialogue on how they taught phonetics, what (their child) picked up in decoding.” The focus on the early years was motivated by several factors including: a national focus on teaching reading that included using phonics and the concomitant availability of suitable resources which the school had purchased; increased growth in the Prep classes at School F-1 Primary (from 20 students a few years ago to predicted enrolments of three classes); increased cultural diversity among parents at the school; the current ISQ project on parent engagement at the school; and the school’s need to provide what they considered was “authentic” support to “busy” parents.

James observed that the complexity of factors affecting opportunities and possibilities of parent engagement at School F-1 Primary saw the leadership team work to “get our teachers to understand [their context] before they tried to say, ‘This is what we want you to do at home,’ because we didn’t want to build in failure for our parents.”

Part of helping the teachers understand their context involved establishing a shared view of what was unique about being a teacher in the F-1 Primary campus team. This process commenced with James asking, “What does it mean to be a teacher at this school? What’s so important about it? Why are we different than the local primary school down the road?” His approach was not about declaring: “This is how you can be an engaged teacher, [but rather] about how we put these teachers into the mindset of becoming their own engaged teachers.”

## CASE STUDY SCHOOL F CONTINUED

At every staff meeting, James used a Word Cloud (Wordle) created by the teachers to represent who they were as a teacher at F-1 Primary campus is (e.g., “caring and dedicated and striving to get the best out of students”) and gave examples to illustrate their words in practice. He iterated the approach was about “engaging the teachers by setting the context for them to be engaged.”

James reported the result of more engaged teachers was that when the phonetics program began, teachers had “upskilled.” They decided to adopt a two-pronged approach. This involved first creating online modules, “so parents can complete the modules, come into the classroom, and talk to the teacher about them.” Second, they wanted to simulate a Prep class where “they (parents) come in and actually, using each other as students and teachers, practise on each other how to effectively do the reading process.”

To promote the initiative, James indicated the marketing team was “ready to go with videoing and interviewing” and that the school hoped to [re]use these resources to show new parents. He also hoped to continue this kind of initiative—building on what had gone before—as students moved through the school. In the case of the phonetics program, James considered teachers could use the resources they created to up-skill Years 1 and 2 parents and for developing a bridging program for parents and students coming into the school who may have missed certain aspects of phonetics. The idea was to target those students, but also to “empower the parents, support the parents, resource the parents, to double up on skill-building with the students.”

### SCHOOL LEARNING

#### Classrooms

Parents came into School F-1 Primary to work with teachers and run lessons with them in the classroom at lunchtimes. One mentioned earlier (see above—Parents) was the coding and robotics program which essentially ran as two programs—one for Prep to Year 2 students and the other for Year 3 to Year 6 students. One parent taught French to students in the French Club. Another group of parents ran a club where they brought in their sewing machines, laid out patterns, and made clothes and pencil cases with the students. James added, “It’s a process. They (referring to the parents and teachers involved) actually come up with, ‘This is what we’re doing this term.’ So, it’s skill building with the students.” James and Tricia conducted a parent survey which yielded detailed information about what parents said they wanted and needed for their children. The survey data, together with the success of the clubs, provided the impetus for James and Tricia to say, “You know what? We can actually move onto something a bit bigger here, because our parents are willing.” Parents coteaching with teachers ultimately paved the way for the phonetics program described earlier.

Teachers at the F-1 Primary campus encouraged two-way communication with parents using the Seesaw app or email. This communication was not only around personal student information (e.g., Johnny had a bad night or parents not understanding some aspect of homework), but foregrounded student classroom learning (e.g., inquiry learning). Tricia described how she sent home questions to encourage parent-student discussions. James outlined the school-wide practice of “a no-teaching-time when parents can come into the classroom” from 8:15am to 8:30am each day. Tricia elaborated that this is the time when teachers “will be in the classroom and available.”

#### Curriculum

James and Tricia described their inquiry curriculum journey as a work-in-progress. Tricia indicated that when she arrived at School F, her experience of working in schools with a Reggio Emilia philosophy led her to expect more play-based approaches in the early years and more investigations in the upper year levels. James noted that subsequent professional learning about inquiry curriculum at the F-1 Primary campus saw teachers’ pedagogies shift such that he began to see “very strong elements of both these methodologies in what the teachers did (referring to their planning documents), but it wasn’t quite there.” He felt that, “The teachers still had that mindset of, ‘This is really where I want you to go.’” James encouraged the teachers to keep the “strong elements” of their planning and “grow them more”—ultimately with some good outcomes.

Tricia provided an example in Year 5 where students undertook project-based learning around sustainability which linked to science and the humanities. She said, “Obviously the parents are helping them (referring to students) or supporting them to create models or things like that at home, but they then run an expo and parents are invited to come along.” She elaborated:

The expos are set up in an interactive way. They could be a poster or a model. There might a game that promotes something or they have questions and answers or a quiz. So there’s an interaction that’s created around that display. And the students are working, some individual, but mostly in pairs or three.

The expos of student learning highlighted the collaborations around learning between parents and their child as well as among students, while also called on the parents as active participants in these events.

## Digital technologies (virtual classrooms)

When asked in the interview about digital technologies, James and Tricia spoke about their recent experience of learning@home during the COVID-19 pandemic. They remarked on the number of platforms and channels used at F-1 Primary campus during learning@home. These included different Microsoft products (e.g., Teams), One Note, and Zoom. James iterated that, “a lot of their (referring to students) learning was set up on One Note.” This meant the curriculum was visible to students and parents at all times.

After the COVID-19 learning@home experience, James noted how the teachers insisted that the school’s laptops were no longer suitable. They told him, “We need better laptops.” He explained this was because the students’ skills “far outstripped” the capability of the equipment.

During learning@home, James and Tricia noted the number of parents with whom teachers interacted increased. One reason was the challenge of working with early years students online. Consequently, James told the teachers: “Don’t worry about getting the students into Zoom meetings, get the carer. Whomever the carer is, who’s trying to teach that student whatever you’ve sent home, they’re the person you need to talk to.” This diminished the potentially constant struggle for teachers of students and parents not knowing what to do.

Tricia observed how her increased use of One Note during learning@home had changed her practice. She commented:

Something I’ve noticed with my students this year, I have a girl away today and her mum emailed me to say, ‘Oh, she’ll be home. She’s got a runny nose. But I’ll get her onto One Note and she’ll be working through.’ And she’s (speaking about the parent) even emailed me. And so far, this year, any student that’s been sick, and I’ve had three boys away, have all logged into One Note and followed the classroom routine whilst we’re teaching it at school.

Tricia added that despite telling these parents, “The most important thing [for their child] is getting better... They chose to (speaking about going to One Note). I don’t say, ‘Don’t forget, go on One Note.’ They choose to.”

James commented on the school’s IT journey which had gained speed since the learning@home experience. He described setting up “voluntary sessions at lunchtime for teachers to come in and start playing with a whole lot of different Microsoft products.” Teachers were given credit in the form of professional development hours to satisfy their continuing registration requirements for the Queensland College of Teachers. One significant outcome of this initiative was the increased level of professional sharing and conversation among the teachers. James elaborated that:

We found that comradery developed as well, that wasn’t there before. Because the Year 1 teachers never worked

with the Year 6 teachers. But now they’re saying, ‘Oh no, this Zoom meeting’s not working.’ Someone was there to help them. They started bringing in chocolates and food. It was just this lovely atmosphere of support.

James further noted that, “We had two first-year teachers start last year as well, and they said, ‘We’ve learnt so much and we know everyone so well.’ So the connections were amazing....”

This investment in teacher professional learning not only increased teachers’ IT knowledge and skills for engaging students and parents, but also improved their sense of belonging and wellbeing.

## SCHOOL CULTURE

### School (vision and values)

The school’s four core values—Integrity, Compassion, Perseverance, and Curiosity—were the result of recent work by School F’s leaders and responded to feedback and consultation with teachers through a survey and ongoing discussions with the school community. Ideas from previous frameworks that were no longer relevant, repetitious or had lost their meaning, and therefore potential impact, were ultimately refined to four words which the school considered captured their vision and values simply and clearly.

The initial phase of using the framework comprised a trial of approximately one year. James reported that school leaders asked, “How do we make these values authentic? Not just teachers telling students, ‘You need to show integrity,’ but teachers having the integrity themselves, and parents having integrity.” He described how this process led to other changes:

So some of our policies, of how a parent is expected to conduct themselves on campus, were rewritten with those values in mind. So the parent sits there, ‘Oh, the policy says [such and such].’ Well, think about values. These are our values. That’s why the policy’s written that way. We expect if someone looks a bit different, then you’re not making fun of them. That kind of thing. That’s integrity. If you see someone who’s looking a little bit tired, we’d love you to support them, because that’s compassion.

James described how these values were operationalised in the staffroom with teachers, in the playground with students, and in decision-making and interactions with parents and others.

### Communities

James indicated that School F subscribed strongly to the ideals of service. The school proactively connected with the community through: cleaning up beaches; inviting local environmental groups into the school; participating in creek re-plantings; working with revegetation specialists, marine biologists, horticulturalists, and the council; visiting old people's homes; and sponsoring YAPS—which is about finding homes for lost dogs.

James also described the challenges the school experienced in his first year of working there, saying, "Unfortunately, our local community is actually probably a little ostracised from us." As a result, the school had recently taken a different approach—creating a caring garden. The parents were invited to work with the school to build the garden and students now grow cherry tomatoes, strawberries, lettuces and other vegetables, which families are welcome to enjoy at any time. This strategy had increased the sense of belonging for students and families at the school.

### CONCLUSIONS

From their experience in schools, James and Tricia recognised that stronger school-home partnerships could improve student learning and wellbeing outcomes. They adopted an incremental approach to building a culture of sustainable parent engagement at F-1 Primary campus, starting with early adopters (i.e., parent engagement champions) and purposefully widening these connections (e.g., with parents and the broader school community) using many different forms of communication as levels of comfort grew. Helping teachers delineate their unique identity in the context of the school saw them become more engaged professionally and upskill in different areas of the curriculum. There was an emphasis on cogenerative processes as evidenced by the parent community group's processes and examples of teachers coteaching with parents.



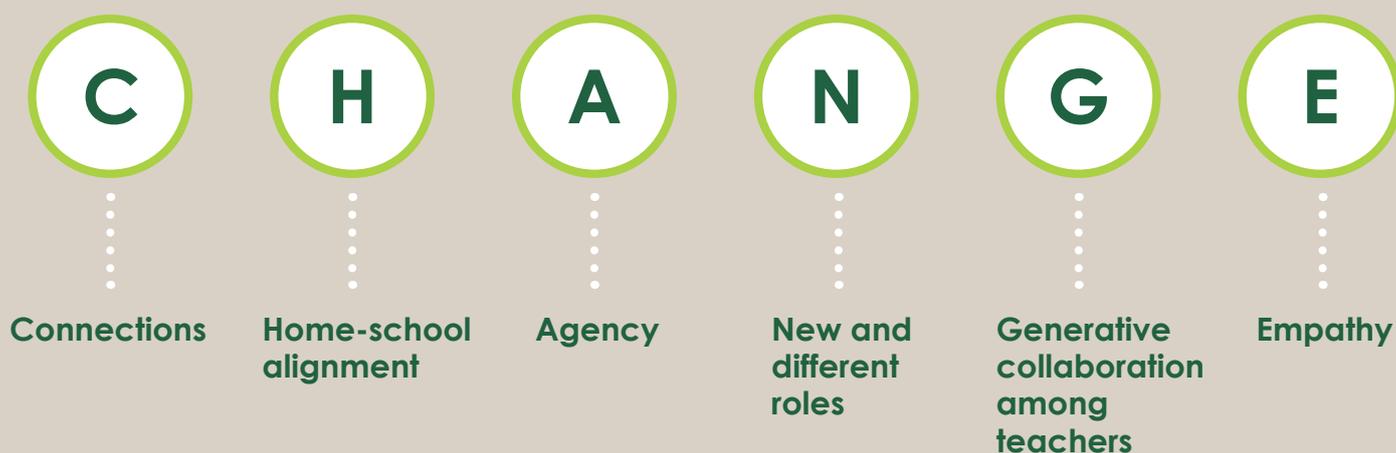
# Phase 2: Classroom teacher case studies

Two schools that participated in Phase 1 also participated in Phase 2. This phase was an intensive nine-month (March to November 2021) cycle of collaboration with the case study teachers to innovate on an existing inquiry project to better align it with the parent engagement agenda. The researchers selected the schools because they each afforded opportunities and possibilities for rich data collection on parent engagement and their geographic locations ensured travel was possible despite COVID-19 restrictions. Four teachers (one of whom was also a school leader) from School A and two teachers from School B participated in two professional learning days (9:00am to 3:00pm) held separately at the beginning of Phase 2. During these days, the teachers and researchers worked cogeneratively to reach shared understandings of: parent engagement, collaborative ways of working, inquiry curriculum approaches, and the affordances of digital platforms and channels for engaging students and parents in aspects of the curriculum (see Willis et al., 2021a). As part of this work, each teacher was supported to re-envision an existing inquiry project using the C-H-A-N-G-E framework to plan for parent engagement. Ultimately, four teachers and one inquiry project each are included in this report: Classroom Teacher 1 – Year 12 Philosophy; Classroom Teacher 2 – Year 8 Food Chemistry; Classroom Teacher 3 – Year 7 Human Physiology; and Classroom Teacher 4 – Year 5 Author Study.

Data were collected using cogenerative dialogues among the teachers and researchers on the professional learning days. Cogenerative dialogues in this research describe purposefully-designed social spaces to encourage substantive conversations, respectful interactions, and open dispositions toward learning from others about parent engagement (Willis, 2013, 2016). Data were also collected using mini-cogenerative dialogues (mini-gens) (Willis, 2013) conducted weekly throughout the research. Mini-gens involved one researcher and one teacher talking together for 10 to 15 minutes by phone or using Microsoft Teams about an EPIC inquiry project. These conversations were audio and/or video recorded and transcribed verbatim. (See Appendix 1 for full data collection and research activities tables.)

These mini-gens afforded teachers: time to discuss their progress in terms of how plans for engaging parents were unfolding; points of reflection on parent engagement in their child's learning; and opportunities to explore ideas and initiatives for engaging parents in coming weeks. At the same time, mini-gens allowed the teachers and researchers to stay in constant contact—building trusting, respectful relationships and providing support for one another (e.g., the researchers offered feedback and suggestions to the teachers, while the teachers helped the researchers better understand the nuances of engaging parents in their context).

Once available, Microsoft Teams recordings were shared immediately, so members of the research team not involved in the actual data capture could listen and watch the conversations in next-to-real-time. This rapid sharing facilitated early data analysis and metalogues (conversations about cogenerative dialogues) (Willis & Exley, 2021; Willis et al., 2018) among the research team (Linda, Beryl and Narelle) which deepened understanding about what may be happening (and why) as teachers engaged parents in their child's learning and wellbeing.



Classroom teacher data were analysed and presented using the C-H-A-N-G-E framework for parent engagement (Willis & Exley, 2020). C-H-A-N-G-E is an acronym for key concepts for engaging parents in their child’s learning and wellbeing which emerged out of secondary data analysis (e.g., school stories) collected from ISQ member schools during learning@home in 2020 (Willis & Exley, 2020). The concepts in the framework are by no means new or definitive, but together provide a strong structure for examining the philosophies, pedagogies, and practices of contemporary parent engagement. The six components of the C-H-A-N-G-E framework should be conceived in constant motion as reflects the iterative and overlapping nature of the concepts and processes that underpin them.

**The concepts represented by each letter of the acronym are briefly explained below.**

### **C**onnections

is about contact and communication to create open, trusting, equitable relationships between home and school. It implicates the necessity for new and emerging digital platforms and channels as forms of communication with parents and students.

### **H**ome-school alignment

relates to creating alignment between learning at home and school.

### **A**gency

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.

### **N**ew and different roles for parents

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.

### **G**enerative collaboration among teachers

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.

### **E**mpathy

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.

The four classroom teacher case studies which follow provide richly-detailed descriptive findings from Phase 2. Together they provide many and varied examples of how parent engagement may be realised in schools and the opportunities, challenges and complexities involved.

# Classroom teacher 1

## School A – Year 12

### Philosophy

#### INTRODUCTION

The first teacher case study features Dana Wilson who taught a three-week Year 12 philosophy class at School A. Dana was also the principal of School A (see Case Study School A). Data for this teacher case study were collected initially from Dana over two days of intensive professional learning as she planned an inquiry project for the class. Further data were collected from: separate semi-formal interviews with Dana and a Year 12 parent; weekly online or phone mini-cogenerative dialogues (mini-gens) (Willis, 2013); email communication; and classroom and school artefacts such as planning documents and photographs. The data collection period was from late May until mid-August 2021.

The Year 12 parent, Vidya Stelios, who provided interview data for this teacher case study, described a long association with School A and similar schools. She embraced School A's philosophy and practice of actively involving parents in the school community and saw the research project as a way of contributing more directly to her daughter's classroom learning. Vidya was particularly interested in the topic of philosophy to understand how her daughter analysed and evaluated different life philosophies—her own and others—and how, as a teenager, she navigated the complexities of a topic such as philosophy.

#### CONTEXT

School A embraced an inquiry approach to the curriculum which Dana described as “organic” in nature (Professional Learning Day 1). She elaborated about the school's approach, saying, “For us, the inquiry is about children experiencing learning through a whole different range of modalities—through art, movement, sculpture, play, drama, maths, and music” (Professional Learning Day 1). The philosophy and practice of inquiry at School A relied on students exploring the world and gaining understanding through sensory experiences. This holistic, immersive approach fostered deep learning through memorable connections, problem-solving, and purposeful investigations while simultaneously developed qualities such as perseverance and patience (Professional Learning Day 1). Dana remarked, “Today, they (people) want a quick fix—with computer games and TV, everything's this ‘quick fix’. Entertain, entertain, entertain” (Professional Learning Day 1). The school's inquiry approach was thus more about student musing, rather than a-musing students.

Despite School A's nationally and internationally recognised inquiry curriculum approach, parent exit interview data collected in the last year led Dana to question her assumptions about how well the approach was understood and appreciated. Dana and other school leaders subsequently developed a raft of new initiatives, including: an approach to enrolment with more emphasis on the parents' experience of being new at the school; school tours targeted to a new student's year level (rather than a general school tour); inviting parents to demonstration lessons in their child's classroom; filming information events and classroom lessons for parents unable to attend to view later; and a high school expo with classroom/science laboratory walk-throughs for parents. Given the school's current parent engagement focus, Dana, as the school's principal, recognised the research project's timeliness, potential value, and possible long-term benefits. As a teaching principal, the project presented a unique opportunity for



Dana to experience engaging parents to bring them closer to their child’s learning where inquiry and wellbeing were foregrounded.

Dana had taught a Year 12 philosophy inquiry project in the previous year. The project focused on “the evolution of philosophical thought from ancient Greece to modern day—bridging and connecting the past to the present—to why are philosophical thoughts so important for the future, like bioethics, artificial intelligence, and vaccinations” (Professional Learning Day 2). Dana articulated key student inquiry questions to guide the start of the project, such as: “Why do we need to have philosophers today?” and “What is my life philosophy?”, as well as questions to guide the conclusion of the project, such as: “Has my philosophy changed?” and “Were there any critical points or watershed moments during my inquiry?” (Professional Learning Day 2).

## FINDINGS

This first teacher case study is presented using the C-H-A-N-G-E framework for parent engagement (Willis & Exley, 2020). This framework comprises six themes—connections, home-school alignment, agency, new roles, generative collaboration, and empathy—which guided data analysis and the descriptive findings below.

### Connections

In launching the philosophy inquiry project, Dana let the students and parents know how parents could be involved. She described how, “I asked the parents. I said right at the beginning that I wanted to involve them with this inquiry project as it was a perfect opportunity for them to have really interesting dialogue with their child about important contemporary issues” (Final Teacher Interview). Every week and sometimes daily (if she considered it appropriate), Dana contacted the parents personally and/or by email to say what the students would be discussing and doing in class.

Vidya Stelios (see Introduction) was a parent of one of Dana’s Year 12 students. She indicated that parent involvement at School A (e.g., gathering for festivals, craft-making, working bees) was “quite a prominent feature of life as a school family” (Parent Interview). Yet, she noted, Dana’s inquiry project was her “first experience of engagement directly with the curriculum” (Parent Interview). Although it was usual for teachers at School A to provide parents with information about the content of the project and deadlines for assignments and submission guidelines, Dana’s first email to parents was different as it included an invitation for parents to share a quote and describe why it was a part of their personal philosophy of life (Parent Interview). Thinking about her child, Vidya described how this invitation to participate in the inquiry project removed “the pressure or the weight of having to play this teenage [game] of shunning your parents or being embarrassed by them” (Parent Interview). Vidya elaborated, saying, “But this almost gave permission for involvement and that’s a great way to actually draw parents in and then say, ‘This is okay to do’” (Parent Interview).

### Home-school alignment

Dana communicated frequently with the parents to facilitate alignment between home and school learning for the Year 12 students. Vidya identified some of these opportunities as: questions for discussion with her child; interactions with the teacher (face-to-face and virtually using email or Microsoft Teams); invitations to share quotes and resources related to her own philosophy; group sessions for parents; a communal pancake morning; and an opportunity to create a student and parent philosophy journal (Parent Interview). She highlighted regular contact from Dana and the different activities and events she developed as important “touch points” with the curriculum (Parent Interview).

Dana identified numerous examples of how home-school alignment was achieved. One example related to the topic of power and violence. Dana recalled how one parent

commented, “Oh, I’ve got this really great song on YouTube’ and she sent me a clip of Billie Eilish singing the song, Your Power” (Final Teacher Interview). She remarked on the effort the parent put into the email, commenting that the song was, “beautiful, but sad and thoughtful.” Dana copied and pasted the lyrics to use with the students (Final Teacher Interview).

Dana described what happened next:

Because the parent had sent it (the clip) to me, I actually played it to the students and I said, ‘Oh, you know I invited parents to participate in the project, so we were discussing this topic, and one of your parents sent this clip. So let’s watch it.’ And that sparked a really great discussion about power and violence. You know, what’s the difference (between the two)? And when the government resorts to violence, does that mean they’ve lost their power? Does being violent make you powerful or, if you’re violent, or a country is violent, is it because their power has slipped or become unstable? They loved that discussion. So that was a parent contributing to the curriculum for the day. (Final Teacher Interview)

Dana outlined how another parent sent three quotes from Nelson Mandela together with an emotional explanation of why Mandela’s words were not only personally significant, but also contained powerful messages for South Africa and the rest of humanity. Dana commented on the eloquence of the parent’s response, the length of time it must have taken to write, and the impact on the Year 12 students of having a member of their school community write and share such a powerful reflective piece.

## Agency

Dana exploited her understanding of the close connection between parent agency and student agency. As indicated above, she sent out class discussion questions to parents, announcing, for example, “Tomorrow’s thinking warm-up is, ‘What is beautiful?’ or ‘What is ugly?’ or ‘Think of something about yourself. Think of something about someone else. What’s the difference between you and someone else, and what makes you, you?’” (Final Parent Interview). She also said to the parents, “You might want to do this yourself” (Final Parent Interview). By letting parents know some of the questions their child would be discussing in the classroom she felt it gave them “an idea of what we (the class) were doing and hopefully, it sparked discussion around the dinner table” (Final Teacher Interview). At the same time, she told students that, “I’d like you to have a philosophical discussion around the dinner table tonight, and if you’re not having dinner together, go and make dinner and set the table” (Final Teacher Interview).

Dana could not be sure if the strategies she used to position parents and students for meaningful conversations about aspects of the curriculum were effective (Final Teacher Interview). She said however, that several parents—who had not necessarily participated in obvious ways—thanked her for the “great dinner time discussions” they had enjoyed with their child throughout the inquiry project (Final Teacher Interview).

## New and different roles

Findings from Vidya’s interview shine a light on how repositioning parents and students in the inquiry project (described above) altered from their usual roles. When asked if her relationship with her child changed or stayed the same as a result of the project, Vidya responded:

I think it definitely shifted. I think as soon as we actually got into the nitty gritty [of the project] because of its nature, the subject and topics—the daily questions that were posed and the discussions—my daughter realised this was a good thing to interact with. So, there was openness and then I think we definitely got into it because we had a really good discussion on a daily basis about what was happening. (Parent Interview)

Vidya’s description of a closer relationship with her child’s learning highlight how she was able to be a co-inquirer and co-learner beside her daughter throughout the inquiry project.

## Generative collaboration

As the findings above show, generative collaboration through substantive conversations in the classroom (student-student, teacher-student), at home (parent-child), and between home and school/community were built into the design of Dana’s philosophy project. Through these conversations, information, ideas, perspectives, insights and resources (e.g., the Billie Eilish YouTube clip) were developed and shared—building and deepening individual and collective knowledge and students’ understanding about aspects of philosophy.

Dana also hosted a pancake philosophy morning for the Year 12 students, parents and staff. She developed conversations starters such as, “How can philosophical thought create positive good in the world?” and “What action might be required?”, to place around the tables for the students to discuss with their parents and teachers (Professional Learning Day 2). Each parent also brought a question to ask the students. Inspired by David Maloof’s Pursuit of Happiness, Vidya’s question to students was about what they considered as fulfilment (Parent Interview).

Dana declared the morning was a success: “They (attendees) were all discussing philosophy and they were discussing ancient Greeks and the age of enlightenment” (Final Teacher Interview). She experienced generative collaboration in that she was not the only one leading these discussions and listening to the students’ answers.

Vidya commented on her experience of the morning, saying that although she did not hear every student speak, she was interested “just to see that their first reaction (to a question) was that it didn’t seem like an outlandish question to them” (Final Parent Interview). She commented that the inquiry project “must have triggered something of a reflective, contemplative quality in these teenagers that they actually kind of went like, ‘Ah’” (Final Parent Interview). Although her daughter and classmates were 17 or 18, she still considered them to be young, hence, she reiterated, “I didn’t expect

that sort of very serious response from them—to accept the question and go, ‘Oh, I’m going to think about that. That’s an interesting question, you know’” (Final Parent Interview). Eating pancakes together also created time and space for the students to quietly think about each question before providing a response.

## Empathy

The philosophy inquiry project appeared to deepen awareness, appreciation, understanding and respect among the participants for parents, students, teachers, and the school community. This was particularly evident for Vidya who empathised with Dana, gained new respect for her child, and appreciated her own journey as a parent. She commented on her usual practice of responding “to every single email” that a teacher sends, saying, “I like to write back at least a sentence and thank the teacher because it’s an immense amount of work that goes into preparing (for teaching) and then to reach out to parents” (Parent Interview). She felt, “it would be good for them (the teacher) to know the parent has read the email, so I do that (acknowledge the teacher’s message) just as a mark of respect” (Parent Interview). Speaking about Dana, Vidya further observed, “But to bring this constant sort of dialogue into a project in the specific topic and keep parents informed and collect feedback is a lot of extra work” (Parent Interview). She appreciated Dana’s approach—noting she only occasionally had experienced something similar as a parent—but that it supported “a healing education” she associated with the school (Parent Interview).

Vidya expressed how her child already came to the inquiry project as a highly-engaged student who enjoyed learning and needed little help from parents or others to succeed at school. The distinction in this particular case was that she “had the opportunity to also glimpse how much she (her daughter) has grown” (Parent Interview). She explained that “the subject (philosophy) was something very personal and revealed how you think and how you relate to life” (Parent Interview). She added that, “Being involved in this (the philosophy project) really gave me a glimpse into that young person actually—thinking in very mature ways—so that was very reassuring as a parent to see that” (Parent Interview). Vidya concluded the experience also represented “an interesting journey” for her as a parent as “[she] was curious to see what happened and how engaging parents in inquiry curriculum impacted the learning of the students” (Parent Interview).

## CONCLUSIONS

When Dana started the philosophy inquiry project she was conscious of feedback from students the previous year who indicated they “just wanted more time to talk” (Professional Learning Day 2). She was also cognisant of the need to increase student and parent understanding of the aims and ethos of the school as one possible response to improving student retention. Participating in the research project reaffirmed for Dana the value and benefits of engaging parents in curriculum for meeting these identified student and school needs.

In planning her inquiry project, Dana chose a relevant, yet challenging, topic. This met with approval from Vidya who described the topic as one that afforded “lots of interesting things for parents and students to talk about” (Parent Interview). Early invitations, ongoing connections, and key events were crucial for enabling generative collaboration among key players in the classroom, at home, and between the two. Giving parents and students strategies that empowered them to bring their family closer to what students were learning and how they learnt, also demarcated this case. Final words go to Dana who stressed for teachers that in planning any inquiry project, “Having that question in your mind, ‘How can I engage parents?’ along with the question, ‘How am I engaging the students?’ is a paradigm shift” (Professional Learning Day 2).

# Classroom teacher 2

## School A – Year 8

### Food Chemistry

#### INTRODUCTION

The second teacher case study features Petrina Larenso who taught a Year 8 food chemistry class at School A. Petrina completed her teacher education in England and while there undertook further professional learning in a form of education that promoted more holistic, “health-giving” approaches to curriculum and student learning (Professional Learning Day 1). Upon moving to Australia, Petrina accepted a position at School A where she currently works with lower secondary school classes (students aged 12 to 14 years).

Data for this teacher case study were collected initially from Petrina over two days of intensive professional learning as she planned an inquiry project for a Year 8 class. Further data were collected from: a semi-formal interview using Microsoft Teams at the end of the research; weekly phone mini-cogenerative dialogues (mini-gens) (Willis, 2013); email communication; and artefacts from the classroom/school, home, and community such as planning documents, videos, PowerPoint presentations, weblinks, books, and photographs. The data collection period was from late May until mid-November 2021.

#### CONTEXT

School A championed parent engagement as an integral part of their educational philosophy and practice. At the beginning of the research, Petrina asserted that, “Parent engagement is what we do” (Professional Learning Day 1). She explained:

We engage with parents because it is the way in which we are able to impart deeper the education of the whole child. It’s where it’s not just happening in the classroom, but there’s this looping back and forth between the home and the parents. (Professional Learning Day 1)

Working in lower secondary school classes, Petrina was acutely aware of the specific challenges for parents of these students. She noted that, “there is such a change in the child. And often parents struggle with them coming into their sexuality and the change that can come with that in their relationship to their peers and to their learning” (Professional Learning Day 1).

School A subscribed to a phenomenological approach to inquiry. Petrina explained that in the sciences, for example, this meant teachers demonstrated an experiment for students to allow them to see first-hand “with new eyes” what happened (Professional Learning Day 1). Student learning occurred through “discovery” and “wondering”— rather than asking them to engage second-hand through textbooks and abstract concepts (Professional Learning Day 1).

Petrina had taught the Year 8 food chemistry inquiry project for the past three years. This version of the project involved students learning about the nutritional value of foods and applying what they learnt on a five-day school camp which included a cross-country trek. (Note: the school camp usually preceded the food chemistry project, but this year, due to a Covid-19 lockdown, the school camp was postponed until after the project.) For the inquiry project featured in this case



study, students: developed a weekly menu plan, provided a detailed recipe for one meal, cooked their chosen meal at home for their family, and recorded their meal preparation using some form of digital technology (e.g., videoing a cooking technique). They also planned, purchased, packed, and cooked a meal to share with a small group on the trek. This meal used an adjusted recipe from one of the meals students cooked during the inquiry project. Petrina proposed to publish the students' original and adjusted recipes in an online class cookbook.

One challenge in past years was that many students brought poor-quality nutritional foods on the trek. Through discussion with her colleagues and the researchers, Petrina thus developed an inquiry question to guide the project: How can engaging in food preparation at home help inform healthier eating choices which can be shared as a cookbook for school camps and the community? (Professional Learning Day 2).

## FINDINGS

This second teacher case study is presented using the C-H-A-N-G-E framework for parent engagement (Willis & Exley, 2020). This framework comprises six themes—connections, home-school alignment, agency, new roles, generative collaboration, and empathy—which guided data analysis and the descriptive findings below.

### Connections

Petrina launched the inquiry project by holding a parent meeting on Microsoft Teams. She chose a family-friendly time of 7:00 pm to enable parents with younger children to attend. The researchers also attended the meeting and were invited to talk about parent engagement and the research project. Petrina explained the food chemistry inquiry project and discussed different ways parents could choose to be involved

at home and school. She subsequently made a recording of the meeting available to parents who could not attend on the night.

Petrina also emailed parents introducing the inquiry project, attaching the project outline, and suggesting possible ways they might contribute to student learning. She wrote:

I am looking for any parents who could volunteer their time to share culinary skills with the class. I would like to explore the following activities with the students.

1. Bread Making—sourdough or other
2. Cheese making
3. Yoghurt making
4. Making Ghee

In addition if anyone in the parent body has any other culinary arts they would like to share with regards to food preparation we would love it. (Email Correspondence, 29 August 2021)

Petrina continued to communicate with parents through email and indirectly through what "she sent to the students as homework" (Final Interview). For example, she wrote to parents to let them know that: "The first task given to them (students) will be a conversation around the dinner table about FOOD. What is it? What is Nutritious Whole Food?" (Email Correspondence, 29 August 2021). Petrina also shared her hopes with parents that these initial conversations would:

...flow into a conversation about many food items sold in supermarkets and that the students [would] start questioning [further]. If food does not nourish, should it be called food? What is convenience food? Why have we moved away from traditional food preparation? What is health? (Email Correspondence, 29 August 2021).

At the same time, Petrina described the inquiry project as a learning “journey” and invited parents to join her “in the fun of creating and cooking” with the class (Email Correspondence, 29 August 2021).

### Home-school alignment

Petrina facilitated home-school alignment of the curriculum through the information she sent to parents and ongoing informal exchanges—face-to-face and phone—and over email. This information included an inquiry project outline which explained that students would explore: the nature of the main food substances (carbohydrates, proteins and fats); their role in the body’s formation; ways these substances are cultivated and harvested; technological methods used in food production; and how the food substances are processed from their living origins into food for human consumption.

In response to Petrina’s invitations to parents to share their knowledge of food chemistry with the class, one offered to make ghee, writing, “As I’m a south Indian, our staple grain is rice, though we make chapathis on a pan. I do have knowledge of grains and millets which are used to make rotis” (Email Correspondence, 29 August 2021). Petrina replied positively, asking the parent if she could make ghee with the students and show them how to prepare roti traditionally. She also suggested, “It would be wonderful if you could tell the students a story about the history of using grains in making bread in India and about the aspect of devotion” (Email Correspondence, 29 August 2021). The parent responded that, “I would wish to discuss about which food gets easily digested, the order [foods should be eaten], and how to approach food with devotion” (Email Correspondence, 29 August 2021). With each email exchange, home-school alignment thus became closer.

Another parent cooked two loaves of German bread using traditional ingredients (e.g., rye flour) and techniques (e.g., baked in a clay pot) for the class. Afterward, she emailed the students (through Petrina) the ingredients—first in English, then German, and included the methods and a picture in case Petrina had not taken one.

Parents also made suggestions about what they could contribute. One emailed, saying:

Last weekend she (daughter’s name) made some biscuits (that we then sold at an animal sanctuary to raise money), which demonstrated sugar crystallisation and looked really impressive too. I suggested that she could teach her class how to make them... Would that be something you could fit into the project? I know it’s sugar, which I am obviously very against, but this recipe is an interesting look into the properties of it, which therefore leads to better understanding of it for the students. (Email Correspondence, 6 September 2021)

As a result, Petrina showed a film about sugar which she reported generated considerable class discussion among the students and positively impacted their food choices at home and when shopping for the school camp (Teacher Interview).

Parents also suggested examples of cookbooks and recipes to support the inquiry project. One wrote that she had, “a couple of cookbooks... written by a food chemist, so really interesting information about ingredients and [food] preparation and what each recipe shows” (Email Correspondence, 30 August 2021). Petrina’s school and broader community added to these resources with one teacher in a school similar to School A providing detailed information about how food grown biodynamically on-site was subsequently harvested, cooked into meals, dehydrated, and packed for school camps (Mini-Gen, 11 August 2021).

### Agency

When asked how this inquiry project differed from previous years, Petrina indicated that usually she would demonstrate activities such as bread-making so students could then follow her lead. She said, “I wouldn’t necessarily get the parents in. In primary school, yes, but not in high school” (Mini-Gen, 1 September 2021). Petrina also arranged excursions, for example, to cheese factories, but remarked that, “with Covid-19 all those options are no longer available” (Mini-Gen, 1 September 2021). She observed, “So in a way, it (engaging parents in the inquiry project) has kind of forced this new picture” (Mini-Gen, 1 September 2021).

Petrina explained:

It’s more hands-on and bringing more relevance to the topic, so that’s some ways the inquiry has changed. And this time, because the focus of the project is on having a tangible product (i.e., the class cookbook), I have brought parents in to actually cook with the students and used their knowledge and skills to teach the content. (Mini-Gen, 15 September 2021)

Petrina built parent agency further by asking them to video homework tasks which involved their child cooking at home. She suggested it could be showing a simple cooking technique that their child had to learn such as: “A good way to cook rice. How do you cook pasta properly? What would be the best way to preserve the vitamins in vegetables when you’re steaming them, so you don’t destroy the [nutritional] value?” (Mini-Gen, 1 September 2021).

Parents and students sent in photos, videos and PowerPoints of cooking at home for class discussions. One student wrote about their experience of the inquiry project which was shared with the school community through the school newsletter. Petrina observed that engaging the parents in their child’s learning and wellbeing throughout the project meant “there was constant communication towards the end” (Teacher Interview).

Petrina consciously promoted student agency throughout the food chemistry inquiry project. As indicated earlier, students: created a weekly menu plan; provided a detailed recipe for one meal; and cooked a meal for their families, took pictures and recorded the activity. Although Petrina knew some of the students were “often in the kitchen with their families,” she had “a sense there was a good handful for whom this (cooking) was a new experience” (Teacher Interview).

Students also received a menu-planning sheet for Monday to Friday to plan breakfast, lunch, dinner, and two snacks per day while on the school camp. Main meals were meant to be eaten in small groups (two to four students) with food cooked on *trangias* (light cooking stoves). Petrina worked with students to complete their menus. They later shopped for the cooking ingredients on their own (budget = approximately \$40). Compared to past projects, Petrina noted that, “discussions around planning the menus were different” (Teacher Interview). She explained, “I was very conscious in linking it (menu planning) to what they (students) had just learnt in class” and students “took on board some of the things we had covered in the food chemistry inquiry project in improving how they planned to prepare their meals” (Teacher Interview).

When asked about her experience of the camp, Petrina reported:

We had less wastage of food this time and there was more fresh food, so this group was more diligent with their vegetables. There were fewer packets of two-minute noodles. I mean there were still some, but really not as many. More wholesome grains like wholemeal pasta and rice made it onto camp, which was good. (Teacher Interview)

Past students often made “really poor empty choices for breakfast,” but Petrina noticed, “this time most of them had either a muesli or an oats type of grain bar with fruits and nuts in it” (Teacher Interview). She added, “We didn’t get any cheerios or boxed cereals that really will sustain them for half an hour. Just empty calories” (Teacher Interview).

Overall Petrina considered that:

They (the students) seemed to fare really well (on camp), so I don't know if it was just this particular group, but in terms of the energy levels and their consistency with their mood, there was hardly any complaining. They slept well, so I'd like to think that the food had something to do with it. (Teacher Interview)

## New and different roles

Petrina highlighted existing high levels of parent involvement and “trust” in teachers as education leaders at School A (Teacher Interview). She felt this culture partly explained the number and kind of enthusiastic responses from parents to her invitations to participate in the food chemistry inquiry project.

However, authentic opportunities for parents to: cook with students in the classroom; make meals at home with their child; have discussions around the dinner table about nutrition, health and better food choices; choose recipes together with their child to cook at home; share photos and videos of their child cooking in the family kitchen; and problem-solve with their child about how they might adjust recipes to suit the school camp, positioned even the most highly-involved parents of students in Petrina’s class differently. Petrina described the new roles parents played as not “just supervisory” (e.g., when parents play traditional roles as supervisors of homework), but rather, “more educative” or “instructive” (e.g., parents and students at home in the kitchen teaching and learning side-by-side).

## Generative collaboration

Opportunities for shared experiences during the food chemistry inquiry project increased collaboration and engagement among students, parents, and teachers. Petrina observed how parents visiting the classroom to cook for the class encouraged usually reserved students to talk comfortably about food and food preparation. She described how these experiences particularly, “created a space for some of the students who come from different cultural backgrounds to feel open and share their culture around food and the ritual around food” (Teacher Interview). These conversations highlighted how the food chemistry inquiry project and the standard way of dividing food into proteins, carbohydrates and fats, contrasted with the ways some of the parents looked at food. The parent from India who made ghee with the class, for example, spoke about food comprising, “different elements of warmth, spice and heat” and how “sourness, sweetness and bitterness all need to be balanced in a meal” (Teacher Interview).

Another example of learning conversations which positively affected one student’s attitude and behaviour occurred after the class watched the film about sugar. A parent who had been trying unsuccessfully to change her son’s “sugar addiction,” told Petrina that he came home and said, “he needs to eat less sugar.” (Teacher Interview). Petrina explained that:

At this age, for teenagers, their peers have a greater influence on them than their parents who have less of a voice in terms of who they listen to. So, in the context of the class and discussion around the film, and seeing the other students’ reactions and the students talking about

## CLASSROOM TEACHER 2 CONTINUED

their habits around eating candy and sugar, they became more aware of where we find sugar and realised you can have healthier options that give you a similar taste value and as much or superior nutritional value. (Teacher Interview)

Meaningful conversations among students after the film flowed into meaningful conversations with parents. Petrina ventured these conversations further assisted students to make better choices about food at home and when they went shopping for the school camp (Teacher Interview).

### Empathy

In previous years, when the trek was scheduled before the food chemistry project, a parent expressed concerns to Petrina that grouping her child with unhealthy eaters on camp risked derailing her efforts to help her child eat healthily. As the inquiry project unfolded, Petrina decided to leave the original groups planned for camp unchanged. She elucidated:

I wanted to believe that because of the work we did in the inquiry project—engaging with students, sharing their ideas of recipes and giving the whole class an expectation that they were to prepare and plan for their camp food in a particular way—students would bring healthy food to share. (Teacher Interview)

She added:

There was also a shift (in the students) because one of the things we spoke about was how some people have certain dietary restrictions and certain sensitivities to foods. Sometimes we have to respect that, and it may seem that some people are not eating a balanced meal in the way that we would.

Petrina indicated that the students' greater appreciation of the situation that, "if someone does not seem to be eating healthily, then there may be a good reason for that," appeared to "take the edge off [the issue]" for the parent concerned (Teacher Interview). She added, "I think they (the parent) relaxed a little and realised their child would still have a healthy experience on camp" (Teacher Interview). Petrina thus felt, "there could be a middle ground that could be found that wasn't too compromised for anybody" (Teacher Interview).

## CONCLUSIONS

Petrina deployed multiple strategies to engage parents in the food chemistry inquiry project which brought a range of benefits for students, parents and teachers. For example: invitations to parents to cook in the classroom created shared experiences and increased relevance for students; setting homework which consciously, yet authentically, folded in parent participation (e.g., conversations over dinner) heightened student engagement and made visible the roles parents play as co-educators of their child; making more explicit links between the inquiry project and school camp strengthened teaching and enhanced student learning; creating opportunities for parents and students to contribute to the curriculum enriched the content and encouraged inclusivity and respect because differences (e.g., around food and culture) were openly discussed; and collaborating with parents renewed Petrina's teaching through the opportunity to look at the inquiry project differently while simultaneously supporting her professional growth (she learnt from them and they learnt from her).

Petrina indicated at the end of the research that the food chemistry inquiry project remained "a work in progress" (Teacher Interview). At the same time, she expressed confidence in what was achieved in the project and the positive difference engaging parents made to student learning and wellbeing outcomes.

# Classroom teacher 3

## School A – Year 7

### Human Physiology



#### INTRODUCTION

This third case study features Astoria English who facilitated a Year 7 inquiry project on Human Physiology. Astoria began her career as a childcare worker, and also took on other jobs aligned to education, including working in Outside Hours School Care and working as a Teacher Aide. She completed her initial teacher education qualification interstate. In addition to this qualification, she has a range of degrees in Childcare and Visual Arts. At the first professional learning day, Astoria remarked, the “sense of community and parent engagement” and “social justice” are really important to her (Professional Learning Day 1).

Data for this teacher case study were collected initially from Astoria over two days of intensive professional learning as she thought about possibilities for parent engagement in a Year 7 inquiry project. Further data were collected from: weekly phone mini-cogenerative dialogues (mini-gens) (Willis, 2013); email communication; and artefacts from the classroom/school, home, and community, and photos and walk-throughs of the students’ work. The data collection period was from late May until mid-November 2021.

#### CONTEXT

Astoria has been at School A for approximately a decade and during this EPIC project was teaching a class of Year 7 students. Astoria integrated parents’ engagement in a number of teaching areas during the data collection period. This case study will mainly focus on the Year 7 Human Physiology inquiry project. Astoria commenced the inquiry project with an oral story of some changes she noticed in herself during puberty. She explained her philosophical approach for sharing personal stories with the students in her class:

It’s really important to humanise that experience for the children, and so that’s how we launched into human reproduction. And then the next day, I talked to them about the boys’ experience in adolescence, and there was a lot of covering, a lot of ‘Oh no’, and ‘How embarrassing’, and it was laughter, and you know, we set ground rules and we talk. (Mini-Gen, 15 September 2021)

#### FINDINGS

This third teacher case study is presented using the C-H-A-N-G-E framework for parent engagement (Willis & Exley, 2020). This framework comprises six themes—connections, home-school alignment, agency, new roles, generative collaboration, and empathy—which guided data analysis and the descriptive findings below.

## Connections

At the first professional learning day, Astoria explained that at School A, home-school connection is such a high priority, that each classroom teacher visits the student's home and has dinner with the student and the family, and the student shows the teacher things that are important to them.

Astoria elaborated:

I can have a connection to where that child is coming from. It's not just a person that turns up at the door in the morning... I've been to their home, and I've got a sense of the family... I'm talking to parents about their children, about these new relationships that are developing, or having to deal with social issues...

So then one of the strategies that I think really works is when you go for a home visit, because suddenly you're out of the context of school, you're at the kitchen table and they are making dinner for you. And then the older one is playing the piano and next thing you know you're singing Abba songs together...

It's a lot of work, but it makes all the difference. That relationship might still be a little bit prickly, but something shifts. And that shift means that you can find a place where you can both comfortably work together. Because, at the end of the day, [the parents] know that you've got the child at the centre. (Professional Learning Day 1)

At School A, each class has a lead parent contact, that is a parent or a couple of parents who are "the go-between between the teacher and the class body, the parents" (Professional Learning Day 1). These parent contacts have "their own Facebook" site (Mini-Gen, 18 August 2021). By way of example, Astoria explained, that tomorrow after the students have performed the class play for a wider community audience (including the parents of the class), she will accompany the students and parents to a local eatery "and have pizza, and some parents have a drink and socialise" (Professional Learning Day 1). She further explained that in 2020 when the students performed their class play, due to Covid-19 restrictions, the parents could not attend in person. This meant that the 2021 play and the associated family-orientated social activity was an important point of re-connection for bringing everybody together again.

## Home-school alignment

Astoria also mentioned that she arrives at school early each morning, about 7:30 am. She explained, "I need the morning to prepare. And sometimes you can have all these parents who want to talk to you and you've got to get your class started" (Professional Learning Day 1). She continued:

So, I had to have some boundaries around that. And because I'm here very early, parents think, 'Oh great, she's here at 7:30. I'll just pop in.' So what I did was, I said to parents, 'Please, in the morning I'm preparing for the

lesson, so that I'm ready for your children. But in the afternoon, once the children have said their verse and the day is finished, the door is open, and I encourage you to come in and share with your child.' And I'm in the room there.

So I stay in the room and parents often just want to just check-in with you about something, or the children want to play their recorder for their parents or show them their paintings, they're usually on the wall, or some beautiful work that they've done. Or if I think that they're a bit low on their self-esteem or something, I will say, 'Well, come and have a look at this beautiful drawing,' and I will direct it. So yeah, I found that very helpful, the open door, come in, in the afternoon. (Professional Learning Day 1)

At the second professional learning day, Astoria stated that she's "been avoiding technology and not using it for such a long time that suddenly I'm now having to go, 'Okay, I really need to start activating this'" (Professional Learning Day 2). Covid-19 provided the impetus for Astoria to ramp up her technological proficiency so she could create an alignment between learning at home and learning at school. In the first half of August, Astoria proudly announced, "I'm going to be able to get you (Beryl) on Teams now because I've learned how to do that. So I'm going to set up a meeting and send you the email invitation and all you'll have to do is click on the link and you will be connected with me" (Mini-Gen, 11 August 2021). She noticed that, "the parents were really grateful for the Teams" when she set up her first meeting with them during the Covid-19 lockdown.

Astoria planned out the following schedule with her students during the Covid-19 lockdown period.

We're going to meet now every morning at 8:30 am for a kind of a roll call. And here's what we're doing for the day. And then we're going to go offline and you're going to go off and do the activities that I emailed to you. Including an audio which sounds like a kind of a podcast, and then you're going to come back at 1:30 pm... a follow-up to see how you've progressed with your work throughout the day. (Mini-Gen, 11 August 2021)

Astoria commented on the parents' responses:

The parents actually said that it was perfect. Having [the students] at 8:30 in the morning online because it got [the students] out of bed and [the parents] said it re-established the rhythm. You know, you get out of bed and you have to be online and you have to be ready because you're going to school basically... Me actually having an expectation that they're going to be there online for the roll call, the parents found that very positive. And then just following-up in the afternoon meant that [the students] had to have something that they progressed with, because we'd be following that up with them. (Mini-Gen, 11 August 2021).

## Agency

Astoria demonstrated a sophisticated appreciation of student agency, noting that she wanted to “give them agency,” but “we don’t want to burden children with choices” (Professional Development Day 2). Astoria explained how she manages what she calls the “other side” of parent engagement, the intricate relationship between parent engagement and student agency. Drawing on a previous inquiry project on “Shelters and Building Homes” as an example, she said that:

Some teachers choose to send that home as a project. But I was concerned that the parents would do it. And we’d end up with children who made their own, who had a couple of pop sticks glued together, and then there would be the one that looked like the chalet because, obviously, only an adult made it.

And I thought, ‘Well, I’m going to completely pre-empt that,’ and I got them to bring all their materials to school, and I got parent helpers to come in, and I gave all the parent helpers a list of, ‘This is how you’re going to work in the classroom.’ Because if you don’t, you end up with a lot of cooks and parents doing everything for the children. And then the children made their own little mini shelters. And it was all at school and it was all done by the children. But the parents, they have a great time. (Professional Learning Day 1)

## New and different roles

Astoria has a long history of being open to letting “parents come in” (Professional Learning Day 1). She elaborated, “I’m not always the expert and I really like that. I like to call it networking. I find I’m always looking for anyone who’s got something interesting [and] I bring them in” (Professional Learning Day 1). Astoria explained that during a previous inquiry project on the Middle Ages, one of the parents with an interest in medieval times “turned up in my classroom and scared the bejesus out of me because he turned up with his helmet and his shield” (Professional Learning Day 1). Astoria continued: “He came dressed like a full medieval villain and I was in the middle of doing something and said [to the students], ‘Right, we’re going to stop now and [this parent is] going to talk to us’” (Professional Learning Day 1).

For the human physiology inquiry project, Astoria explained that one child’s parents both have visual impairment, with the father being totally blind and the mother being partially blind. Astoria said these parents offered to come into the classroom to talk with the students. Astoria explained that the father travels to America for work, and “they brought in books with Braille and they talked about how they managed their life, and the children were able to ask questions” (Mini-Gen, 18 August 2021). Astoria explained that as a result of these parents’ visit to the classroom, the students shifted their understanding that someone with visual impairment does not necessarily have their life limited in the way students had previously

thought. Astoria commented, “They found that really quite amazing” (Mini-Gen, 18 August 2021).

Astoria does not limit parent engagement to the parents only. She’s consciously “opened that up to grandparents” as “a lot of them are very engaged with their families” (Mini-Gen, 18 August 2021).

Astoria was also cognisant of the changing nature of her role as a teacher when facilitating an inquiry project. She explained the craft of inquiry pedagogy through a metaphor of cooking:

It’s like when you cook something that you’ve cooked for a really long time and you just know what goes in it and how much. You don’t need to measure ingredients, and so I feel like coming to school in this environment is like being in the kitchen and going, ‘Okay. Well, we’re going to make dinner and this is what I’ve got, so I’m going to use a little bit more of this today, and a little bit less of that to cook that meal.’ And that that’s how it feels when you’re teaching here in this particular curriculum. (Mini-Gen, 11 August 2021)

## Generative collaboration

Astoria found that it was productive to talk about her ideas for parent and community engagement with others. For example, when planning the Human Physiology inquiry project, Astoria reached out to a pregnant co-worker and broached the subject of inviting her into the classroom to talk to the students. The pregnant co-worker responded, “I’m French, we can talk about anything...” (Mini-Gen, 18 August 2021). Astoria continued, “So she’s going to come in and talk about being pregnant and having a baby, and she said she’s quite happy to answer the students’ questions. When that baby is born, she’s agreed to bring the baby in” (Mini-Gen, 18 August 2021). It was important that Astoria opened the conversation with her co-worker, firstly to offer the invitation, and secondly to establish the boundaries of the discussion with the students. On this occasion, this community member’s contribution to the Human Physiology project was inspiring.

One of the teaching assistants at School A has qualifications as a midwife. Astoria explained:

We had Martha, who was pregnant, come to the room, and Tessa [the midwife] has Martha on the floor, and was showing the children where the baby’s head was, and the feet, and we got the baby moving... and that caused a lot of excitement... I wrote down every single question. They were fantastic questions. (Mini-Gen, 15 September 2021).

The students' experiences with generative collaboration with parents and community members positively value-added to the students' learning and growth. Astoria explained:

I find it very exciting to have lots of different people coming through the room and sharing what they've got. And I think that also facilitates the way [the students] see people, other human beings, like you see a person, you see them every day—maybe a parent—you just think that's a parent of somebody. Once they start speaking of their life experience, then suddenly you look at that parent a whole different way. (Mini-Gen, 25 August 2021)

Some of the conversations were generative collaborations between students. Astoria explained that one of the students in her class was at the birth of his younger sister. During a student-led class discussion, Astoria "held the book" and the student "explained to the class all of the experiences that he remembered being part of for the birth of his younger sister" (Mini-Gen, 15 September 2021). Astoria reflected that "his mother has allowed this to come into the [class]room. I've had another parent say to me today that they're loving the conversations that are coming home" (Mini-Gen, 15 September, 2021).

Another way Astoria brought students and parents into a generative collaboration with each other was to ask the parents to "send their children's photographs to school" and to also "include images of themselves if they can—around 12 to 13 years of age" (Mini-Gen, 15 September 2021). Astoria said, "We had a fantastic turn out" and "it created such an energy—the children were really delighted" (Mini-Gen, 15 September 2021). Astoria included pictures of herself at ages 16 and 18, which included being "a punky teenager of the 80s" (Mini-Gen, 15 September 2021). Astoria explained, "The parents have been obviously going through photographs with their children at home. There must be some conversations going on around that" (Mini-Gen, 15 September 2021).

### Empathy

Astoria said that parents tended to be "very engaged with their children's learning when they're very young. As the students get older, I find if they've got younger siblings, the parents are focused on spending time with them..." (Mini-Gen, 18 August 2021). Astoria was empathetic to the parents who wanted to engage, offering, "I think children stop talking to their parents about what they're doing at school, unless they're complaining about something, then they're very communicative" (Professional Learning Day 2). She also explained:

It's difficult for parents to have a line of inquiry when they're not quite sure where to launch from... But it's about connecting the parents so they actually had a point to launch from, that they can engage in those discussions. (Professional Learning Day 2)

Astoria was also empathetic to the students' need to connect with one another during the Covid-19 enforced learning@home period. She commented, "I think the children also really like seeing each other and connecting. In a way the Teams meeting is more about helping the children to stay connected... What the parents said back to us in a survey was what [the students] really, really wanted was connection. [The students] really missed the connection." (Mini-Gen, 11 August 2021)

In reflecting upon her schedule for learning@home, Astoria commented, "So I think that's what I was really aiming for, and I think that kind of succeeded in that regard" (Mini-Gen, 11 August 2021).

### CONCLUSIONS

Underlying all of Astoria's talk is her commitment that connections between school and family are "at the heart of a child feeling safe and happy and part of the class" (Mini-Gen, 18 August 2021). Upon reflecting on the parent engagement in the Human Physiology inquiry project, Astoria provided some final comments:

It's fulfilling because I feel like the parents are connecting with their children at home in richer ways, just by going home and asking for those photographs, you're getting photographs out that maybe haven't been looked at for a long time, and I sort of have a little bit of a thrill just thinking about them getting that... If it's students asking questions of their parents about changes in their physiology at adolescence or about their birth story... I love the idea that at home there are all these things that they could be discussing. (Mini-Gen, 18 August 2021)

# Classroom teacher 4

## School B – Year 5

### Author Study



#### INTRODUCTION

This fourth case study features Ginny Michaels who facilitated a Year 5 author study inquiry project. Ginny completed her initial teaching qualification abroad approximately two decades ago. She has more recently immigrated to Australia and has also completed a Master level educational qualification in Queensland. By her own admission, Ginny positions herself as a long-life learner, declaring, “I haven’t finished learning about how to be a teacher, because there’s always new questions and new ideas and new ways of looking at things” (Professional Learning Day 1). She has always taught in independent schools and has almost always taught in the middle years of schooling. She has a special interest in the teaching of literacy and has in the past held curriculum leadership roles.

Data for this teacher case study were collected initially from Ginny over two days of intensive professional learning as she tweaked an already existing inquiry project for her Year 5 class. Further data were collected from: a semi-formal interview using Microsoft Teams at the end of the research; weekly phone mini-cogenerative dialogues (mini-gens) (Willis, 2013); email communication; and artefacts from the classroom/school, home, and community such as planning documents and videos. The data collection period was from late May until mid-November 2021.

#### CONTEXT

Ginny has been at School B for approximately five years and during this EPIC project was teaching a class of Year Five students alongside a few other Year Five teachers and their classes. Year Five is a major intake for the school, so some of the students and parents in Ginny’s class have been at the school for a number of years, and for other students and parents, this is their first year at this school. In her own words, at the Professional Learning Day 1 Ginny said she was “quite hesitant” about parent engagement in upper primary. She was already implementing some carefully considered parent engagement strategies, but was also reflecting on some limitations.

For Phase 2 of the EPIC project, Ginny chose to focus on an existing inquiry project based around the concept of “Where we are in Place and Time.” This inquiry project includes a Shaun Tan author study and a “conceptual analysis of migration and change.” Ginny is very experienced with working in teacher teams to plan student inquiries that run for six to eight weeks, and for those inquiries to unfold in each of the Year Five classrooms in similar but personalised ways. Ginny’s goal was to use the existing inquiry project to identify and act upon the opportunities to invite parents to engage more closely in their child’s learning and the classroom practices that support students’ learning and wellbeing.

Part way through this “Place and Time” inquiry project, a Covid-19 cluster broke out in schools and communities in the neighbouring suburbs and some 1500 teachers and students and their families, including Ginny and her family, were required to enter government-enforced home quarantine for a fortnight, or longer. During this time, Ginny taught the Year Five students in home quarantine via online means from her home. Many students and their families were released from home quarantine at the end of the fortnight, but some students and their families were required to stay in home quarantine for longer. This case study documents and reflects upon the in-school learning and home-based online learning and associated parent engagement initiatives.

### FINDINGS

This fourth teacher case study is presented using the C-H-A-N-G-E framework for parent engagement (Willis & Exley, 2020). This framework comprises six themes—connections, home-school alignment, agency, new roles, generative collaboration, and empathy—which guided data analysis and the descriptive findings below.

### Connections

At the first professional learning day, Ginny outlined the range of strategies she and her teaching colleagues used to connect the parents to the classroom and to their child's learning. These strategies included individual parent-teacher meetings in term one, written reports about their child's learning in terms two and four, and a student-led three-way student-parent-teacher meeting in term three. Other points of connection were established through parents emailing Ginny, or requesting face-to-face meetings. From Ginny's account, all of these strategies were delivering dividends relative to the time invested.

The parents can also view the school curriculum on the school portal, and since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, parents have been able to see a lot more of the content planning and the "worked examples" videos that Ginny has made of herself explaining a concept (Professional Learning Day 1). As it transpired, the two-week Covid-19 home quarantine arrangements created new opportunities for the student-parent-teacher connections. Ginny explained that over these two weeks, home quarantining had "quite massively shifted our communication with parents" (Mini-Gen, 6 August 2021). Ginny explained that she had an 8.45am online briefing with all students and used this time to talk through the learning activities for the day and then followed up with an 11.30am wellbeing catch up that was "more just a general chat about how you are going, but there's opportunities to answer the questions" (Mini-Gen, 6 August 2021). In a point of marked difference to the typical school day, parents were copied into the email invitations. Ginny also noticed that during the online meetings "quite often there are parents sort of around in the background" (Mini-Gen, 6 August 2021). Ginny also noted that parents were emailing her, seeking clarification about points of content and the sequencing and pacing of the set tasks that had to be completed during the home quarantine period.

### Home-school alignment

In the first professional learning day, Ginny spoke about the complexity of parent engagement and home-school alignment for students in the middle years of schooling. She homed in on her overt goal of supporting students to "take a step up in terms of responsibility for themselves" and "for the parents to back off a little bit" (Professional Learning Day 1). She explained:

We don't have any parents that come into the classroom to help; we don't encourage parents to come to the classroom to drop off or pick up their students. It's very much, the boundary of the school is where the parents are at and the students come into the school by themselves. (Professional Learning Day 1)

Ginny cautions that these school-led arrangements can have unintended consequences; when the students will need the parents to be more involved, the parents may well struggle if they have "lost touch with what the student needs to know and what the student should be doing" (Professional Learning Day 1).

During the inquiry project, after the Shaun Tan book, "The Arrival," was shared, Ginny asked the students to write about their memories of "arriving in Australia or moving from Australia to somewhere else or just going somewhere on holiday" (Mini-Gen, 23 July 2021). The students completed the task and emailed it to Ginny for uploading to the new tab that parents could access on the school-based student learning system. Up until the EPIC project, students' work was not uploaded to a parent-accessible space. Ginny then asked the students to email their parents to invite them to access the link and read their arrival story. One student wrote about the time "he moved from Melbourne to the Philippines and his little post talks about the difference with food and pollution" (Mini-Gen, 6 August 2021). His mum responded to his post noting some points of grammar and word choice, congratulating her son and finishing with a comment, "I learned a few things reading your story" (Mini-Gen, 6 August 2021). This example highlights the multiple opportunities present within: students are exercising their own voices by documenting what matters to them, and through the sharing process, strengthening the home-school alignment. Activities and experiences that are shared between the child and the parent can be aligned to school learning, and vice-versa.

### Agency

One proactive way Ginny and her teaching colleagues promote student agency is through the three-way student-parent-teaching meetings held in term three each year. Ginny explains the process as:

The students create a digital portfolio of their learning. During the course of each term, assessment items would be scanned and put up there, but the students also choose their own items of work that they worked on, that they're proud of, and they would put them into their digital portfolio. In their three-way conference, the student comes in with their parent and their iPad and they'll go into that digital portfolio and show examples and talk about examples of their work, or they'll grab a book off the shelf or some things on display and they'll show it to their parents... It's an interaction, really, mostly between the child and their parents and a discussion of their

learning, with the teacher there to sort of fill in any gaps or answer any questions. It's different to the parent-teacher conference, which is really, I guess, the teacher giving the parents information about where their child's at... They usually have set goals, and reflect on previous goals from earlier in the year, where they can talk about what they've achieved and where their next steps are. (Professional Learning Day 1)

In addition, as mentioned earlier, Ginny is now making "worked examples" videos and posting these to the school-based learning management system. Ginny noticed there were:

...far fewer children asking questions because they had just got into this zone of, well, everything I need is on [here] and the instructions are on [here] so I just click on the instructions... and access it. Some of the students have really, really enjoyed that independence. (Mini-Gen, 13 August 2021)

In addition, Ginny said these resources were particularly useful if a student said, "What was that again?" (Mini-Gen, 13 August 2021). Placing these learning artefacts in an all-access student repository meant that students who needed to revisit a particular learning artefact could put on their headphones and listen to the content again. This is a prime example of student agency insofar that students now had a means to control the sequencing and pacing of their teacher's delivery and of their own learning; students could metaphorically and literally postpone, pause, or rewind the teacher for productive purposes.

## New and different roles

As mentioned in the introduction of this case study, a Covid-19 cluster broke out in schools and communities in the neighbouring suburbs. Whilst Ginny and many of the students in her class and their families returned to school at the end of the first fortnight, some families remained in government-enforced home quarantine for longer. During this time, Ginny reported:

We've had a couple of families who are struggling a bit... I do find that most of our conversations with parents seem to be around wellbeing and behaviour rather than curriculum... They are just parents who are reaching out to us because they need a bit of extra support and they don't really know where to go... This week's interactions with parents have been entirely on wellbeing... (Mini-Gen, 20 August 2021)

Ginny further explained her new role with parents during this moment in time:

It's not something I've particularly come across before. Often parents are quite private when they've argued with their child at home, or things aren't going well at home.

Sometimes they have a reluctance to talk to us as teachers, about what they feel like, we would judge them, or that there's some shame in admitting to the teachers that you're not coping well at home. So this is the first time in my 20 odd years of teaching... (Mini-Gen, 20 August 2021)

By early September, Ginny had noticed a change in the parent roles once more. The culminating task for the "Place and Time" inquiry required the students to script, resource, deliver, record and edit a multimodal digital artefact. The task involved students choosing a character from a Shaun Tan book, sourcing a costume to wear, and preparing appropriate props for the filming. Ginny said, "Finding a prop or costume for their performance will be, I would imagine a lot of parents would get involved in that" (Mini-Gen, 3 September 2021). Ginny confirmed, "I'm definitely hearing more from the students about, 'Oh, I spoke to my mum about this,' and 'I did this with Dad,' and it's been really nice actually" (Mini-Gen, 3 September 2021). Ginny explained, "Maybe the student might practise their performance once they've written their scripts, they could practise for their parents" (Mini-Gen, 3 September 2021). In this way, the students and parents have new roles in the student's learning. The student needs to communicate the content of the inquiry project with their parents to engage them in discussion about sourcing costumes and props and in providing feedback about the practice sessions leading up to the actual filming.

## Generative collaboration

In this particular project, Ginny collaborated with Linda and Beryl (the researchers) as critical friends. In the first professional learning day, Ginny started to think aloud about the possible invitations for parent engagement: "If our concepts are around change and perspective, any parent would have stories, personal stories, about change... Or grandparents" (Professional Learning Day 1). In the second professional learning day, Ginny opened up about the possibility of how a parent's contribution "might influence other children, or have impact on other children" while also giving "parents perspective too. If they come into the classroom and they can see all the different students learning in the ways that they do, it gives them a perspective on their own child as well..." Ginny also projected that the parents could be invited to attend the culminating presentations. Ginny concluded the second planning day by saying that these options feel "really manageable and, yeah, it will be amazing, but manageable amazing... I think our parents are going to get on board really, really well with it." In a play on words, Ginny concluded that this plan "doesn't feel quite so epic" (Professional Learning Day 2). It was through the generative collaboration that Ginny came up with suggestions about the way parents could be involved in the inquiry project. Unfortunately, by the time Ginny was ready to invite the parents to contribute to the inquiry project, Covid-19 had disrupted the flow of things. Similarly, Covid-19

restrictions also meant the parents could not come onto the school campus for the culminating presentations.

Ginny came up with an excellent alternative. An example of a generative collaboration Ginny set up during this inquiry project was asking the students to email both parents and say, "Have a watch of this or remind me to talk to you about this when I get home" (Mini-Gen, 21 October 2021). Ginny explained that this prompt worked really well to bring the Dads closer to their child's learning:

Often, the dads will come home a bit later, perhaps Mum picks them up from school. Dad comes home later and dads are frequently then saying, 'Oh hey, I got that email from you. Tell me about whatever it is' and that's really opened the door for those conversations with Dad, particularly. (Mini-Gen, 21 October 2021)

Ginny passed comment on the initiative, noting:

And actually, particularly the girls, have been saying to me that they talk a lot more with their dads about school now. Which I think is lovely, you know I think it's important. I think it's important for girls to know that Dad thinks their education is important. (Mini-Gen, 21 October 2021)

### Empathy

In the introduction of this case study, Ginny explained that many of the Year Five parents are working full-time and cannot come into the classroom during the day. Ginny did not construct this as parent disinterest or in deficit discourses, but as something that Ginny said required "empathy" (Professional Learning Day 1). Ginny summed up her overall approach to connecting with parents as "pretty accommodating and flexible; I think we have to be" (Professional Learning Day 1). As an example of her flexibility and also her capacity to harness the affordances of digital technology, Ginny explained,

I had a face-to-face meeting with a parent last week and the mum was here onsite, and the dad was just on the phone because he was at work. He had half an hour to have a meeting with me, but he didn't have the extra hour-and-a-half it would have taken him to get here and get back again. (Professional Learning Day 1)

In the first planning meeting, Ginny explained that for the last four years, the Year Five teaching team has written a weekly blog "that tells parents what we've done in the classroom and it's usually populated with lots of photos of the students doing stuff, and we put news items there." (Professional Learning Day 1). She added, "If there's something coming up that we need to remind parents about, it goes into the weekly blog" (Professional Learning Day 1). However, somewhat disappointingly, Ginny explains, "We can see who looks at it... And we have two, maybe three, at a stretch, parents that will look at it" (Professional Learning Day 1). In further discussion and in a display of empathy for the parents' situation, Ginny also mentions the "very wordy" nature of the teacher-led Year Five blog, noting, "We do have a lot of students in the school for whom English is a second language..." (Professional Learning Day 1)

In the generative collaboration on the first professional learning day, Beryl (researcher) spoke about the importance of providing opportunities for the children to engage in academic talk with their parents in their mother or father tongue. When children and parents limit their mother or father tongue conversations to social matters or every day mundane matters, they are limiting the reach of their language learning. It is more challenging to speak about academic matters in a mother or father tongue because it requires a more precise vocabulary and a more technical grammar that is capable of expressing abstractions. For example, Beryl explains opening conversations about a student's arrival story in one's mother or father tongue changes the nature of conversations to "feelings and emotions, fear and tensions, and opportunities and trepidation" (Professional Learning Day 1). In this way, parents who speak a language other than English, have an opportunity to capitalise upon a significant language teaching opportunity.

Ginny also recounted that, "the parents struggle with the curriculum because they don't necessarily remember how (to teach something to their child at home), or they remember how they were taught, which is very different to how we teach today" (Mini-Gen, 20 August 2021). Ginny expressed her empathy for the parents and was cognisant that she needed to make careful choices about the topics she opened up to parents.

## CONCLUSIONS

Ginny and her teacher colleagues had already deployed multiple strategies to engage parents in their child's learning. Most of these strategies were successful, but one of the time-consuming strategies, that of the weekly teacher blog, was not reaping a return on investment relative to the time involved. Generative collaboration with the researchers, and the trials and tribulations of Covid-19, somewhat ironically, opened up a new set of possibilities for parent engagement and bringing parents close to their child's learning and wellbeing. This case study shows that many of the new strategies Ginny introduced were, in relative terms, short in duration, sharp in focus, offered regularly and were always optional. There was no penalty if the request or the timelines could not be met.

One hurdle Ginny had to address was the means by which students' learning could be shared with the parents. This required her to add another tab to the class's learning management system. Another strategy was to have the students email their parents, either with a sample of their work, or a request for the parents to remember to ask their child about a point of learning.

Throughout the generative collaboration with the researchers, Ginny noted positive outcomes flowing from the range of parent engagement initiatives. She however, importantly, identified some necessary cautions, including finding ways to communicate with parents for whom English is an additional language, and being sensitive to limitations of parents' knowledge for teaching new concepts.

# Concise findings – Schools

Engaging parents is an active process designed to bring parents and their child's learning and wellbeing closer together.

Important questions to ask about students' experiences at school, might be: 'Are students basically happy? Do they feel they belong to a community at school? Do they enjoy supportive relations with their peers, their teachers and their parents?' (OECD, 2017, p. 3)

The concise findings of EPIC 2021 for schools are presented as statements for effective parent engagement under three headings: building knowledge, leading the way, and connecting and communicating.

## **BUILDING KNOWLEDGE**

- Develop a philosophical and pedagogical statement for guiding ways to engage students, parents, students, teachers and communities.
- Co-develop the statement with students, parents, teachers and your school community and model how it works in practice in your school at every opportunity, e.g., on assembly.
- Make the statement friendly for students, parents and teachers so it can be easily understood and applied by everyone in the school community.
- Importantly, recognise the uniqueness of your context and setting, and consider how this uniqueness affects opportunities and possibilities for engaging parents.

## **LEADING THE WAY**

- Recognise the fundamental importance of leadership in establishing a culture of engaging parents at all levels of the school.
- Create leadership roles with a specific focus on engaging parents and identify parent engagement champions from among parents, teachers and community members to support these leaders.
- Build teachers' professional learning for engaging parents through opportunities to learn with and alongside parents.
- Identify barriers to engaging parents at your school and develop plans to address or minimise these.
- Examine existing parent engagement strategies to determine if you are reaping a return on investment relative to the time involved.



- [Re]consider the design of school buildings and spaces (physically and virtually) for increasing the quality, frequency, ease and convenience of engaging parents. Ensure parents have a voice in these plans, either at the building design stage, or at the re-design stage.
- Capitalise on knowledge and insights of engaging parents from learning@home during the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g., using online platforms to speak directly to parents and students about aspects of learning, rather than only to students).
- Ensure parent engagement opportunities are part of the school's pedagogical framework and curriculum planning templates.

### **CONNECTING AND COMMUNICATING**

- Make the distinction between engaging parents and involving parents clear in what is said and written at your school.
- Ensure school leaders are not only visible and accessible to parents (e.g., in the playground, at the school gate), but also that parents perceive this access as always available and safe.
- Establish clear, regular lines of communication to parents based on your context and setting, e.g., taking account of cultural and social diversity.
- Ensure communication to parents includes feedback loops to encourage dialogic conversations accommodating the flow of information to parents and from parents.
- Focus on relationship-building with parents; for example, set up a parent community group to listen to parents' wants and needs for their children.
- Share the outcomes of these discussions with the school community through newsletters and social media to encourage student and parent ownership of initiatives.

# Concise findings – Teachers

Engaging parents is an active process designed to bring parents and their child's learning and wellbeing closer together.

'Spending time just talking' is the parental activity most frequently and most strongly associated with students' life satisfaction. And it seems to matter for performance too: students whose parents reported 'spending time just talking' were two-thirds of a school year ahead in science learning; and even after accounting for socio-economic status, the advantage remains at one-third of a school year. (OECD, 2017, p. 6)

The concise findings of EPIC 2021 for teachers are presented under three headings: building knowledge, inquiring with parents, and connecting and communicating.

## **BUILDING KNOWLEDGE**

- Articulate clearly and early to parents what engaging in their child's learning and wellbeing means.
- Share from research the benefits of parent engagement for children's school and life success and wellbeing.
- Establish regular times and spaces to dialogue cogeneratively with colleagues about engaging parents in the curriculum.
- Network with parents to find out more about them, what they know and can do, and use this knowledge as inspiration for inquiry projects.
- Lead by example, sharing your personal stories so parents come to appreciate the power of personal connections in their child's learning.
- Build knowledge about curriculum inquiry projects and their associated pedagogies so there is a genuine opportunity for student agency and parent engagement.

## **INQUIRING WITH PARENTS**

- Recognise the power and value of inquiry curriculum approaches for not only engaging students in their learning, but also engaging parents in their child's learning.
- Choose topics that will interest parents and allow them to contribute authentically. Appreciate that parents will gravitate to topics where they can value-add, and as their other commitments allow.
- Understand the potential of each phase of an inquiry process (planning, teaching, reflecting) for new and different opportunities to engage parents—which may require new pedagogies and practices.
- Recognise teachers as facilitators of knowledge, rather than the fount of knowledge.



- Allow parents to play new and different roles such as coteachers in the classroom. Support parents by meeting with them beforehand to discuss the topic and the parameters of the discussion.
- Invite parents into classrooms or virtual spaces to expand the audience with whom students connect about their learning.
- Importantly, consider ways to engage parents that are short in duration, sharp in focus, offered regularly, always optional, and personal to them and their child's learning.

### **CONNECTING AND COMMUNICATING**

- Communicate with parents and families in ways they use and value (for example, a vlog created by students for parents).
- Let parents know what their child is learning at the beginning of each week and close the loop by letting them know at the end of the week about their child's learning successes and next steps.
- Create virtual spaces for engaging parents—synchronously and asynchronously—in classroom topics and phases of inquiry curriculum.
- Harness the power of student agency for engaging parents (for example, have students create a video about their learning which they email to parents).
- Respond quickly and directly to requests from parents for clarity and/or explanation about aspects of their child's learning and wellbeing.

# Challenges to parent engagement



The EPIC 2021 research identified a number of challenges and potential barriers to engaging parents in their child's learning and wellbeing. These are listed below under school and classroom levels.

## **PARENT ENGAGEMENT CHALLENGES – SCHOOL LEVEL**

Below is a list of challenges and potential barriers to engaging parents in their child's learning and wellbeing at the school level identified in the EPIC 2021 project.

- Risk-management and workplace health and safety concerns about parents on school grounds and in classrooms (physically and virtually).
- Distance that families reside from school and consequences for parents in terms of their ability and hence, willingness to engage—an issue for both day students and boarding student families.
- Setting up new channels and routines to communicate with parents when traditional face-to-face meetings are no longer possible given Covid-19 restrictions.
- Language barriers when communication from the school and teachers cannot be provided in the home language of parents.
- The size of the school community—where engaging parents in a small school is vital, while a large school may present organisational and other issues for parent engagement activities or prove difficult during times of rapid population growth.

## **PARENT ENGAGEMENT CHALLENGES – CLASSROOM LEVEL**

Below is a list of challenges and potential barriers to engaging parents in their child's learning and wellbeing at the classroom level identified in the EPIC 2021 project.

- Clunky online platforms which prevent parents from accessing student work samples and information or messages quickly and easily.
- Contradictory expectations by parents and teachers about their roles in relation to student learning at home and school.
- Limited teacher knowledge about new communication technologies.
- Reticence by teachers to open classrooms and/or allow parents and others to observe their teaching practice.
- Resistance by teachers to parent engagement.
- Year-level collaboration which overlooks parent engagement as an essential aspect of curriculum planning.

# Conclusions and implications



**As stated in the opening of this report, this research is unique for its relevance and timeliness. Overall conclusions include that context matters when it comes to engaging parents. So does school leadership.**

The number and ways to foster parent engagement in their child's learning and wellbeing are as vast and different as the contexts in which they occur. Conclusions and implications about some ways uncovered in this research include:

- valuing parents as their child's first and continuing teacher
- adopting a welcoming approach that starts at the school gate
- developing strategies that help parents feel safe to approach and talk with school leaders and teachers in the playground and/or at other times
- inviting parents to participate in developing or reviewing the school's vision and values statement
- developing activities that offer parents experiences and allow them to build relationships with one another and the wider school community
- providing parent information sessions about curriculum learning areas and child development to support their capacity to: engage in their child's learning, make joint decisions about learning pathways, and support wellbeing
- making home visits to connect personally with students' families and home settings, where information gathered may be used to support each child's learning and wellbeing and better align learning at home and school
- encouraging parent support groups and opportunities to meet and chat
- offering regular forums where parent and teacher voices are invited and valued, and solutions to problems/issues may be cogenerated or planned for wider school activities
- developing opportunities for parents to build their capacity for teaching and learning alongside their child

- inviting parents into classrooms to share stories and experiences or work on projects together with their child
- appreciating the power of personal connections and staying connected through sharing and celebrating key school and life events.

The findings of this research commend inquiry as a pedagogical vehicle for building parent and student agency to engage directly and innovatively in aspects of the curriculum. Inquiry topics should be interesting and draw authentically on parent knowledges and skills. Since families and communities are commonplaces for student learning, strategies for engaging parents that include co-planning and co-teaching should be purposefully folded into each phase of inquiry.

Despite the disruptive effects of Covid-19, the worldwide pandemic has created an environment where teachers and parents now use many different digital platforms and channels, and are generally more willing to engage online. This shift is significant for its pace, scale and impact—creating myriad new and different opportunities to engage students and parents. Processes and strategies considered effective for engaging parents in their child's learning and wellbeing online should be encouraged as routine practice in schools and classrooms.

Cogenerative dialoguing harnesses the power of two-way conversations and discussions to enrich the pedagogy and practice of collaboration among school leaders, teachers, parents and students. Knowledge of these dialogues—and the processes and skills which underpin them—should be encouraged at home and school as an essential means for engaging students and parents. At the same time, cogenerative dialoguing—both in its intensive whole day format and ongoing weekly mini-gens—offers an effective method as part of a design-based research approach for investigating parent engagement.

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# Appendix 1

Tables 1 and 2 below set out the full number and range of data collection and research activities in EPIC 2021.

**Table 1 Data collection activities (Griffith University research team)**

DATA COLLECTION ACTIVITY	NUMBER OF INSTANCES	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Phase 1 Interviews – Principals/school leaders	6	10
Cogenerative dialogues – Catch-up meetings with Principals/school leaders (June & July 2021)	2	13
Phase 2 Cogenerative dialogues – School leaders and teachers during planning days (In person)	4	9
Phase 2 Interviews – Parents and Teachers (Online)	2	2
Phase 2 Mini-cogenerative dialogues with teachers whose case studies are included in the report.	28	4
Phase 2 Mini-cogenerative dialogues with teachers whose case studies are not included in the report.	10	2

**Table 2 Additional research activities (Griffith University research team and ISQ member schools and QIS Parents Network collaboration)**

ACTIVITY	NUMBER OF INSTANCES
Parent Engagement Workshop for Principals/ School Leaders (May, 2021)	1
Co-generative dialogues – Catch-up meetings (Online) with Principals/ School Leaders (June & July)	2
Phase 1 School Case Study meetings (Online)	3
Phase 2 'Meet the teachers' meetings (Online)	2
Phase 2 Parent information sessions (Online)	2
Co-generative dialogues – 'Catch-up' meetings (Online) (GU Research Team and ISQ and QIS Parents Network collaborators)	22
Final Report ('Soft Launch' meeting with principals and school leaders (Online))	1

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