Researching parent engagement

A qualitative field study

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Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations and acronyms

ADD	Attention Deficit Disorder
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
ARACY	Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
DoCS	Department of Community Services
EAP	Education Adjustment Program
ESL	English as a Second Language
NGO	Non- Government Organization
NSW	New South Wales
NT	Northern Territory
ODD	Oppositional Defiant Disorder
PE	Parental Engagement
QLD	Queensland
SA	South Australia
SEIFA	Socio-Economic Indexes For Areas
SES	Socio-Economic Status
SSO	Student Support Officer
TAS	Tasmania
VIC	Victoria
WA	Western Australia

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Executive summary

Introduction

Growing awareness that strengthening parents' engagement can enhance children's learning achievements, sense of wellbeing, and connectedness is fuelling increased policy interest (Pomerantz et al 2007). However the research literature base in Australia is small and emergent, and typically reflects either an institutional results/reform perspective or an individual psychological lens that considers how and why parents might engage, rather than ways that make it meaningful and purposeful.

This report documents the findings of an Australian wide research project, *Researching Parent Engagement: A Qualitative Field Study* undertaken by the Centre for Educational Research, Western Sydney University in collaboration with the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY). A qualitative ethnographic approach explored parent engagement in contexts where little research has been done, focusing on Aboriginal[1], low Socio-Economic Status (SES), Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) parents, and parents of children with special needs. The research team were selected for their particular expertise in relation to these groups.

Research Aims

- Aim 1: To explore the perspectives on learning of parents and educators of the four cohorts

- Aim 2: To investigate the views on the roles of parents and educators in relation to children's learning

- Aim 3: To identify the barriers and enablers of parent engagement in children's learning

- Aim 4: To make recommendations for future actions in relation to the findings.

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[1] No Torres-Strait Islanders were identified in the research

Research design and method

The above questions were asked in focus groups with parents and educators in each state of Australia. Sites were identified with high populations of the representative groups and schools and community groups were approached to participate. Over 50 focus groups were conducted in seven states and territories of Australia, involving the participation of more than 160 parents and 150 educators and education support personnel.

Recruitment was generally undertaken through schools and school personnel, with community based non-government organisations (NGO)'s assisting in some school communities with disadvantaged families. Parents of children attending secondary and primary schools; public, Catholic and independent schools; in inner city, outer suburbs, regional and remote locations, participated. Focus groups were recorded, transcribed and analysed according to the thematic analysis process of ethnographic research. Individual researchers led the recruitment, facilitated the focus groups, analysed the data, and developed the case studies for each parent cohort.

Overview of case study findings

The findings of the ethnographic study are reported in each of the case studies that follow. Here an overview of the case study findings is reported according to the aims of the project.

Aim 1: To explore the perspectives on learning of parents and educators of the four cohorts

Parents' perspectives on learning were the most variable across the cohorts and underpinned their responses to all other questions.

For parents and educators in low SES communities the findings emphasise a shared understanding of learning by parents and educators that focuses mainly on safety, survival and vulnerability with the ultimate goal of education as providing a pathway out of disadvantage. Learning in the home is acknowledged but not well understood.

CALD parents demonstrated a focus almost entirely on school learning. The findings from this group revealed a high level of expectation from the schools for successful educational outcomes of their children in a system which they [parents] are still learning to navigate. This leads to some degree of frustration and conflict with teachers who did not understand the context of their students' lives nor the learning needs of their children.

Parents of children with special needs recognise the imperative of learning in the home and family for their special needs children and they have to learn over time to develop realistic expectations of the outcomes of learning. They also recognise the wide variation in individual differences between different children and the challenges of providing education either in specialist or mainstream schools. There is a high level of synchronicity between parents and educators in this group, and a strong focus on the emotional quality of learning, learning needs and capacities of parents.

Aboriginal parents across all site types recognised learning Aboriginal culture in the home and community, within large extended family groups, as the most significant of their children's learning. This learning was described as taking place through land, language, history and story with the concept of respect as an overarching concept linking traditional cultural values and everyday life. Educators in high Aboriginal enrolment schools displayed a remarkably parallel understanding of learning with more focus on learning outside of school than other groups. Their focus was different from Aboriginal parents as the whole notion of learning Aboriginal culture from everyday life was entirely absent.

Aim 2: To investigate views on the roles of parents and educators in relation to children's learning

While parents and educators in low SES communities believe parents should have a role in children's learning, the data indicates that parents are not clear about what that role could be and feel inadequate to undertake this role. Educators reinforce this sense of inadequacy by the low level of expectation, that parents at least get their children to school, and by their sense that parents should have more involvement. This is further complicated by the presence of community based organisations, some of which are there primarily to support vulnerable families, while other NGOs focus on the importance of education, and need to negotiate often complex school dynamics.

CALD parents responded very differently to the questions about parents' roles because their focus is on helping their children to achieve academically. When they felt unable to do this because of language and cultural barriers they express their frustration in order to try to change the status quo on their children's behalf. They perceive their role as challenging the school and the teachers to meet their high aspirations for their children's learning.

Parents of special needs children see their role in mainly social terms, managing the child's integration into family, school and community through social activities and modelling. Educators make a distinction between the role of the school and the role of parents in terms of the specialist skills and knowledge the school can offer, and in recognition of the often lifelong commitment of parents to the continuing learning of their special needs child. The understanding of the parent is different from that of low SES parents because of the nature of managing a child with high level special needs.

The distance between Aboriginal parent views on the nature of learning and the practices of western education systems is apparent in how Aboriginal parents view their roles in their children's learning. For them, their major role is encompassed in teaching and learning 'respect', the overarching concept that encompasses traditional cultural values and contemporary everyday life. Helping with school learning featured as a part of their role as did having a say in their children's education. Educators, because of their skills and knowledge in education, had much to offer in terms of parent roles in children's learning in and out of school, but unrelated to culture.

Aim 3: To identify the barriers and enablers of parent engagement in children's learning

The barriers and enablers of parent engagement have much more in common across the four case studies than the responses to the questions about learning in particular which tended to distinguish between the cohorts. The following is a summary of the overlapping categories of barriers with examples from the different cohorts.

Communication issues

- Parents perceive mixed messages about how welcome they are in the school (open door versus making appointments, invitations to the classrooms, but on the teacher's terms), report feeling judged or excluded

- Educators perceive a clash of values between parents and the schools

- Parents often need to ensure common approach where there could easily be slippage between the expectations of school and home

- Parents' with emotional difficulties, becoming angry at the school, or children who are angry.

Family pressures/incapacities

- Poverty, drug and alcohol addiction, domestic violence, focus on survival

- Time, workforce constraints, caring for younger siblings

- Unfamiliarity with the school system, negative experiences of school, low levels of education, illiteracy

- Parents fear of being judged, fear of DoCS involvement

- Lack of parental understanding of supporting learning in the home

- Impact of technology on family life.

School pressures

- Many schools with complex constituencies are experiencing a crisis of resources

- Schools experience performance pressures that narrow their interest in parent engagement to what is relevant to the required outcomes and what can be measured

- Concerns about special needs children in mainstream schools across all site types in every state; 'mainstream' and special needs children generally regarded as suffering from these arrangements

- Lack of systemic support for parent engagement.

Lack of specialist knowledge in relation to specific cohorts

- Lack of cultural capital, lack of common language (CALD cohort)

- Lack of cultural knowledge, loss of cultural authority (Aboriginal cohort)

- Lack of specialist help and educator knowledge (special needs cohort).

These common barriers of parent engagement in children's learning are expressed as enablers in almost all cases. Both parents and educators offered many examples of innovative, lateral and creative practices that could assist parents to overcome the barriers to their engagement in their children's learning. The problem is that these tend to be isolated, not widely known, and often not shared between parents and schools in the same location.

Enablers of parent engagement

Establishing relationships, good communication

- School staff relating to parents outside of school

- School staff communicating with parents in innovative and positive ways e.g. postcards, photos, portfolios of children's work

- Mediating role of Aboriginal Education Officers

- Welcoming schools, celebrations, events, food, BBQs, morning teas

- Provision of a community resource room or designated space for parents and families

- Inclusion, acceptance, compassion, sensitivity, high positive regard for all

- Consistency in messaging and approach across the whole school.

Educational supports for parent engagement

- Educators developing innovative resources for parents to use at home to support parents who lack literacy and numeracy skills

- Teachers inviting parents into the classroom to sit with children who have difficulties

- Parents using computer to assist with unfamiliar homework

- Parents promoting the value of education, encouraging career aspirations, telling stories about the value of education from historical experience

- Parents forming committees, being on the school board, yarning circles

- Professional learning for teachers in Aboriginal, CALD and special needs schools

- Celebrating all achievements

- Community liaison officers, cultural and language translation abilities.

Programs with outside agencies

- Programs for children from poor families (breakfast, lunch, school clothes)

- TAFE Literacy, computer, parenting, basic maths courses for parents intersecting with schools

- Schools partnering with intervention organisations such as The Smith Family

- Innovative parent engagement programs such as Go4Fun that involve parents and children at schools

- Creative bridges for parents from engagement prior to school into school communities enabling a continuity of the parent experience of engagement.

Enabling creative, informal and out-of-school learning

- Involving parents (and grandparents, aunties and uncles) in art, dance, song, storytelling, language, making use of parents' many talents

- Helping parents to be aware of everyday learning with children - gardening, fishing, sewing

- Integrating whole school in cultural performances; understanding each other's cultural backgrounds

- Encouraging parents to include children in everyday activities to reinforce school learning e.g. weighing, counting, fractions in cooking.

Significant and innovative ideas were generated by both parents and educators across all cohorts. These inspiring enablers of parent engagement are expressed in generic terms and tend to lose the specificity of the parents' words as represented in the case studies. It is important that all forms and levels of parent engagement are recognised and valued and to avoid hierarchical or judgmental binary terms. For parents who are alienated from schools and marginalised by poverty, culture, language and other barriers associated with the conditions of their life and practices, any beginning point is as valuable and important as the highest level of parent engagement might be for another parent. All parent and educator groups have a lot to learn from each other and it is likely that the most valuable learning and sharing to come out of this national study is local and ongoing with respect to the different groups and their needs.

Aim 4: To make recommendations for future actions in relation to the findings
The research findings suggest a need for:

- Locally and collaboratively developed professional learning, training and resources for parents and educators that support:

  ➢ school communities to scope their community strengths, needs, cultural knowledge, values and priorities in relation to parent engagement

  ➢ meaningful communication and dialogue with parents and communities

> teachers working in Aboriginal, CALD and special needs contexts

> parents to develop strengths in relation to supporting informal learning in the home and community.

- Investment in community relationships with key personnel to integrate cultural knowledge into school learning

- Promoting continuity and the advancement of relationships between school and prior to school programs as these provide a foundation for parent engagement

- Resources to guide collaboration between schools and community-based organisations

- Training for school and parents in relationship/ capacity building, democratic communication and change strategies

- Improved resourcing of parent support in schools

- Parent leadership training opportunities

- Appointments of school-community liaison personnel with appropriate knowledge and training

- Development of models of parent engagement that are inclusive, culturally sensitive and capable of diversification at local levels is required

- Systemic, whole of school community approaches.

Introduction

This report documents the findings of the Researching Parent Engagement: A Qualitative Field Study. The research was undertaken in collaboration with the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) by the Centre for Educational Research at Western Sydney University. The findings are significant for their potential to inform further work underway in Australia, including the development of resources for schools and other agencies to effectively support parent engagement.

Growing awareness that strengthening parents' engagement can enhance children's learning achievements, sense of wellbeing and connectedness, is fuelling increased policy interest (Pomerantz et al 2007). However the research literature base in Australia is small and emergent, and typically reflects either an institutional results/reform perspective or an individualist/psychological lens that considers how and why parents might engage, rather than ways that make it meaningful and purposeful. The current project contributes to this literature by adopting an ethnographic perspective in the exploration of parent engagement in contexts where engagement is known to be more complex. In this study, this meant a particular focus on low SES communities and schools, and communities with high Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) populations, parents of children with special needs, and communities and schools with high Aboriginal populations.

The research findings provide important perspectives on some salient issues, give access to the parents' voices, and provide some signposts as to how parent engagement might be strengthened in ways that are beneficial to children, families, schools and the broader community.
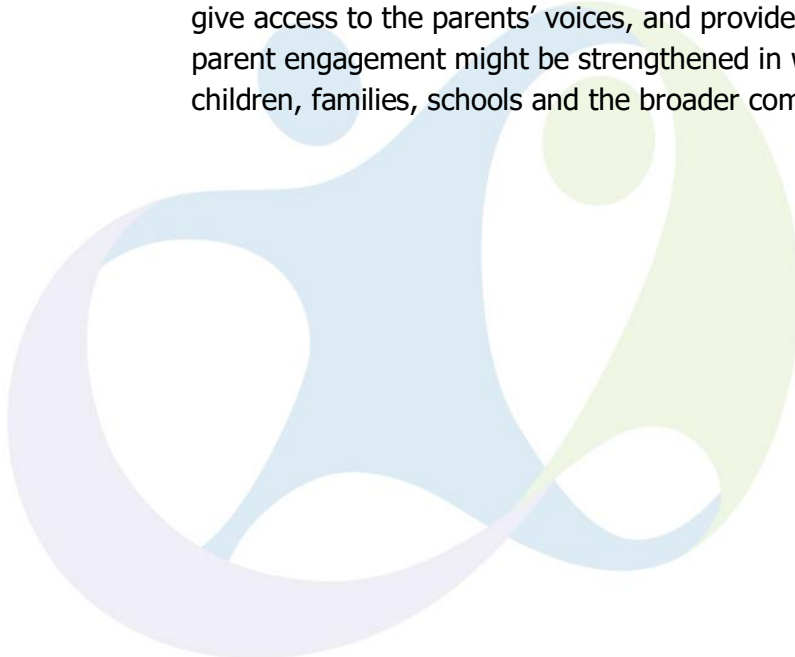
1 Background and literature review

1.1 National context

Five successive Australian Federal Labor and Liberal/National Coalition governments since 2004 have influenced national policy emphases, objectives, research directions and program funding in this area. Following the Family-School Partnerships Project, a research initiative in 2004, the Government, in conjunction with two peak parent bodies from both government and non-government school sectors, developed a National Family-School Partnerships Framework, that was endorsed by all Australian Education Ministers in 2008. Research from such initiatives, as the resulting National Parental Engagement Project, have advanced an understanding of what has worked well and in what contexts. Over 2014 and 2015 the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau conducted a study across several schools to identify and validate indicators and measures for evaluating and monitoring the success of parent engagement activity within schools and across regions and jurisdictions (Family-School & Community Partnerships Bureau, 2014). It is on such ever-shifting grounds of policy that a proliferation of terms and projects occur, each enabling multiple nuanced readings to be made of their underlying political philosophies. A statement from the current (2016) Australian Government's website defines parent engagement in terms of current policy:

> *Parent engagement in education is about parents being positively involved in their child's learning, their school community and their child's sport and social life. Parents and carers are a child's first and most important teachers. Parents and families play an important role in supporting their child's education. The earlier parents and families become engaged, the better it is for their children. Parent engagement is more than being involved and informed about school activities. It is actively engaging with your child's learning, both in the home and at school. When schools and families work together, children do better and stay in school longer. Parent engagement in learning can help children to do better at school, be more engaged with their school work, go to school more regularly, behave better and have better social skills. For this reason 'Engaging parents in education' is one of the four pillars of the Australian Government's Students First approach for quality school education.*

Australian evidence generated from large data sets such as the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (Daniel, 2015; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2014) and the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER, 2014) generally supports the global research consensus that parent engagement in school children's and young people's learning contributes to their educational success and aspirations. Broad trend indicators of educational achievement such as higher grades and scores, improved school retention, completion and graduation rates, lower drop-out figures and an upward trend in postsecondary enrolments are associated with parent engagement in formal education (Emerson et al, 2012). Individual students' scores on measures of school attendance, social skills, conduct, adaptation to school, and 'a greater sense of personal competence and efficacy for learning' have also been associated with parent engagement (Emerson et al, 2012, p.8).

Several researchers have identified the impact of socio-economic and cultural factors (Daniel, 2015; Maury, 2014). Analysing indices of home-based, school-based, and community-based involvement, socio-economic position and cultural background from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), Daniel (2015) employed the term 'family-school partnerships' to include activities at home, at school and in the community. He found that patterns of parent involvement in Australia were similar to those in other developed countries, showing a reduction as children matured. Maury (2014), analysed an Australian project based on building community capacity in geographical locations characterized by disengagement and economic and services exclusion. The project leaders framed the intervention in terms of research into 'neighbourhood impacts, intergenerational closure, neighbourhood effect heterogeneity, contagion or peer-effects theories, social capital and connection, and community capacity' (Maury, 2014, p.16).

Critical paradigm researchers questioned 'policy rhetorics positioning schools and parents as "partners" in the educational equation' (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014, p.1). Citing other researchers within this paradigm, they claim that increasingly, managerialist models of school leadership place demands on principals to manage the complexities and contradictions of reform agendas that may be antithetical to the more collaborative orientations of educators

and of policy prescriptions in the area of school-family partnerships (Blackmore, 2004; Connell, 2010).

1.2   International context

In a global context of rapid population movement through voluntary and refugee migration, one way of fostering shared responsibility and social cohesion in educational domains in developed countries has been to encourage parent engagement in their children's learning at home, in their communities, and in schools. In many countries national, state and provincial parent advocacy organisations have successfully lobbied for programs fostering parent involvement/engagement to be prioritised by governments. Borgonovi and Montt (2012) in their analysis of parental involvement from a cross-national perspective in Europe, East Asia, Central America and Middle East, found that inequalities in parental involvement exist in almost all countries and economies. Their research, sponsored by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), indicates that promoting higher levels of parental involvement may increase both students' cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes, such as enjoyment of learning. High-quality parental involvement may help reduce performance differences across socio-economic groups. Parents informed of their children's academic abilities, language and metacognitive skills may be better able to judge at what level to pitch their assistance and enhance children's motivation and sense of competence (Pomerantz et al, 2007). 'Naturally Occurring Involvement' was found to be preferable to 'intervention-based involvement' which can become 'controlling, person focused, and characterized by negative affect' (Pomerantz et al, 2007, p.388).

Deslandes (2001, p.1) described three complementary conceptual frameworks:

- Epstein's (1987) overlapping spheres of influence model illustrates a global and holistic vision of partnership

- Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) focusing on parental sense of efficacy and parental role construction

- Dunst et al. (1992) focuses on the influence of attitudes and behaviours within parent-teacher interactions in a reciprocal partnership.

In contrast to the models described above which tend to stress the power of community and social context, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) developed a largely individualistic, psychological model of parent engagement, focusing on the motivation for parents to become involved in their children's education. They argue that parents (and teachers) can directly influence students' 'psychological processes and attributes such as 'sense of personal competence and efficacy for learning'…'mastery orientation'… 'perceptions of personal control over school outcomes' … 'self-regulatory knowledge and skills'… 'attentive, adaptive school behaviour, engagement in schoolwork, and beliefs about the importance of education'. Parents' motivational beliefs (role construction and self-efficacy) and their own perceptions of invitations to involvement (school climate, teacher invitations, child invitations) are variables that are likely to influence involvement. The authors position some parents' 'life-context variables' (such as family socio-economic status, family culture and family circumstances) as deficits in the resource of time, energy, knowledge, and skills they have available to them to be involved in their children's learning (Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2005, p.116).

A model to distinguish between family-led learning and family school-partnerships has been developed in order to identify 'core constructs and elements that can be utilised to establish a consistent approach to measuring parental engagement and can inform policy and practice' (Fox & Olsen, 2014). To facilitate the inclusion of diverse perspectives this report adopts an inclusive approach to the many terms used to denote parent engagement such as: 'parent involvement' (Hoover-Dempsey, 2005), 'parental educational investment' (Cheadle, 2009), 'family involvement', 'family engagement', 'parent-school engagement' (Chenhall et al. 2011), 'community and parental engagement' (Wildy & Clark/WA Govt, 2005), 'community engagement' (Wilson/NT Govt, 2013), 'school partnerships' (Epstein, 2002; Wolfendale 2006), 'parent engagement' (Maury, 2014) and 'parental engagement' (Emerson et al., 2012; Fox & Olsen/ACT Govt, 2014).

While the project described below is named 'parent engagement', this report acknowledges that support for learning takes place in a variety of different ways and locations. Diverse family structures, practices and cultural traditions influence how learning is understood, how parents wish to engage with their children's learning, and what might enable this to take place. In some social

groups, other people than biological parents may take full or shared responsibility for children's learning. As illustrated in a short exploration of conceptual frameworks in the area, different theoretical framings also underlie how issues of parent engagement manifest in research, policy and practice.

2   The project

This Australia wide, qualitative ethnographic study of parent engagement focuses on low SES, CALD, and Aboriginal parents, and parents of children with special needs. The research aimed to establish a baseline for understanding parent engagement in children's learning in the absence of qualitative studies of these particular cohorts. To this end the aims of the project are open, conceptual and exploratory in relation to the identified cohorts:

> Aim 1: To explore the perspectives on learning of parents and educators of the four cohorts
>
> Aim 2: To investigate the views on the roles of parents and educators in relation to children's learning
>
> Aim 3: To identify the barriers and enablers of parent engagement in children's learning
>
> Aim 4: To make recommendations for future actions in relation to the findings.

2.1   Project Design

Semi-structured focus groups were conducted with parents and educators by individual researchers selected for their expertise in each of the respective parent groups.

The following key questions informed the research:

Perspectives on Learning

- Where does most of a child's learning happen?

- What do you think helps children to learn?

- What does successful learning mean to you?

Roles of Parents

- Do parents have a role in children's learning?

- What are parents' roles in helping children to learn?

- Can parents and family affect how well a child does at school?

Enablers and Barriers to Parent Engagement

- Is there a role for schools to promote parents' involvement in children's education?

- In what ways can schools support parents to engage in children's learning?

2.2 Ethics clearance

Ethics approval was sought and granted by Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number H11263). A subsequent ethical approval process was required for each state of Australia for access to teachers and parents in public schools and for each diocese in relation to Catholic Schools. The multiple ethical approvals required many levels of negotiation and led to an unexpected delay in beginning fieldwork which then took place in Term 4 of the school year.

2.3 Recruitment

Recruitment of parents is notoriously difficult for the cohort groups nominated and required the networks and connections of the selected researchers who used a range of different methods according to their experience and expertise. The specific methods of recruitment are reported in the cohort case studies. In general, school principals were asked to circulate information

about the project to staff while community liaison centres and key personnel were asked to do the same for their local communities. Email and follow-up telephone calls were employed to recruit.

2.4   Focus groups

Fifty semi-structured focus groups and interviews were conducted in seven states and territories of Australia, involving the participation of more than 160 parents and carers of school aged children and 150 educators and education support personnel (see Table 1 below). Parents of children attending secondary and primary, public, Catholic and independent schools in inner city, outer suburbs, regional and remote locations participated. Education personnel from the same location were recruited and interviewed in separate groups. In three states, community based NGO's working in school communities with disadvantaged families assisted with the parent recruitment and some members of these organisations also became informants to the study. In situations where only one or two participants turned up, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The focus groups took up to 1.5 hours each and were recorded and transcribed and the resulting transcriptions shared between researchers involved in the project via Dropbox.

2.5   Data analysis

Thematic analysis of the transcribed data was undertaken by each researcher in relation to their particular cohort. Preliminary analysis was shared in a two-day workshop with WSU researchers and ARACY officers. The resulting case studies that follow are the outcome of the data analysis which honours the voices of the participant cohorts of this unique study.

Table 1: Focus group locations and categories

Id	State	Site	I	C	L	P	S	Location
201	NSW	Suburban Primary School	1	0	0	1	0	Western Sydney
202	NSW	Suburban Primary School	1	0	0	1	0	Western Sydney
203	NSW	Suburban educators	1	0	0	1	0	Western Sydney
204	NSW	Suburban High School	1	0	0	0	1	Western Sydney
205	NSW	Suburban High School	0	0	0	0	1	Western Sydney
206	NSW	Suburban High School	0	1	1	0	1	Western Sydney
207	NSW	Suburban Primary School	1	0	0	1	0	Western Sydney
208	NSW	Suburban High School	0	1	1	0	1	Western Sydney
209	NSW	Regional Primary School	1	0	0	1	0	Regional NSW
210	NSW	Regional Primary School	1	0	0	1	0	Regional NSW
211	NSW	Remote Central School	1	0	0	1	0	Regional NSW
212	NSW	Regional parents	1	0	0	1	1	Regional NSW
301	VIC	Suburban High School	0	1	1	0	1	SE Melbourne
302	VIC	Suburban secondary College	0	0	0	0	1	NE Melbourne
303	VIC	Suburban Primary School	0	1	1	1	0	NE Melbourne
304	VIC	Suburban secondary College	0	1	1	0	1	NW Melbourne
401	QLD	Regional Primary School	0	0	1	1	0	Regional QLD
402	QLD	Regional Primary School	0	0	1	1	0	Regional QLD
403	QLD	Regional High School	0	0	1	0	1	Regional QLD
404	QLD	Community suburban NGO	0	0	1	1	1	Regional QLD
501	SA	Regional special needs School	0	0	1	0	1	Regional SA
502	SA	Outer suburban Primary School	0	0	1	1	0	SE suburban SA
503	SA	Regional Primary School	0	0	1	1	0	SE regional SA
601	WA	Suburban Primary School	0	0	0	1	0	N suburban, Perth
602	WA	Suburban High School	0	0	0	0	1	S suburban, Perth
603	WA	Suburban Primary School	0	0	0	1	0	SW suburb, Perth
701	TAS	Outer suburban Primary School, Hobart	0	0	1	1	0	SE suburb Tas
702	TAS	Outer suburban Primary School, Hobart	0	0	1	1	0	SE suburb Tas
703	TAS	Outer suburban Primary School, Launceston	0	0	1	1	0	Launceston,Tas
704	TAS	Outer suburban Primary School, Hobart	0	0	1	1	0	SE suburb Tas
705	TAS	Local NGO community organization	0	0	1	0	0	SE suburb Tas
901	NT	Suburban Primary School	0	0	1	1	0	SW suburb Darwin
902	NT	Suburban Primary School	0	0	1	1	0	NE suburb Darwin
903	NT	Outer suburban Primary School	0	0	1	1	0	E suburb Darwin
904	NT	Community suburban NGO (peak organization)	0	0	1	1	1	Darwin
KEY	I	Aboriginal						
	C	CALD						
	L	Low SES						
	P	Primary						
	S	Secondary						

3 Overview of case study findings

The findings of the ethnographic study are reported in each of the case studies that follow. Here the cross-case findings are reported according to the aims of the project with the following introductory overview and some concluding remarks.

While there has been little in-depth qualitative research in regard to the general population, preliminary research literature suggests that conventional forms of parent engagement in children's learning is more familiar for middle class parents of non-Aboriginal, English speaking origin. The findings about parent engagement in children's learning for the particular cohorts in this study are widely divergent and highly dependent on the nature of the group and especially on their approach to learning. Questions such as what learning is, where learning happens, the relative importance of different forms of learning, and how to assist their children to be successful learners across all domains, yielded vastly different responses across the cohorts. These frameworks of learning then underpin how parents in these groups shape their engagement in their children's learning, the mismatches between home and school learning, and the opportunity for increased understanding for all groups of parents and educators.

In order to capture an overall generalised impression of each group and their approaches to parent engagement the following characterisations of the case studies are offered:

Struggle

For parents and educators in low SES schools and communities, questions of parent engagement in children's learning can be characterized as struggle: the struggle for parents, schools and community organisations to deal with the individual and structural impacts of poverty.

Conflict

Responses of CALD parents and educators, can be described as mostly conflictual with parents and schools having differing and incompatible expectations and understandings of their children's performance and learning needs.

Chaos

For parents of special needs children and their educators, the most appropriate word to summarise their overall responses is chaos. The diversity and unpredictability of the learning of children with special needs challenges families and educators alike.

Distance

The approaches to learning evidenced by Aboriginal parents can be understood through the idea of distance with fundamentally different world views expressed by Aboriginal parents to those expressed by teachers and school education.

3.1 Exploring the perspectives on learning of parents and educators of the four cohorts

As stated above there is little that is comparable across the four cohorts in terms of parents' perspectives on learning. At a very general level there is possibly agreement that strong foundations for learning are established at home and possibly that values in general, and cultural values in particular, are learned at home. Beyond this there is little evidence in the case studies of any agreement about the meaning of learning and its relative significance across different domains.

3.1.1 Low SES parents and educators

- Parents acknowledge the home as the place where values are inculcated and cultural values are communicated

- Educators and community organisations recognise importance of a safe and supportive home learning environment

- Many parents do not readily recognise or value the contribution home experiences can make to their children's learning

- Some parents' living circumstances and challenges of daily survival leave little opportunity for them to focus on their children's learning and education needs

- Educators sometimes reveal a lack of understanding of compounding challenges of living in vulnerable circumstances, and undervalue learning at home

- Community-based organisations and schools understand the importance of strong foundations for learning being provided in the home

- Parents mostly value education as a pathway out of disadvantage.

The findings from this cohort suggest a shared understanding of learning by parents and educators that focuses mainly on safety, survival and vulnerability with the ultimate goal of education as providing a pathway out of disadvantage. Learning in the home is acknowledged but not well understood and consequently there is much slippage to focus only on learning that happens in school.

3.1.2 CALD parents and educators

- Parents and Educators had different understandings and experiences of schools and the school systems

- Educators believed that the parents were too reliant on them [educators] to take responsibility for their children's learning

- Parents saw engagement as a much more important connection with the school than learning

- Educators often held stereotypical views of CALD parents' aspirations for their children

- Most parents felt that there was a cultural mismatch between the teachers and students, with teachers not making much of an effort to develop intercultural sensitivity

- Parents expressed interest in receiving more tailored, regular, and appropriate information about their children's progress.

Culturally and linguistically diverse parents demonstrated a focus almost entirely on school learning. The findings from this group revealed a high level of expectation from the schools for successful educational outcomes of their children in a system which they [parents] are still learning to navigate. This

leads to some degree of frustration and conflict with teachers who did not understand the context of their students' lives nor the learning needs of their children.

3.1.3 Parents and educators of children with special needs

Parents' perspectives

- Attention to the specific learning needs of each child

- Underpinned by accurate ongoing diagnosis of the learning problems

- Teaching needs to addresses specific problems

- A deterministic perspective: basing learning on early childhood experiences prior to kindergarten and school

- Learning happens formally at school but also at home and 'down the street'

- Everyone learns from everyone else, both within families but also in the community

- The child with special needs plays a teaching role, enabling compassion and acceptance in the family, associates and community

- Independence and the opportunity of a 'normal life' are goals of learning.

Educators' perspectives

- Needs to be individually appropriate rather than age appropriate

- Learning life skills and behaviours that will help children survive in the world

- Dependent on a realistic expectation of a child's capacity

- Is successful when transferred from one situation to another

- Most learning occurs at home when a child is very young

- Takes more time: children who have special needs may take longer to learn things than a mainstream child

- Importance of unconditional love, attention, encouragement and repetition

- Success for these children is not measured by the normal benchmarks of curriculum outcomes, children are achieving at particular goals that the educators negotiate with the parents

- Independence is valued, but not every child is expected to become independent because they have special needs and special ways of succeeding

- Success can include being a participant in the community; being able to relate socially to each other and to mainstream members of the community.

Parents of children with special needs recognise the imperative of learning in the home and family for their special needs children and they have to learn over time to develop realistic expectations of the outcomes of learning. They also recognise the wide variation in individual differences between different children and the challenges of providing education either in specialist or mainstream schools. There is a high level of synchronicity between parents and educators in this group and a strong focus on the emotional quality of learning, learning needs and capacities of parents.

3.1.4 Aboriginal parents and teachers in high Aboriginal enrolment schools

Aboriginal parents: How learning is understood

- Aboriginal culture as conceptual framework

- Early learning, the first teachers

- Land, language, history, story

- Learning respect, an overarching concept.

Teachers: How learning is understood

- Learning happens at both school and home/community depending on what type of learning

- Learning can occur in/from local places, the environment

- Early years/basic learning happens at home

- Social/emotional and ethical/moral/values learning happens mainly at home

- Non-Aboriginal cultural learning happens outside of home in extended families and community

- Children learn from peers and outside school socialising.

Aboriginal parents: What helps children learn

- Understanding different ways of learning and applying them in school

- Teaching Aboriginal culture and language in schools

- Attending to basic physical and emotional needs at home and in school

- Providing support for Aboriginal children's learning at home and in school

- Role of Aboriginal Education Officers.

Teachers: What helps children learn

- Understanding of the ways that students learn – hands-on, visual, experimental

- Relevance, meaningful to student's lives

- Positive relationships/partnerships between parents and school

- Good relationship between teacher and students

- Safe, secure, trusting learning environment, stability at home

- Good basic routine, sleep, food, school attendance.

All Aboriginal parents across all site types recognised learning Aboriginal culture in the home and community within large extended family groups as the most significant of their children's learning. This learning was described as taking place through land, language, history and story with the concept of

respect as an overarching concept linking traditional cultural values and everyday life. Educators in high Aboriginal enrolment schools displayed a remarkably parallel understanding of learning with more focus on learning outside of school than other groups and yet their focus was different than Aboriginal parents as the whole notion of learning Aboriginal culture from everyday life was entirely absent. They are like two sides of the same coin.

On the other hand, when the questions focused on what helps children to learn, Aboriginal parents mainly focused on school learning with a much higher level of agreement between parents and teachers.

3.2 Investigation of views on the roles of parents and educators in relation to children's learning

3.2.1 Low SES parent and educator perspectives on parent roles

- Most parents want their children to succeed and want a better life and opportunities for their children than they have experienced

- Parent views are sometimes ambiguous and contradictory about how they see their role in children's learning

- Some parents feel inadequate and have little to contribute to their children's learning, both at home, and in the school, and admit that getting their children to school can take all their resources to the limit of their capabilities

- Educators have clear expectations that parents send their children to school clean, fed and 'ready to learn'

- Most educators want greater 'involvement' of families in the school and greater support from families at home

- Community based organisations have knowledge and skills to support vulnerable families and link them to other support mechanisms.

While parents and educators in low SES communities believe parents should have a role in children's learning, the data indicates that parents are not clear about what that role could be and feel inadequate to undertake this role. Educators reinforce this sense of inadequacy by the low level of expectation,

that parents at least get their children to school, and by their sense that parents should have more involvement. This is further compounded by the presence of community-based organisations who are there to support vulnerable families. Some of these organisations focus solely on aspects of disadvantage whilst others focus more on the importance of education and the need to negotiate complex school dynamics.

3.2.2 CALD parent and educator perspectives on parent roles

- Parents saw their role as largely supporting their children so they could succeed academically

- Due to their lack of sanctioned cultural capital and knowledge of the Australian educational school system, many parents with limited English language skills, delegate responsibility for education to their children

- CALD parents were unfamiliar with the school's expectations of parents and unacquainted with the genres used by teachers when talking about curriculum and pedagogy

- CALD parents wanted more homework than was currently given and believed that the curriculum was not challenging and their children are studying material that was well below their ability level

- Educators saw parent engagement as largely supporting the school and to assist with classroom management

- Educators felt that when parents had a negative experience of schooling or subjects, they imposed such negativity upon their children.

The difference between the low SES parents and CALD parents is stark in the sense that CALD parents see their role as helping their children to achieve academically. When they are frustrated in this by language and cultural barriers they express their frustration in order to change the status quo. Their role therefore is to challenge the school and teachers to meet their high aspirations for their children's learning and for them to assist in whatever way they can.

3.2.3 Special needs parent and educator perspectives on parent roles

Parent perspectives

- Sharing school work across the family

- Grandparents helping out with behavioural learning

- Seeking specialist assistance, repetition, sensitivity

- Parent role in teaching basic feeding and drinking

- Supporting social learning

- Supporting engagement in sports as spectator

- Building a relationship with the school

- Managing multiple family needs.

Educator perspectives

- Parents have major role in children's learning that extends well beyond when mainstream children become independent

- A big distinction exists between parents and teachers. In the school each child has the help of a team of teachers and a Student Support Officer (SSO) funded for a particular disability

- Specific learning techniques often require more than one person

- Parents are not always in the position of being able to apply specialist techniques because they're in survival mode and its the best they can do to get the child to school every day and meet other obligations.

Parents of special needs children see their role in mainly social terms, managing the child's integration into family, school and community through social activities and modelling. Educators make a distinction between the role of the school and the role of parents in terms of the specialist skills and knowledge the school can offer, in recognition of the often lifelong commitment of parents to the continuing learning of their special needs child.

The understanding of the parent is different from that of low SES parents because of the nature of managing a child with high level special needs.

3.2.4 Aboriginal parent and educator perspective on parent roles

Parent perspectives on parents' roles

- Teaching respect

- Reciprocal relationship building

- Helping with school learning

- Having your say.

Educator perspectives on parents role in children's learning

- Major role in ethics, values, social and emotional learning

- Ensuring children have good basic routine and attend school

- Supporting children's learning by talking with them about school

- Helping with homework in whatever way they can

- Participating in a relationship with the school

- Communicating the value of education

- Assisting children to see positives, deal with failure and mistakes

- Giving students a reason to learn and persist through difficulties

- Being involved everyday, listening to small stuff

- Showing children you care, valuing education

- Doing practical things with children around the home, repairs, mechanics.

The distance between Aboriginal parent views on the nature of learning and the practices of western education systems is apparent in how Aboriginal parents view their roles in their children's learning. For them their major role

is encompassed in teaching and learning 'respect', the overarching concept that encompasses traditional cultural values and contemporary everyday life. Helping with school learning featured as a part of their role as did having a say in their children's education. Educators, because of their skills and knowledge in education, had much to offer in terms of parent roles in children's learning in and out of school, but unrelated to culture.

3.3 Identifying the barriers and enablers of parent engagement in children's learning

The barriers and enablers of parent engagement have much more in common across the four case studies than the responses to the questions about learning in particular which tended to distinguish between the cohorts. The following is a summary of the overlapping categories of barriers with examples from the different cohorts.

3.3.1 Barriers to parent engagement

Communication issues

- Parents perceive mixed messages about how welcome they are in the school (open door versus making appointments, invitations to the classrooms, but on the teachers terms), report feeling judged or excluded

- Educators perceive a clash of values between parents and the schools

- Parents often need to ensure a common approach where there could easily be slippage between the expectations of school and home

- Parents' with emotional difficulties, becoming angry at the school, or children who are angry.

Family pressures/incapacities

- Poverty, drug and alcohol addiction, domestic violence, focus on survival

- Time, workforce constraints, younger siblings to care for

- Unfamiliarity with the school system, negative experiences of school, low levels of education, illiteracy

- Parents fear of being judged, fear of Department of Community Services (DoCS) involvement

- Lack of parental understanding of how to support learning in the home

- Impact of technology on family life.

School pressures

- Many schools with complex constituencies are experiencing a crisis of resources

- Schools experience performance pressures that narrow their interest in parent engagement to what is relevant to the required outcomes and what can be measured

- Concerns about special needs children in mainstream schools across all site types in every state; 'mainstream' and special needs children generally regarded as suffering from these arrangements

- Lack of systemic support for parent engagement.

Lack of specialist knowledge in relation to specific cohorts

- Lack of cultural capital, lack of common language (CALD cohort)

- Lack of cultural knowledge, loss of cultural authority (Aboriginal cohort)

- Lack of specialist help and educator knowledge (special needs cohort).

These common barriers of parent engagement in children's learning are expressed as enablers in almost all cases. Both parents and educators offered many examples of innovative, lateral and creative practices that could assist parents to overcome the barriers to their engagement in their children's learning. The problem is that these tend to be isolated, not widely known and often not shared between parents and schools in the same location.

3.3.2 Enablers of parent engagement

Establishing relationships, good communication

- School staff relating to parents outside of school

- School staff communicating with parents in innovative and positive ways e.g. postcards, photos, portfolios of children's work

- Mediating role of Aboriginal Education Officers

- Welcoming schools: celebrations, events, food, BBQs, morning teas

- Provision of community resource room, designated space for parents and families

- Inclusion, acceptance, compassion, sensitivity, high positive regard for all.

Educational supports for parent engagement

- Educators developing innovative resources for parents to use at home to support parents who lack literacy and numeracy skills

- Teachers inviting parents into classroom to sit with children with difficulties

- Parents using computer to assist with unfamiliar homework

- Parents promoting the value of education, encouraging career aspirations, telling stories about the value of education from historical experience

- Parents forming committees, being on school board, yarning circles

- Professional learning for teachers in Aboriginal, CALD and special needs and conditions of poverty and social exclusion

- Celebrating all achievements

- Community liaison officers, cultural and language translation abilities.

- Programs with outside agencies for children from poor families to provide breakfast, lunch, school clothes

- TAFE Literacy, computer, parenting, basic maths courses for parents intersecting with schools

- Schools partnering with intervention organisations such as Brighter Futures

- Innovative parent engagement programs such as Go4Fun that involve parents and children at schools

- Creating bridges for parents from before child goes to school to school communities to enable continuity of parent experience of engagement

- Enabling creative, informal and out-of-school learning

- Involving parents (and grandparents, aunties and uncles) in art, dance, song, storytelling, language, making use of parents' many talents

- Helping parents to be aware of everyday learning with children- gardening, fishing, sewing

- Integrating the whole school in cultural performances; understanding each other's cultural backgrounds

- Encouraging parents to include children in everyday activities to reinforce school learning e.g. weighing, counting, fractions in cooking.

Significant and innovative ideas were generated by both parents and educators across all cohort groups. These inspiring enablers of parent engagement are expressed in generic terms and tend to lose the specificity of the parents words as represented in the case studies. It is important that all forms and levels of parent engagement are recognised and valued and to avoid hierarchical or judgmental binary terms. For parents who are alienated from schools and marginalised by poverty, culture, language and other barriers associated with the conditions of their life and practices, any beginning point is as valuable and important as the highest level of parent engagement might be for another parent. All parent and educator groups

have a lot to learn from each other and it is likely that the most valuable learning and sharing to come out of this national study is local and ongoing with respect to the different groups and their needs.

4 Case study: Parents and educators in low SES contexts

Christine Woodrow

4.1 Introduction

There is agreement in the broader education research literature regarding the important role education plays in disrupting intergenerational poverty and disrupting the cycles of disadvantage (Wrigley, Thomson & Lingard, 2012; Raffo, Dyson, Gunter, Hall, Jones & Kalombouka, 2009). Similarly, that children living in conditions characterised by economic adversity, overall are significantly less likely to achieve school success than their more advantaged peers (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012). In educational policy and practice, there is general agreement about the importance of effective communication with parents, and that securing parent engagement in their children's learning, are both important elements that contribute to children's school success (Murray, 2009; Kim, 2009). These findings from research, policy and practice, provide a compelling case for strengthening the research evidence about understandings and practices of parent engagement and the barriers and enablers of meaningful parent engagement from both a parent/family perspective and from the point of view of teachers and schools in low SES contexts.

The research focus involved identifying schools in low SES communities using Socio-Economic Index For Australia (SEIFA) and Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) data as a guide for locations. Twenty two interviews and focus groups involving 51 parents and family members, 34 principals, deputy principals and teachers, and eight members of three community-based service provider organisations were undertaken across three states and territories (Table 4.1, 4.2) achieving a mix of urban and regional sites. As with the qualitative research approach undertaken across the whole study, the format of data collection involved semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Being sensitive to the particular context sometimes required adapting the order or framing of the questions. This resulted in some additional and unanticipated information and insights and added to the richness and complexity of the data. Similarly, the opportunity

became available in each location to conduct interviews/focus groups with community based, not-for-profit organisations that were working closely in and with schools with a direct focus of engaging parents in their children's learning. These also provided important insights and informed a finding that where schools collaborate with, and utilise, the expertise of some community based organisations, the engagement of families living in circumstances of economic hardship is more successful and sustained.

Table 2: Research sites low SES

State/Territory	Research sites (De-identified)
Tasmania	-State based community service provider offering in-school parent engagement and parent-child relationship programs -Parent group-city urban fringe -Educator group-city urban fringe -Parent group-regional urban fringe -Educator group -Parent group-city suburban
Northern Territory	-Parent group - outer city suburban -Educator group - outer city suburban -Parent group city - suburban (two sites) -Educator group city - suburban (two sites) -National community based service provider supporting low SES communities and parent engagement
Queensland	-Parent groups - regional inner city (two sites) -Educator group - regional inner city (two sites) -Seven parent interviews - regional urban fringe -National community based service provider supporting low SES communities and parent engagement

4.2 Parents and Educator Perspectives: Learning

The research sought initially to understand parent and educator perspectives on where children's learning happens, what helps children learn and what success looks like. An important qualifier or correction to emerge from this research is the need for a broader recognition of the many places where children's learning takes place. In addition to schools, the home, the family and the community are also important sites for children's learning, although it was common for many respondents from both the educator groups and the

parent groups to initially interpret the question in terms of school based or school initiated activities.

In summary, a diversity of views were expressed by parents and educators across the low SES research cohort about where children's learning happens, and important insights were provided through participant responses about the roles of families and schools in supporting this.

A more complex, varied and nuanced understanding of where children's learning occurs emerged from the parent respondents. For example, although many parents initially responded to the question about where learning happens by referring to school based activities, later, many parents identified the home and family as places where children do learn many things. More prevalent amongst these parent responses was a focus on children learning values, 'manners' and about their cultural heritage at home. However, there were also several instances where later in the interviews, the parents who had initially answered the question about where learning takes places by saying 'school', talked about activities that they had done with their children at home. They mentioned cooking, letter writing, reading books, doing puzzles, playing games, making gifts and going outside the home to attend community events. When prompted, they acknowledged, sometimes with surprise, that these were also activities where children would be learning about the world around them and about reading and maths. Some parents expressed a perception of a lack of knowledge or valuing, on the school's part, of particular cultural aspects of family life.

Responses from teachers, principals, deputy principals and heads of departments were clear in saying that a significant part of children's learning occurs at home, that the home provides an important foundation for children's learning. Further, that many of the difficulties that the children experience at school can be largely attributed to a perceived lack of 'readiness' resulting from inadequacies in the home environment. Examples of inadequate toilet training, children coming to school without breakfast, lack of follow-up with homework and children not having had before-school and/or out-of-school experiences with books were frequently cited. Many educators expressed frustration and concern with both a perceived lack of support for the school and apparent lack of parental responsibility or capability to provide these experiences that are seen as either fundamental to, or a contributory element

of children's learning success. Contradictions did emerge in the educator responses about where children's learning happens, particularly when they emphasised the importance and deleterious effect of parents not following up on homework. On one hand expressing a view that important learning takes place in the home; but on the other, insisting that homework should be a privileged activity over other home based or home initiated activities.

Community-based service provider organization responses demonstrated, perhaps not surprisingly, an understanding and appreciation of the importance of the home learning environment in providing strong 'foundations' for learning. Their active participation in parent communities in schools in low SES locations was frequently focused around encouraging and developing knowledge, skills and attributes that enable parents to engage more fully with their children, and their children's learning.

Overwhelmingly, parents expressed desires for their children's happiness as a measure of success of their learning and parenting. Securing employment was also highly valued and considered a contributory element of that happiness.

The findings suggested that the development of shared understandings around the notion that children's home, families and communities as well as school sites (including early education sites) are significant places where children's learning occurs has the potential to refocus a range of debates, policy decisions and school and community actions. These might include revised choices about where to invest resources, what is the focus of professional learning, the kind of initiatives directed at parent/community engagement, selection of community and school pedagogies and curriculum, amongst others.

4.2.1 Summary: Children's Learning

Parents acknowledge the home as the place where values are inculcated and cultural values and messages are communicated and embedded. They are less clear about learning in the home.

Educators and community organisations recognize the home as an important site for children's learning and the importance of a safe and supportive home learning environment to help children learn and benefit from their school experiences.

Many parents do not readily recognise or value the contribution home experiences can make to their children's learning. Consequently, they don't recognise their own role and the contribution they can, and often already do make to their children's learning. In summary:

- Recognising the contribution they make can be empowering for parents

- Some parents were clear that their living circumstances and associated challenges of daily survival took up all of their time and energy, leaving little opportunity for them to focus on their children's learning and education needs

- Educators sometimes reveal a lack of understanding of compounding challenges of living in vulnerable circumstances and expressed views dismissive of, or undervaluing learning that may take place in the home

- Community-based organisations and schools understand and appreciate the importance of strong 'foundations' for learning being provided in the home through, for example establishing routines, fostering persistence, having home-based literacy and numeracy experiences

- Parents mostly value education as a pathway out of disadvantage.

4.3   Role of parents and educators

Linked to perceptions of where children's learning occurs is a consideration of the parent's role in children's learning. The findings to emerge from this study in relation to this question from the perspectives of parents, educators (and by implication, schools), and community-based organisations, are at the same time both clear and complex.

Parent responses in the interviews and focus groups expressed a range of views to questions about their role in their children's learning. However, a strong theme emerged that almost all parents wanted their children to be successful at school and to have a better life and more opportunities than they themselves experienced. It was not always clear that educators and schools understood or appreciated that view, particularly in the frequency of references to the unavailability or unwillingness of parents to attend parent

interviews, lack of response to invitations to participate in school activities or perceived neglect of the child's basic needs. At one extreme, an educator expressed the view that parents didn't want their children to succeed as it would take the children away from their own lives and localities. At the other extreme, educators expressed recognition of the parental struggles to manage scarce and diminishing resources and meet regulatory requirements for receiving income support which made for tough challenges for some parents, particularly when these issues interacted with complex family dynamics, family violence and/or mental health issues.

There is strong research evidence about the importance of the home learning environment in providing foundations for school success in the early years (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2010; Dearing & Tang, 2010; Melhuish, Phan & Sylva, 2008). Educators are well aware of this research which emphasises the parent role in providing informal early literacy and numeracy experiences, responding to children's interests, and participating with them in community life and cultural experiences. However, as earlier observed, not all parents readily recognize some of these informal activities as rich or potentially rich learning experiences, or themselves as making an active and positive contribution to their children's learning in this way. When parents experience feedback from the school valuing their contribution, they feel validated and empowered.

Although parents' views are most consistent across the data set about their role in setting and instilling values, there is some ambiguity about how they see their role in child's school learning. Some parents, referring to their own lack of success or inadequacies in learning and school achievement expressed a view that their child's education was best left to the teachers and the schools, whilst others expressed a desire for a greater role in knowing about, understanding and supporting their children's learning. Whilst this might reflect a lack of confidence on the part of the parents, it might also reflect the influence of institutional power and the effects of unequal power relationships. This is an important dimension of deepening and elevating parent engagement.

Educators appreciate the efforts that parents make to support their children's learning and certainly value activities undertaken by parents at home such as reading to children, supporting homework regimes, reminding children of

school tasks and expectations. However, across the data set, there is a great range of expectations of parents and their role in children's learning by educators and schools. These range from at one end of the spectrum to expectations about providing children with their basic physical needs to expectations of classroom participation, active engagement with their children's school work at home and involvement in parent education initiatives at the other extreme. Educators do generally endorse homework and expect that parents should be able to provide a structure at home that supports school learning at home.

> We have to focus on striving and our aspiration is to give them a good education, a chance to be global citizens… they've got to have a chance----we have an expectation that every child will be read at night with their parents, or be heard by a parent, and that happens for,…like 20 percent. (Educator)

It is perhaps appropriate for education settings to reflect on whether their expectations of parents are realistic, what activities are more likely to lead to children's learning success than others, and therefore be prioritised, and what support parents might need or respond to in order to undertake these roles. Unrealistic expectations may further alienate parents who are interested in engaging, and have the undesired effect of pushing them away.

Other parents wanting greater participation in the school community sometimes found few opportunities to do so and when available, they seemed dependent on the interests of individual teachers rather than as a coherent school policy or ethos:

> It can depend on the teacher. My son was in middle primary and I went in occasionally to see the kids. So there were a few parents that came in and volunteered. That was about it. There was no coming in and reading, anything like that. So I don't know whether it's just that they don't have the time. They don't even think …what can I involve parents in? I don't know. (Parent)

The individual nature of parent engagement was a recurring theme in the study sites. On the one hand, this might be a good thing that parents aren't under pressure to participate in certain institutionalised ways. Alternatively, it suggests missed opportunities for parents and perhaps a lack of coherence in

school policy, leading to ambiguity about what parents can expect, what is available to them, and what might be expected of them. In several sites, principals spoke about what they perceived as a lack of confidence and/or lack of knowledge and skill from some educators about working with parents in contexts that are complex and difficult, even venturing that sometimes younger teachers are scared of parents. This might suggest the need for professional development focussed on approaches to relationship building.

However school structures are also implicated in how parents might access schools and participate:

> When they go to middle school you don't know who the teacher is. My daughter went through year, what is middle school, 7 to 9, I had no idea who her teacher was. You would have parent teacher interviews but because she'd have a different teacher for each subject it was really hard to communicate. I don't even remember really much of the first years when she went through it. I didn't have much involvement in that school at all. (Parent)

Consideration of the alienating effect of certain school structures such as classroom and timetable organisation, the importance of 'whole of school' approaches and professional learning are likely to be implicated in these parent perspectives.

4.4 Conceptualising Parent Engagement

Educators and schools on the whole are very keen for parent 'engagement'. Sometimes this is conceptualized and communicated by schools as 'helping' in the classroom or at school activities such as BBQs, working bees, and attending and participating in festivals, and other school-initiated cultural events. In other contexts, schools embrace alternative conceptualisations of parent involvement that might more closely approximate partnership models.

There is a growing tendency in the literature to distinguish between 'involvement', 'participation' and 'engagement'. Whilst this distinction might be useful to schools in discerning levels or hierarchies of engagement for reporting purposes, such distinctions are unlikely to be meaningful to parents. What might be more significant for schools that are keen to embrace greater parental engagement might be more flexibility in the ways parents can engage and exploring strategies and models outside of those constructed

within the frame of white middle-class parenting (Daniels 2015; Baquedano-López, Alexander & Hernandez, 2013; Mapp & Hong, 2010; Auerbach, 2009).

However parents receive mixed messages from schools. For example, schools that promote an 'open door' policy in their newsletters home to parents, and display signs at the front office saying that all parents must make an appointment send confusing and contradictory messages to parents who may already be feeling overwhelmed by their parenting role or intimidated by institutional expectations. Parents reported feeling confused about what was expected of them, and talked about feelings of inadequacy when asked to help in the classroom. Many complained about the staff in the front office, seeing them as gate-keepers that denied them access to the staff. These perspectives suggest the need for whole of school approaches and consistency in messaging.

4.5   Ready to Learn-Supporting parents in their parenting role

Educators expect families to be able to provide for their children and send them to school clean, fed and 'ready to learn.'

> A good breakfast, clean, healthy, … good sleep the night
> before…., at least some language or knowledge of books.. some
> idea about how to sit still,.. school knowledge , learning to sit on
> a mat, treat books (Educator).

Educators see these as fundamental to children's learning and chances of educational success. Some educators expressed a view that parents had become reliant on provision of programs that supplement or replace what is believed to be a key parental responsibility, such as breakfast programs, and that parents could be encouraged to take greater responsibility for their children's basic needs. Similarly, while many parents say that they are interested in their children's success, they admit that sometimes it takes all their effort just to get their children to school. The parent below is participating in a program being implemented by a community-based organisation in the school which is designed to strengthen parent-child relationships and build parenting confidence.

> I struggle at home because I've got five kids. So I struggle to
> get one-on-one interaction at home. So that's why I participate

> in the groups here because I can single that child out and spend extra quality time with that one child, where at home it's more intense because there's so many that want my attention.
> (Parent)

That the impact of poverty on children and families is multidimensional has been consistently well-documented (Skattebol et al., 2012). Yet it would appear that some schools have little understanding of how providing basic necessities is compromised in low SES contexts and/or tend to view the parent experience through the lens of middle class parenting. This, and other themes to emerge from the study suggest the need for a stronger emphasis on parenting in complex circumstances, and the effects of poverty in pre-service teacher education and ongoing professional learning.

Across the study sites a variety of views were put forward about the degree to which schools should be responsible for things that might reasonably be considered a parent's responsibility- the following quote from a school community is relevant:

> We can only do so much…the more we spread our resources and pick up the slack, the more parents are going to let us do it… we'll change things here next year to push back a bit, onto the communities to say no, that's parenting…offering to feed children…. We'll do the other end of it, but we won't give you recess and lunch any more. You pack it and you pack a healthy one…..our business is meant to be education. (Educator)

These reflections raise issues associated with school resourcing, as well as understandings of school staff previously discussed. In one school community, staff felt that they had to make choices between limited resources, and were resentful when school funds needed to be spent on things that might be seen as a family responsibility (breakfast and lunch) at the expense of educational resources, personnel and programs.

This study did not engage with the views of children. However, they are the key stakeholders in their educational success, and the purpose of parental engagement must be to support their learning and enhance their educational achievement and future opportunities for well-being. Educators reiterated on numerous occasions their beliefs that greater parent involvement in children's

learning at home and being visibly present is significantly affirming and motivating for children.

4.6 Summary

- Most parents want their children to succeed and want a better life and opportunities for their children than they have experienced

- Parent views are sometimes ambiguous and contradictory about how they see their role in children's learning

- Some parents feel inadequate and that they have little to contribute to their children's learning, both at home, and in the school, and admit that getting their children to school can take all their resources to the limit of their capabilities

- Educators have clear expectations that parents send them to school clean, fed and 'ready to learn'

- Most educators want greater 'involvement' in the school from families and greater support from families at home

- Community-based organisations have knowledge and skills to support vulnerable families and link them to other support mechanisms.

4.6.1 Barriers and Enablers

The data collected for this research is rich and diverse in relation to the barriers and enablers of parents being engaged in their children's learning. Over the course of the study, the researchers encountered a great deal of passion, emotion, dedicated efforts of school, educators and community personnel to work towards meaningful parent engagement in the complex environments that characterise low SES communities. Equally, parent participants in the research expressed strong views about their children and their aspirations for them, shared compelling stories of hardship, disappointment, dissatisfaction, satisfaction, joy and pride.

Several key themes emerged in relation to barriers and enablers such as communication, trust, schools knowing the community more broadly, schools working with other agencies. Despite all this passion and sometimes

extraordinary commitment, for a variety of reasons, successful parent engagement that is meaningful to parents and productive for schools appears to be rare and difficult to sustain. The evidence in this case study provides some pointers to salient issues.

School staff report feeling overwhelmed by the extent of social disadvantage in their communities, exhausted by the constant demands of finding resources to support their initiatives, and sometimes weary of what is perceived as limited success. Parents express dissatisfaction with opportunities for engagement, and the way they are treated, which is often perceived by schools as their disengagement or lack of interest. It is also clear that there is 'no one right way'. There is no recipe for success and what works and is successful in one particular context could be a dismal failure in another. Drawing on the interview data and examples documented by the researcher when present in the communities, this section attempts to crystallise issues that are implicated in the success or otherwise of strengthening parent engagement.

4.6.2 Schools under pressure

The study revealed how schools perceive themselves to be under pressure in these low SES communities. Across all the research locations for the low SES cohort, education personnel raised issues about the shortage of resources and the increase of need. Many referred to previous funding programs such as 'partnership funding' that no longer existed. These were perceived as allowing schools to be more supportive and creative in the kinds of school based programs that they could run to support what they perceived as high needs in their school community.

> I was going to say that somewhere in there, there needs to be acknowledgement by government that these are big issues in some schools and maybe that comes down to…, you know, like, yeah. It comes down to dollars and being aware demographically of different areas and applying more funding to areas that may be - do have, what do they call them, decile ratings…(Educator)

School leaders also talked about the performance pressure on schools – for example to 'improve the NAPLAN scores and other externally imposed indicators of school improvement. Different views were expressed about the impact of these pressures, with some schools saying that supporting the immediate needs of high poverty families diverted funds away from educational initiatives that would contribute to this, and others saying that the accountability requirement ignored the particularities of context-related pressures. Either way, the pressures of meeting external accountabilities were real and expressed as problematic to resolve.

Many also talked about the increasing numbers of children coming to school without the basic necessities of life, living in seriously compromised conditions and already assessed as 'at risk'. One school community had identified that 25% of their new intake to kindergarten in the following year were considered to be 'at risk' and in need of supplementary support and resources from the school. Education personnel saw this as a major impediment to their work as educators, and some expressed resentment that much of their time was taken in securing the basics for children, rather than supporting their education.

This indicates a strong argument for the establishment of positions such as community co-ordinators in schools in disadvantaged communities. Such personnel, who could help families' access resources and programs, ensure a more co-ordinated and holistic approach to family support and communicate these needs appropriately to school staff. While there was evidence of some schools having access to such personnel, the provision seemed idiosyncratic and piecemeal. A more systemic approach that enabled schools to develop more strategic planning in catering for the complex needs of disadvantaged communities would better serve schools efforts to both engage parents and promote quality teaching and learning.

4.6.3 Effective Communication-Building Relationships

Many parents and educators referred to communication as a key issue implicated in effective parent engagement. Schools identified high illiteracy levels and social issues such as drugs and alcohol, together with parents' previous negative associations with schools as students themselves, as factors that inhibit their communication attempts:

> So we get kids from that (alcohol rehabilitation) centre as well…the parents of a high majority of our children are illiterate themselves…, schools aren't seen as a good place… they've had bad experiences … so those experiences colour their world (Educators).

Consequently communication strategies that rely on print based materials are often ineffective in gaining parents interest. Schools admit that they must accept responsibility and need to improve systems and approaches more than we can expect the families and communities to do.

From a parents' perspective, there were frequent complaints that they didn't receive newsletters or know about activities that were taking place in the school. Many responded favourably to the use of social media. However perhaps surprisingly, not many schools were making consistent use of this. It would seem that some school communities struggle to identify effective communication strategies. However innovations with technology often seem to hit the spot when combined with feelings of being welcome and strong personal relationships:

> The teachers are really welcoming. They just say come in any time. Some teachers they might get upset and say oh you need to make an appointment. Here it's very open. You can just walk into the classroom. The teacher will welcome you. I find that very good. Even from the front office to the classroom, it's all quite welcoming. You can come in with a problem any time and they'll just say oh come, please speak about it. They're not like I have to make an appointment in the diary first. So that's very good. That's what I want. (Parent)

Communication with families is greatly assisted where schools have access to community liaison people either based in the school or as regular visitors and it is through these personnel that direct communication with parents is often successfully achieved. Teachers also talked about situations where they make immediate and direct contact with parents when difficulties arise, but parents often report that they dislike only being contacted by the school when problems arise, suggesting the need for greater emphasis on relationship building rather than problem solving. In a context where schools are often under considerable pressure, this is not always easy, yet emerges as of key importance.

4.6.4 School Based Events

Schools conduct many activities and events to which parents are invited and have worked out that where children are receiving awards or performing a role in the event, parental attendance is likely to be greater. However parents often complained that they were unaware of these events.

Popular and well-attended activities included:

- Community Breakfasts (with children introducing parents to the teachers)

- Student-parent meetings (children talking to their parents about their learning with the teachers present)

- Award ceremonies

- Concerts.

Activities that are less engaging for parents include sports days, and in-class activities such as reading groups.

Opportunities for parents to have input into school planning tended to be limited to formal decision-making structures such as boards and P&C. These tend to be more attractive to more advantaged and better educated parents. Some schools have trialled innovative ideas such as parental involvement in the development of Individual Learning Plans, and input into class composition. These have met with some success.

4.6.5 Trust

Trust is fundamental to building relationships and considerable research by authors such as Bryk and Schneider (2003) show the development of relational trust within the school community is key. Many parents expressed a view that schools didn't trust them, felt 'judged' by the school for their inadequacies as parents and this fuelled their disengagement. Where parents perceived they were trusted by the schools to work with their own, and other children or on projects for the school community, engagement became more meaningful and satisfying. Where parents could undertake programs in the company of other parents, and participate in a social network, this was often valued. This was particularly expressed by fathers participating in the study.

In several school communities parents and educators talked positively about parent involvement in initiatives such as:

- Community gardens

- Cooking programs

- Extracurricular activities.

One school in an extremely marginalised community ran an extremely successful school wide extra-curricular program in which parents worked with small groups of children. Activities included craft, cooking, gardening and excursions to the local community. Parents were very enthusiastic about this participation.

4.6.6 Mixed Messaging

Parents noticed many contradictions between schools rhetoric and practice. For example, many schools claim to run an open door policy, '*the door is open…it's an open door policy… our newsletter every week says 'please come and talk to us about the educational program*' (Educators). However parents reported that the reality of this was quite different. They often felt 'put off' by the school front office and commented that some had notices saying 'only people with appointments will be attended to'. This reflects concerns expressed in the literature that rhetoric often takes precedence over action, leading to failure in parent engagement (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

Parents reiterated the need for schools to be welcoming places, both physically and socially, '*from the front office…how it's set up, the faces at the front….having smiling faces, the right person, having aboriginal art.*' (Parent).

Additionally, parents commented on individual teachers and how their different approaches made a difference to how they engaged, how comfortable they felt. This reinforces the earlier contention that for parent engagement to be successful, schools need to adopt a 'whole of school' systemic approach, ensuring consistency in messaging, approach and action.

4.6.7 Validating and Promoting Parenting Engagement

Given the evidence presented in this study, there seems a strong argument for schools to be proactive as agents and promoters for parent engagement.

A clear finding from the study was that some parents quite successfully engaged in their children's learning at home, and were contributing to their children's chances of school success, without being consciously aware of it. Where this contribution is validated and made explicit by educators, parents can be quite transformed by feelings of being valued and being a good parent which then seem to be motivating greater engagement. (Woodrow, Arthur & Newman, 2014; Newman, Arthur, Staples & Woodrow, 2016).

Many parents in this study expressed an interest in participating more in their children's education, but the mechanisms for this weren't clear, accessible or sufficiently motivating. Engaging parents in low SES communities is clearly very challenging and demands on schools are high with related high expectations about the level of skill necessary to communicate successfully. But perhaps schools, principals and teachers needn't shoulder the responsibility of parent engagement alone. An important and unanticipated finding from this study relates to the role and contribution of community-based not-for-profit organisations.

4.6.8 The role of community based organisations in schools

Community-based organisations assisted in the recruitment of parents and schools for this study. In two sites, this was through the local office of a national organisation and in the third with a state based grass roots NGO. In a number of the research sites, a community-based organisation was actively working in the schools with low SES and disadvantaged families. In quite a few sites, the same organisation was working collaboratively at a high level with the schools in different projects of parent support and engagement and in some case mobilising the services of other not-for-profit community-based service provider organisations to support and benefit these communities and engagement initiatives.

In another research site, a different service provider was implementing a specialist program involving children and a parent in a program of relationship and esteem building based on a curriculum project. Elsewhere, the service organisation was trying to locate resources to support a planned new initiative, and in several sites, the organisation was implementing a scholarship scheme that linked parent engagement to subsidised and free

clothes, books and equipment. Thus the models of working with the NGO differed across the sites.

It is clear that these organisations have considerable expertise in engaging families living in challenging circumstances and have developed a range of programs that support parent engagement. Schools are appreciative of the support of these organisations:

> We're trailblazers here, with the support of...(NGO organisation) .. we've had a zero to four centre …. I can't think of a better way of reaching out to the community and the specific people we need to…reaching out to parents and different groups (School principal).

The facilities that are initiated through joint projects between the community-based organisations and the schools contribute to building social networks amongst the parents, and provide opportunities for them to learn and practice ways they can support their children's learning:

> The ladies in the centre… they go off on a picnic, or each others home and have little plays at each other's houses… things like that … I think those ladies feel very comfortable within our school… you see them walking around and helping out (Educator).

Perhaps because of the joint inter-agency commitment, the programs seem well established and to be sustained over time. In several school sites, the collaboration between the school and the community-based organisation resulted in the creation of dedicated spaces for parents to 'hang out'. These were typically simply furnished with soft furniture, facilities for preparing refreshments, educational toys for young children, and access to information about community services and the school.

The spaces observed in the study resulting from these school-community collaborations were sites for parent drop-in groups, supported playgroups and formal and informal access to information. Such programs also support transitions for parents and children when the children start school, as children and families are already familiar with the school environment and have knowledge of, or relationships with education personnel in the school.

Despite the obvious success and impact of these collaborations on enhanced parent engagement, all of the community-based organisations reflected on the difficulty of achieving school 'buy-in'. Respondents talked about issues such as lack of skills and expertise in collaboration amongst the school community, the priority of curriculum and assessment tasks and accountabilities, reluctance to 'divert' resources, loss of power and control as possible explanations for what sometimes felt like an unequal contribution and commitment. None-the-less, the community-based respondents were pleased with the outcomes in the school sites, and felt that real inroads were being made in the area of parent engagement in ways that would be positive for children's learning.

One further point made by the community-based respondents was the idiosyncratic nature of school interest and personnel capabilities in these kinds of initiatives, indicating that it relied on individual people and their interests and particular schools where these could be undertaken, and that when a loss of staff occurs, so too the momentum for the program has dissipated. This reflects findings in other sites and reinforces the importance of whole of school approaches for sustainability of parent engagement initiatives.

4.6.9 Promoting Continuity between prior-to school and school communities.

A number of respondents commented on the phenomenon where parents are engaged when their children attend prior-to-school services, but how this evaporates when children start at school. Whilst reasons for this obviously include the likelihood that parents might seek further employment at this point, there are obviously also other explanations. Some parents talked about relationships they enjoyed with staff when their child was at preschool, that weren't replicated at school, and some commenting about feeling shut out as their child moved into 'big school'.

In several sites, strategies had been put in place to support families and attempt to sustain parent interest and engagement. The Child and Family Centre model seems very successful in establishing a bridge between prior-to-school services and schools, and promoting continuity for children and families. Similarly the appointment of community co-ordinator positions has created the opportunity for appropriately qualified staff to leverage

community resources and promote continuity with the schools for parents, freeing the teaching staff from some of this work. For this to be effective, clearly such personnel need to be incorporated in the deliberations of the education team. In one school, a community co-ordinator attended fortnightly teaching team meetings and attended other interactions with families and teachers.

4.6.10 Concluding comments

Barriers:

- Parents perceive mixed messages about how welcome they are in the school (open door versus making appointments, invitations to the classrooms, but on the teacher's terms), report feeling judged or excluded

- Parents feelings of being judged and/or lack of confidence can be misrecognised as lack of interest by schools

- Many schools with complex constituencies are experiencing a crisis of resources

- Schools experience performance pressures that narrow their interest in parent engagement to what relevant to the required outcomes and what can be measured

- Increasing numbers of children with defined special needs additional to issues associated with structural poverty are commencing school

- An important, and mostly unmet, need exists for parent/community liaison personnel with advanced communication skills

- Lack of systemic support for the school, or apparent lack of parental responsibility or capability to provide experiences that are seen as either fundamental to, or contributing to, children's learning.

Enablers

- Some schools initiate and sustain very successful programs for children's learning using the expertise, knowledge or willingness of the parents to be engaged by offering meaningful small group activities as part of the school

curriculum. These included crafts, kitchen gardens, cooking, excursions to local businesses

- Collaborations with community organisations have resulted in creation of dedicated parent spaces and delivery of 'soft entry' programs supporting parenting knowledge and skill development and parent engagement, leading to enhanced parent engagement

- Whole of school parent engagement approaches embed parent engagement in spaces and places as well as through structural arrangements and programs. This becomes very tangible across the school

- Fostering continuity and relations between school and prior-to-school such as Child and Family Centres establishes foundations for parent engagement in school

- Mobilising parents who are, or have become engaged as credentialed parent leaders by providing training and support has mutual benefits and has been productive in some sites, particularly in generating further engagement amongst parents

- Schools and Community organisations can play a role in validating parents as their children's first educators and strengthening both their perception of this and their capability in respectful and capacity building ways.

Conclusion

This case study about parent engagement in low SES communities has shown that parent engagement is on the radar of schooling policy and practice in Australia and that many individual schools are undertaking initiatives in this regard. The research also showed parent engagement in low SES contexts is associated with great complexity. The research highlighted wide variations in understandings about its significance and conceptualisation, and the widely varying capability of schools to initiate, support and sustain meaningful parent engagement.

Some schools are working hard in extremely difficult contexts, encountering considerable barriers and obstacles, and experiencing mixed success. In some of those same sites, some parent groups couldn't recognise these efforts, and felt the school wasn't trying hard enough. The importance of creating

mechanisms for open dialogue about expectations of schools and the role of families was clear. There was also an imperative for moving towards co-operative and collaborative planning involving parents and education personnel. However, such initiatives require sophisticated knowledge and skills in their planning and execution, and it was clear that these did not always reside in the school communities. This suggests a role for training and professional learning, for parent communities and for education personnel.

The research identified the need for a reconceptualised approach to parent engagement that goes beyond common characterisations in educational practice of parents' attendance at school events, and the frequently held deficit views of families experiencing economic hardship living in low SES communities. Differences in perceptions between parents and educators were common and perceptions of parents as disinterested in their children's learning might be a misrecognition of feelings of vulnerability, inadequacy and marginalisation. Similarly, parents sometimes misread school messages, although they readily identified mixed and contradictory messages communicated by schools about their role.

There is a clear lack of systemic expertise within many school communities, some of whom are overwhelmed by the demands on their resources. In school communities where NGO's were in active collaboration with the school, the positive impact of this collaboration was tangible. It might be unrealistic to expect schools to take full responsibility for engaging parents in low SES communities. Collaborations with community-based organisations might ease the burdens on schools and deliver productive outcomes for schools, children and their families. However working collaboratively in this with communities also requires well-developed leadership, communication and collaboration skills.

The research reveals considerable complexity in the ways families, community and organisations understand and identify the issues and 'problems' of parent engagement, provided windows into areas of promising practice, and insights into enablers and barriers. The findings suggest the need for considerable investment in professional learning and resources, the greater utilisation of existing resources such as community-based organisations, and looking to prior-to-school services which seem more successful in engaging parents than

schools often are and which have the potential to build bridges for parents into primary schools.

5 Case study: CALD parents and teachers in high CALD enrolment schools

Loshini Naidoo

5.1 Introduction

Australia is the most culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) society in the world, with 28 per cent of Australia's population - 6.6 million people - born overseas, according to recently released figures by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2015). There are 200 language groups in Australia (Rao, Warburton, & Bartlett, 2006). Languages other than English are spoken by about 16% of the population. The challenges of resettlement are more difficult for those who are from non-English speaking countries. The term CALD is used in the paper to represent first and second generation ethnically diverse migrants and refugees resettled in Australia.

In the interviews with parents and educators, the primary focus was on the home and school practices that contribute to dispositions for learning, role expectations for parents and educators and the enablers and barriers to parent engagement. The main purpose of the interviews was to understand the ways in which parents from culturally diverse backgrounds negotiate and navigate school contexts. One limitation is that it was not possible to interview all the school principals or their deputies systematically in all the focus groups. Where the school executive were involved in the focus group, it was possible to obtain a comprehensive portrait of the efforts made by the school to engage CALD parents in the school community.

In particular, the interviews considered the perceptions that CALD parents had of the school system in NSW and Victoria, both public and Catholic, secondary and primary and the links between parents and the school, allowing for qualitative, multi-site research, with slightly different curricular approaches and core missions, though similar demographics. The schools were all in low socio-economic areas where CALD communities lived and send

their children to school. It is useful to note that although the aim was to get a representative sample of CALD parents, a potential limitation was that the majority of parents from CALD backgrounds were recruited through their connection to the schools and some parents may have been less outspoken than they would have been in an individual interview. In some cases where interpreters were used, this process was perceived to be robust but it could also be seen as a limitation as the transcription represented the voice of the interpreter rather than that of the parent. In spite of the different school types and locations, it was clear that all CALD parents interviewed were interested in a school where teachers cared about their child and where the child was happy.

5.2 CALD Parent Responses

5.2.1 Parents views about where a child learns:

The findings of the case study indicate that divergent perceptions of learning and its origin (starting in home or school) existed amongst teachers and parents as stakeholders in education. Parents interviewed were not a homogeneous group of people, although they were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. As such, they had different understandings and experiences of schools and school systems. Most parents saw learning as happening both in the school and the home and as support for their children.

Academic emphasis in the curriculum

Parents largely saw learning as associated with homework, understanding curriculum content and academic progress. Parents believed that monitoring their children's progress at home and providing moral guidance will result in good classroom behaviour, and give their children greater future educational opportunities. These parents try to compensate for their lack of language by placing emphasis on moral guidance and good behaviour, which they see as their responsibility. Most of the CALD parents to some degree were pragmatic given the constraints under which they operated. The desire to complete homework or be given more homework was undermined by the urgency to have their children progress academically and not being behind and hence academic preparation was a high priority as a sure path to a better life. In this frame, success though narrowly defined for CALD parents becomes a goal in

itself and one that fits squarely with western worldviews regarding a progressive future.

> I think when the children learn at school and they're back at home we can help them do homework and teach them, talk to them, they can have parent do something. That is the way they learn…..Even if you know English or non-English, you have to teach them how to behave and how to share with other people. So when they go to school, from their first year is so they can play with friends, how to be talking, how to behave at us. (Parent)

Some emphasised completion of homework, while others saw the importance of respect and discipline admitting too that all they wanted is for their children to be "happy". However, for many parents, language was an overwhelming barrier to participation in their children's academic activities. Moreover, the content and course material in secondary school had become increasingly difficult to understand. Nevertheless, parents valued homework and saw this as an indication of the work being done in classes. For the most part, the CALD parents wanted more homework than was currently given and believed that the curriculum was not challenging and their children are studying material that was well below their ability level. Some parents were also unhappy about the limited use of textbooks and the increased dependency on worksheets in the classroom as well as the low expectations that teachers placed on homework completion.

Curricular views of CALD parents were based largely on memories of their own schooling experience which were conservative, where knowledge was transmitted rather than socially constructed, making learning more structured and more authoritarian and this is what they expected when they arrived in their new environment. Parents therefore with limited English looked to the schools to give their children what they could not. In many cases, the definitions given to learning by the CALD communities interviewed were based on an assessment of the barriers that they faced as parents and their access to resources. Much of the responses to the questions posed in the study were based on information through the prism of their own experiences with education in their home country, which they idealise. The cultural identity with the home culture serves as protection against any opposing values in the host

community. This however does not make the decisions or perceptions of CALD parents as being less reasonable or less rational.

> There are no text books. We don't know what they're taking, but at school there's nothing. They have a maths exam. We don't know what's in that exam. They only have worksheet, worksheet, and worksheet. Those worksheets do no explain anything. We wanted to help the kids to learn. We want them to study. We always help them, but textbooks - nothing - no learning materials – absolutely nothing. (Parent)

Other parents complained that the homework was not well thought out by educators and amounted to filling out worksheets with no follow up from teachers in the classroom. Overall, parents felt that academic rigour in their children's school was not at the level they desired. Some parents however were able to recall their early experiences with schooling, for example, when reflecting on the school system in their home countries, they felt that it denied any individual growth and had fewer opportunities for success. In contrast, they noticed that the educational system they experienced in Australia encouraged more of an all-round development of the learner even if extra-curricular activities was a major part of the curriculum.

5.2.2 Educator's views about learning

Teacher professionalism and Intercultural Sensitivity

Educators saw learning as much broader and included parent engagement in education both in and out of school. Teachers believed that the parents were not committed enough to participate in the school activities and were too reliant on them to take responsibility for their children's learning. Educators were reluctant to have their professional practices challenged believing that their curricular knowledge is what distinguishes them from parents and unless educators and CALD parents work collaboratively together, cultural responsive teaching is less likely to occur. This may be due to the fact that there is little professional development for educators on ways to work with CALD parents. ESL teachers have had more contact with CALD parents and are better prepared to work with these parents in their classroom but in the school as a whole there is an over-reliance on these ESL teachers to work with CALD parents. A clear implication is that we need teacher in-service programs for working with CALD parents.

> I think that at school...learning takes place everywhere.....It can take place with that significant adult, significant teacher for them but...I think it is increased when there is a connection or an understanding between teachers and parents working together. I think that the most fertile soil is available to the students when you have that relationship. That both parents and teachers are on the same wavelength. (Educator)

The quotation indicates that the educators want parents to be more than involved in their children's learning. However, in engaging parents, educators need to think of a way to work with parents to assist the child and the community. By engaging with parents, it is likely that both the staff member and the parent could determine a mutual, culturally responsive and supportive solution that works for both the child as an individual and the family/school as a collective.

Language, Acculturation and Communication

The inability to speak English fluently and having had different educational experiences are seen by educators as impacting the ability of parents to motivate and support their children's learning. CALD parents felt uncomfortable in interacting in their children's schools because they had difficulty communicating in English. Educators were seen to hold stereotypical views of CALD parents' aspirations for their children even though it is evident from the parent responses that they wanted positive educational experiences for their children. While educators expressed sympathy for the challenges CALD parents faced, some of their comments were unproductive, reflecting anti-migrant/refugee sentiments commonly heard.

Most educators complained that although invitations were sent out to parents to be involved in their children's learning, many do not turn up. This very thinking positions parents as the problem and educators as the solution. Such deficit thinking can be a barrier to constructive engagement between parents and the school community and could preclude dialogue about the curriculum.

> I think it's important too in this day and age that parents take an interest in what their kids are doing....I've been to situations at the school where the parent and child are meant to be coming up for an information thing. The parent's on their phone and the

> kids trying to absorb the information for their subject selection or whatever else. Yeah, it doesn't set a good role model when the parent doesn't take the role of the parent. (Educator)

These were felt to be overwhelming for parents from CALD backgrounds, particularly when there was limited English proficiency and literacy. Some educators felt that perhaps a greater use of translation and translator services may be the way to engage parents from CALD backgrounds. This was particularly important as parents reported that interpreters and translated materials were not readily available. Most parents felt that there was a cultural mismatch between the teachers and students, with teachers not making much of an effort to develop intercultural sensitivity. There were only two educators in the interviews that spoke about the importance of intercultural sensitivity. Educators were willing to accommodate the culture of the home into the classroom if it helped CALD background students learn but hesitant to change curricular or pedagogical practices to accommodate parents' wishes. Additionally, while educators were not philosophically opposed to bilingualism or multilingualism, they felt that if parents were fluent in English, it would help the student transition more quickly academically. Despite this, educators were committed to engaging in dialogue with parents.

The challenge is valuing that other learning. Often the families themselves don't value that as learning. Connecting that learning with the academic learning that is valued; that is scored; that is where they can gain power in a way in our society.

The expectations of the school and parents were culturally different because of background and traditions, and these seemed to impede CALD parent engagement in their children's education. The teachers' level of responsiveness to children from economically, linguistically, and culturally diverse backgrounds is suggested to contribute to strong teacher – parent partnerships, and, as a result, to positive student learning outcomes and school well-being (Espinosa, 2005). While educators were keen to have parents engaged in schools and believed that understanding the cultural needs was essential, time and resources proved to be problematic. Many expressed the need to have teacher professional development training to successfully engage parents and make teachers aware of culturally sensitive ways of engaging CALD parents. Educators also conceded that while CALD

parents had a positive attitude towards education, their lack of awareness of the Australian schooling system proved a barrier to engagement.

They might feel disempowered by a different system, a different language and even by the whole process of dealing with authorities over many years.

The educators reported plenty of opportunity and invitations for collaboration and discussion with parents, but the parents thought differently, and they believed that the involvement in the school could be much more clearly articulated without a reliance on information technology as being the most effective means of communication. Parents also bemoaned the fact that parent-teacher interviews were limited to five minutes and that this did little to provide sufficient information for parents to act on or develop effective partnerships with them. Coupled with this was the dissatisfaction with the nature of home and school communication due to the lack of adequate classroom-related information and the lack of information about a child's academic progress. Parents expressed interest in receiving more tailored, regular, and appropriate information about their children's progress. They viewed the Australian schools as democratic and less competitive, and thus ascribed less value to parent-teacher relationships in their children's success.

Contrastingly, educators saw parent-teacher nights as a worthwhile opportunity to discuss the child's progress in school. It is possible that cultural ways of life and of deference to authority may prevent CALD parents from being critical of the school and its teachers while teachers may take this as a sign of acceptance of their pedagogical and professional practices. Educators were less likely to negotiate about their practice in the classrooms because they saw their pedagogy as being progressive and in keeping with best practice. The curricular views of CALD parents were perceived by educators to be deficits in that it was less constructivist, focusing on knowledge transmission.

5.2.3 Summary:

- Parents and Educators had different understandings and experiences of schools and school systems

- Parents saw engagement as a much more important connection with the school rather than learning

- CALD parents wanted positive educational experiences for their children

- Most parents felt that there was a cultural mismatch between the teachers and students, with teachers not making much of an effort to develop intercultural sensitivity

- Parents expressed interest in receiving more tailored, regular, and appropriate information about their children's progress

- Educators believed that the parents were too reliant on them to take responsibility for their children's learning

- Educators often held stereotypical views of CALD parents' aspirations for their children.

Roles of Parents and Educators

There were explicit and implicit expectations that underpinned the role expectations of parents and teachers. While both parents and educators acknowledged the importance of parent engagement in education, the definition of these roles was quite different.

Supportive Learning Environment

Parents saw their role as largely supporting their children so that they could succeed academically. The majority of the CALD parents who were not fluent in English or informed of the Australian school system saw that their role, rather, was to provide a supportive home and family background and to give encouragement. Parents checked if homework was done and some parents managed to assist their children by using the home language as a means of communication about school work. Additionally, parents felt that by giving their children access to the internet, their children were able to get the academic support that they are not always able to provide.

Educators saw the role of parents largely as limited to supporting the school and assisting with classroom management. There were also more developed practices in some schools to engage the diverse cohort of parents than in other schools, particularly in the public sector. Educators even felt that when parents had a negative experience of schooling or subjects, they imposed such negativity upon their children discouraging the children from taking certain subjects.

> I hear it with maths all the time, parents have - before the kid even starts high school the parents have that vibe of, well I was never good at maths, I never liked maths. They repeat that to their children at home, so then their kids come into school with this mentality that maths is too hard or I'm never going to understand it because my parents never understood it. (Educator)

Educators further indicated that they only saw CALD parents when they were summoned to school to talk about their children's behavioural problems. If parents were better engaged at different levels of the schooling process, then parents might be more active in the education of their children.

> When they're at school they're your problem. When they're at home, they're my problem. They see it that way as a problem not necessarily as a positive engagement, but whatever engagement they have - because we only really contact them, unfortunately when their child is in trouble. I think their contact with the school is usually only negative. (Educator)

Parent-Teacher Activities

The interview data with CALD parents showed that parents were less interested in parent-teacher interviews and parent-teacher associations because they believed that there was limited time to engage with teachers and opted instead to have workshops that gave them an opportunity to engage with homework content or teach English language and computer skills. Educators on the other hand, viewed parents who were involved in parent-teacher associations as engaged parents and thought it problematic that CALD parents who most needed to be engaged, chose not to. But parents' lack of knowledge about the system should not be attributed to a lack of interest in education. It is more likely that parents were often hesitant to participate in school activities because they were "inhibited by their self-consciousness with respect to their use of English" (Crozier, 2009, p.293). This same thought was articulated by an educator at a participating school. The interviews indicated that when given the opportunity to talk about their children's education, CALD parents are passionate, thoughtful and pragmatic.

> Those students coming from Iraq and I think here some of them they are still at the edge of beginning of the primary school and the language is the problem and the problem is learning from

> home…If they are home their parents are not speaking English, so it means the language is difficult for those children to learn from their parents….he will not participate in class because he was worried to not make something wrong or say a word the wrong way and the other children will start laughing at him. (Educator)

This comment is particularly important in a context where there are significant cultural differences with the traditional western way of schooling and why many parents did not perceive the parent-teacher activities organised by the school as true venues of participation.

> I feel that meeting the parents every 3 months for parent-teacher night and results is not enough. We do not get enough time with the teacher. We need to meet more often/regularly so if there is something wrong/issues with the children, we can solve it. Sometimes 3 months is too late for parents to do anything. (Parent)

It is evident that parent engagement in schools is thus largely based on the school actors with whom they came in contact.

Language and Western Ways of Knowing as Cultural Capital

While CALD parents interviewed, understood and valued education, those with limited English and educational capital, realised that they were unable to assist with homework or academic work. Additionally, due to their lack of sanctioned cultural capital and knowledge of the Australian educational school system, many parents with limited English language skills delegated responsibility for communicating with the school to their children. Parents were unsure how to influence school discipline policy and educator's pedagogy as they felt ill-equipped educationally to intervene in the school processes. While most parents praised the school leadership, they felt that the leaders were powerless to control the classroom pedagogy. Both parents and educators however agreed that relying on the children to communicate messages and information from the school was not a good idea as they (parents) were likely to be given the incorrect messages particularly if the children communicating the messages were in trouble at school.

A lack of knowledge about the Australian schooling system, economic issues resulting sometimes from the lack of recognition of past qualifications of

parents, meant that parents are not always available to support their children and engage at the school level. Many parents expressed a sense of powerlessness in the school, which was further exacerbated by the fact that communication with the school was infrequent and focused almost solely on the internet, email and texting. Parents also discussed a lack of classroom management skills and felt that discipline was weaker in the classes with CALD students. They were concerned that this lack of discipline is the result of poor academic results and has led to the development of negative attitudes in the children towards school. Parents on the other hand thought the fault lay with the school.

> From my experience, children who do that [act out] in the classroom [do so] because they're not being challenged. So academically, the work is not an appropriate level for them and it's not stimulating. So that comes back to the teacher, not giving them enough to keep their mind active...So for children that are at different levels, that's where the differentiated learning comes in, and they should be setting the curriculum at a higher level to engage those children …The school system is failing these kids. The schools have got a lot to answer for. They need to change their teaching strategies because they don't all learn the same way. (Parent)

Additionally, CALD parents were unfamiliar with the school's expectations of parents and unacquainted with the genres used by teachers when talking about curriculum and pedagogy. This was misinterpreted by schools as evidence that parents were not interested in their children's schooling. This was in stark contrast to many overseas contexts, where teaching and academic work is left to the schools and teachers. The expectation in Australia is that parents share responsibility as partners in education, a concept that is therefore alien to many CALD communities.

> My husband is Indian and in India the kids hop in an auto or get picked up and they go to school and they come back and that's it. You might attend a parent-teacher interview and an end of year school function and apart from that the children's school environment is where the children are and the parents are at home and that's it. So for him it was an adjustment. (Parent)

5.2.4 Concluding comments

- Parents saw their role as largely supporting their children so that they could succeed academically

- Due to their lack of sanctioned cultural capital and knowledge of the Australian educational school system, many parents with limited English language skills, delegated responsibility for education, to their children

- CALD parents were unfamiliar with the school's expectations of parents and unacquainted with the genres used by teachers when talking about curriculum and pedagogy

- CALD parents wanted more homework than was currently given and believed that the curriculum was not challenging and their children are studying material that was well below their ability level

- Educators saw parent engagement as largely supporting the school and to assist with classroom management

- Educators felt that when parents had a negative experience of schooling or subjects, they imposed that negativity upon their children.

Enablers and barriers to parent engagement

Parent engagement in Australian schools is characterised by many barriers with potential however for enablement. The most often cited barriers for CALD parents were:

- Lack of cultural capital

- Lack of common language

- Communication

- Time- workforce constraints

- Social isolation

- Parent unfamiliarity with the school system – hesitancy to cause offence or make trouble.

Most parents see the main limitation to engagement in education arising from the demands on their time and the restrictions of work on their availability to attend school events or assist with school work. Some CALD parents remarked that they worked long hours, sometimes in low paid jobs and were unable to assist the children with their homework. One grandmother remarked that her son was involved in physically strenuous work and often came home too tired to assist the child with academic work.

> But a lot of parents, both parents are working, and it is very difficult because their hours - I'm caring for my son's children but he still wants to be the person in there, part of the learning. (Grandmother)

Parents also complained about their overseas qualifications not being recognised in Australia. This meant that many had to accept low paid jobs with long hours so they had little or no time to assist their children academically or improve their own academic knowledge. CALD parents therefore often experience more constraints on their time and energy due to economic pressures.

Language is a barrier to many parents and the ability to speak and understand English well gives CALD parents a sense of identity and power. Those with poor English language skills therefore lose some of the authority they had in their home countries and hence cannot communicate effectively with the school such as talking to a teacher (Trueba, 2004). As with the interviews, many CALD parents had to rely on their children as translators with other school personnel, shifting the accepted authority structure within both the family and the school. CALD parents especially those who did not speak English well were intimidated by the secondary school context. Some participating schools however went to great lengths to facilitate communication between CALD parents and school personnel, hiring translators to assist as frequently as funding allowed. Sometimes bilingual teachers in the school served as translators. Parents found the availability of adult English as a Second Language (ESL) classes offered by some of the participating schools to be the most valuable. Some parents expressed a desire for more with flexibility of ESL classes to capture those parents who were not available during the day. Participating schools, educators and parents agreed that CALD parent participation in school activities was limited

by linguistic factors. Therefore schools that adopt a multi-cultural, multi-lingual approach whenever possible will, inevitably, have better parent engagement.

The idea that the parents' or native language involvement could disturb the English language acquisition of their children is closely related to dominant learning approaches that prioritise monolingual over multilingual instruction methods (Meyer et al., 2015). However, preliminary research indicates that any form of parental support, including the use of the home language is crucial for CALD students' literacy development (Caesar & Nelson, 2014). There is a tension between keeping a culture's values from the minority background, and succeeding in the dominant culture expressed through the schooling system, which is highly problematic. If a parent's primary language is not English, they generally report problems such as unsuitable meeting times, not feeling welcome in the school, and the teacher or school administrator speaks only English. As Guo (2006) also found, teachers tend to use specialist educational language with parents, and assume that parents understand the system.

Moreover, the cultural capital that CALD parents use to position their actions in schools often differs from the forms of capital recognized and valued by the school. For example some CALD parents place emphasis on classroom and home discipline and completion of homework, while others have emphasised the importance of respect. Such cultural values may limit the questions that CALD parents might ask in communicating with schools. The great irony is that even the parents who attempted to engage with the school felt disengaged. Our interview with educators revealed a lack of awareness as to how these parents, thought to be very satisfied with the school, feel about their experiences of engagement. The reason CALD parents do not engage is that they lack the required cultural resources to become involved. Secondly, there is a cultural incongruence between schools and CALD families (Denessen et al., 2007).

There is little, if any, acknowledgment of parents' funds of knowledge and the impact on their children's lives. What we did find is that the interviews created an opportunity and a space as a channel of communication among the parents who participated as they felt there was a determined effort been made to support them and listen to their views. This was even acknowledged

by one of the deputy principals at the schools who admitted outside the interview context that such forums with an external facilitator may be the answer to effectively engaging parents in the practices of the school.

In general, the very nature of the school, its organisation and practices, could be either an enabler or barrier to parent engagement. Many parents felt that it was much easier to engage in primary school than high school, and felt they could offer more support to both their children and the school at the primary level. They were able to understand more of the activities that occurred at the primary school level and because they understood them and had to work mostly with one teacher, they found it easier to be involved. Parents found the high school environment alienating because they could not navigate the schooling system with so many different teachers for the various subjects.

Social isolation was another significant reason for many parents from CALD backgrounds, not engaging in schools. This isolation was worsened by the fact that many grandparents were the full-time carers while the parents were at work. In order for parents to provide opportunities for success for their children, they have to be able to access social networks and organizations and build social capital (Gordon & Nocon, 2008). A school that has a welcoming climate working collaboratively with parents can provide the opportunity for CALD parents to develop social capital. Currently, school decisions especially the parent-teacher associations largely involve middle class parents who have both the social and cultural capital to influence school policy and decisions. Usually their cultural norms are part of the Australian dominant culture and are reflected in the schools. The different cultural understandings and meanings of the parents' role in the education of their children has to be acknowledged (Peters, 2014). Many CALD parents may not be aware of their capacity as educators and in some cases even see it as disrespectful to interfere with the teachers (Emerson et al., 2012).

> As a parent, I don't want to overstep my mark and be too interfering in the school. Do you know what I mean? I don't want to overstep my mark…But high school is different to primary school. (Parent)

Moreover, new responsibilities and hierarchies are often invisible and there can be "some confusion among refugee parents between what [is] perceived

as Australian law and what are Australian cultural norms" (Lewig, Arney & Salveron, 2010, p. 328). The authors found that greater community involvement would be welcomed by especially refugee parents but they do not feel they have the agency to do so. As a result, they need to be made aware of the importance of their involvement for their children's learning success, more than the majority of parents. It is important to acknowledge the different cultural backgrounds and experiences to better understand the barriers many CALD families are facing. For example, parents with refugee background will have different needs and motivations than those with migrant backgrounds, and often face additional challenges. This was clearly an area that required greater understanding on the part of educators.

> We have a lot of refugees coming into the school, it's more that they're not able - they're transitioning to safety and that is paramount. So education...it's further down the chain, I have learnt that there's a whole lot of emotions they get to before they can even think about learning. So it's not that learning is not important to them it's just that their welfare and their mental and emotional wellbeing needs to be looked after first. Then they feel that they are able to take on education. (Educator)

Enablers:

The focus on:

- Good planning to increase parent engagement

- Moving from involvement to flexible strategies for engagement of parents

- Understanding language barriers

- Intercultural understanding

- Connection with families.

Kim (2009) stresses that the actual barriers to CALD parents' involvement needs to be investigated and the focus shifted away from conceptualisations revolving around the deficiencies of parents. In interviews with educators, there was a clear absence of any long-term, workable solution to parent engagement in schools. Most schools thought that they had a good program in place and did not necessarily see their task as doing more while other

schools did acknowledge that there may be a problem and were happy to give thought to different ways of increasing CALD parent engagement in schools.

> So the challenge is finding time to connect outside of the…formality of schooling, and actually making a connection with those families. Then it's - my role as leader of - a lot of connecting through local council services because there's a lot of people on the ground and that is to connect with these families and to bring them into community...So we do try and go to that other level of where we become quite an important link for parents, especially when they may not have a cultural group or a connection with family. (Educator)

Challenges from the school side, for example, include teachers' lack of knowledge and understanding of the different needs CALD families may have. Some teachers are "likely to have more difficulties relating to parents who have a different cultural frame of reference" (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008, p. 36). Teachers are less likely to engage with CALD parents and as such Daniel (2015) identifies teacher outreach, meaning teachers' facilitation of parental involvement, as most significant to ensure lasting school-family engagements. For example, some parents may hesitate to ask teachers about some issues relating to their children because they fear that they might negatively affect the teachers' attitude towards their child. Teaching staff as well as school staff need to have intercultural understanding to deal sensibly with these parents. The response below very clearly demonstrates the need for teacher professional development in this area.

> It's understanding the aspirations of our community and restructuring our commitments as a school to meet the changing context of our community. So we need to be adaptable. We need to be as a school an ongoing learning institution. (Educator)

Also Kim (2009) stresses the importance of culturally sensitive teacher education that clearly addresses deficit perspectives of staff towards CALD parents. Al-Hassan and Gardner (2002) suggest some strategies for educators to get CALD parents more actively involved are sending welcome notes to the parents in their language, inviting them to the school, being aware of special cultural and religious holidays, including them on the school calendar and as classroom celebrations. In addition, bureaucracies need to be broken down

and school policies need to become more flexible allowing more diverse types of engagement. The conclusion taken from a study undertaken by Nathans, Wang and Booker (2014, p.42) illustrates the difficulties of educating teachers:

> Our schools and teachers need to adjust their expectations and requirements of parents from different cultural backgrounds. The dominant white middle class models that construct the role of parents' involvement as 'supporters, helpers and fundraisers' may not be applicable for some minority parents.

Many approaches to parent engagement evolve around privileged middle-class values, which are not necessarily 'compatible' with the lives and perspectives of CALD parents (Daniel, 2015). Since many parents found the focus group interviews for this project an important forum for them to talk about their experiences of engagement at the school, it may be worthwhile for educators and parents to come together in a number of shared interactions to enable independent and isolated CALD parents in particular to develop confidence in engaging with the school. This however cannot be achieved unless there is a shared understanding of learning and the role of parents and teachers. The concept of entering into dialogue with teachers is not familiar to many CALD parents. It is important therefore as a step forward that the school create an environment where parents feel comfortable so that they can get to know each other. CALD parents can be taught strategies for engaging with teachers to minimise their fears of offending their children's teachers. This can be one way of forming a community of parents who can network and connect socially. The approach is to work from the ground up rather than from the top down if CALD parent voice and engagement in school is likely to occur.

It may not always possible to bring in an external facilitator for this process (like the interview process) but parents and teachers can come together to at least agree on the parameters and protocols for engagement. There needs to be a willingness between teachers and parents to negotiate across cultural divides. This would alleviate many of the tensions and fears CALD parents have about engaging with the school and it may well be an opportunity to involve CALD parents in the school community activities, a desire reinforced by both teachers and parents in the project interview process.

Barriers for CALD parents

- Language difficulties - not familiar with the language used at school- CALD parents feel they may present as unsophisticated

- Communication - is conventional

- Time-workforce constraints - scheduling issues from conflicts with work

- Social isolation - may make it difficult to attend meetings or form alliances

- Difficulty understanding Australian school system - complaining may affect child's future at the school.

Enablers for CALD Parents

Well-resourced schools that have access to/provide:

- Translation services to better engage CALD parents in educating children

- Teacher professional development in this arena

- Effective communication with CALD parents

- A program of parent-teacher dialogue

- Community liaison staff at the school

- Bilingual teaching staff as teacher-parent liaison

- A parent engagement model that is responsive to the local community.

The demographic of low SES accompanied by lack of English proficiency, migrant/refugee status, few family resources and ethnicity, that were identified in this study are well described in the CALD research on parent engagement in education. What this case study adds is a further understanding of the process of access and equity of access as well as the disabling and enabling factors for successful engagement of parents in the schooling process. In particular, it highlights the importance of translation

services to better engage CALD parents in the education of their children and to prevent further social isolation.

How well parents engage in schools is dependent upon: the resources that schools can access; the intercultural sensitivity of educators; avenues for professional development in this arena; and, the ability of the school to communicate effectively with CALD parents. These are the key factors to effectively engaging CALD parents in the education process.

While both parents and educators were in agreement about the difficulty of engaging parents due to English proficiency and literacy, they differed in their perceptions on their roles and responsibilities. Many of the educators described parents' apathy towards engagement in and with schools while parents complained about the lack of interest shown by teachers. This highlights the importance of schools working in partnership with parents, supporting and encouraging parents by enabling access to interpreters and interpretation services, and broadly communicating with parents in a culturally responsible manner.

The false belief by educators that lack of engagement reflects a lack of interest in the child's education highlights the importance of professional development in intercultural education. If possible, educators and schools should communicate with parents in different languages (where and when possible), instigating discussions through different and easily accessible communication strategies and technologies which may include translators, bilingual parents and teaching staff and community organisations that may offer free translator services.

Schools need to listen and respond to the particular context of the lives of parents and students (Emerson, Fear, Fox, & Sanders, 2012) and become acquainted with the barriers to engagement. By extension, engagement implies enabling parents to work with educators in the schooling of their children, combining the knowledge that they bring from their life experiences with the teachers' knowledge. In this way, power is shared by educators and parents, with school decisions being jointly determined and mutually beneficial. These small steps will go a long way in developing a more meaningful and profound understanding of diversity in twenty-first century classrooms.

6 Case study: Parents of children with special needs

Kerith Power

6.1 Introduction

This case study draws on focus group responses from two categories of parents of children with special needs. The first category is parents of children attending the only special education centre that participated in the study, 'Limestone Special Needs School'. Children at this school have disabilities that preclude attendance at mainstream schools and are predicted to require ongoing support into adulthood. In relation to parent engagement, families of children with severe disabilities are engaged with their children's learning to a much greater extent by necessity. The second category of data is drawn from incidental discussion of parents of children with special needs in 'Mainstream Schools'.

Table 3 shows the demography of the 'Limestone' region where the special education centre is located. It serves an area up to 60 km in diameter. Distance is a key issue identified by educators and parents in relation to parent engagement in the school.

Table 3: Limestone population profile

Population	Australian born, Indigenous citizens	Comparative size	SEIFA index	Industries	Median household income	People in need of assistance due to disability[2]
24,905	84.9%	2nd largest in state	911[3]	Mining, agriculture and forestry	A$814 or more per week[4]	"Limestone" 5.7%
	1.6% Indigenous	50th largest in Australia		Engineering works	Unemployment rate 7%	State capital 5.5%
	91.5% Australian citizens			Service centre		Australia 4.6%

6.2 Learning: Limestone parents and educators

The main objective of learning for children with special needs is to develop maximum independence and opportunities for social inclusion for each student to the limit of their capacity. As parents pointed out, 'Just because they have learning difficulties doesn't mean that they can't learn'. The most important aspects of learning identified by parents of children with special needs were:

- Attention to the specific learning needs of each child

- Underpinned by accurate ongoing diagnosis of the learning problems and

- Teaching that addresses those specific problems.

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[2]This population is defined as people in Limestone who need assistance in their day to day lives with any or all of the following activities – self-care, body movements or communication – because of a disability, long-term health condition, or old age.
[3] The average (population weighted) SEIFA score on the index of disadvantage is 1,000. Therefore, areas with an index above 1,000 are above the Australian average and so relatively less disadvantaged, while index figures below 1,000 indicate areas of relatively greater disadvantage when compared to the nation.
[4] compared with $924 in state capital.

6.2.1 What is meant by learning?

Learning for children with special needs is more variable than the general population and depends on the condition of each individual child.

Each parent of a child with severe disabilities identified different learning needs and different ways of learning.

> [C]'s learning comes in phases … He could be open and take something for months and then he'll go six months with just nothing … you just have to go with that. You can tell when he's running again because he starts questioning things again. (Parent)
>
> Some kids are great at reading questions on a paper and there's other kids that can learn by doing hands on stuff … if you're learning your fractions doing cooking like half a cup ... if you had more support then you could implement different strategies on how to teach different kids. (Parent)

Limestone educators, like the parents, stated that the more commonly understood 'academic' definition of learning is not applicable to many children with special needs. Learning, for them is not necessarily age appropriate, but individually appropriate.

Learning life skills and behaviours that will help them to survive in the world is important. Teaching is dependent on a realistic expectation of a child's capacity (e.g. non-verbal children understand particular communications but will not necessarily produce them) and learning has occurred when the particular skill or knowledge is transferred from one situation to another.

6.2.2 Where does most of a child's learning happen?

Again, each parent in the Limestone community had an individual and different approach to where learning happens. This included a deterministic perspective basing learning on early childhood experiences prior to kindergarten and school. Others said that learning happens formally at school but also informally at home and 'down the street'. A particular characteristic response was that everyone learns from everyone else, both within families

but also in the community. The child with special needs plays a teaching role, enabling compassion and acceptance in his family, associates and community.

> At home when they're starting to grow, before they're ready to go off to kindy and to school. (Parent)
>
> I think he does most of his learning … at home and school. It's like he's learning as much at home and down the street and everywhere else. He's more like primary school, more like probably a five year old … his learning happens everywhere. (Parent)
>
> I'm a big believer in getting him out and about into society … we chose to put [M] into a mainstream kindergarten when he started kindy. I just wanted him to interact with kids that were able to move around and do stuff. I thought maybe it might give him a bit of an inspiration to try and maybe crawl, or maybe roll … it taught the other kindy kids that not all kids are the same. … still when we're out and about at the supermarket his kindy friends … will run up and start talking to [M] … They still remember [M] and they still come up and engage with him, they weren't only teaching him something. He was teaching them something as well. (Parent)
>
> [His brothers have] learnt … compassion, not to judge people… they'll stick up for someone that they don't even know and say 'well listen, you're going to pick on them by saying nasty comments but that could be my little brother'. (Parent)

Limestone educators said that most learning occurs at home and most often when a child is very young.

6.2.3 What do you think helps your children to learn?

Limestone parents identified understanding the needs of each child as the basis of their individual learning plan was important in helping their children to learn. This was associated with specialised equipment and techniques and they also named encouragement and support as helping children as important.

> Understanding. If you understand their specific needs and how they learn, you've got no hope, like you need to know what works for each individual. (Parent)
>
> I find a lot of encouragement goes a long way... We all like a bit of praise ... building up their confidence. (Parent)
>
> Going into the classrooms and showing them support. (Parent)
>
> Services and equipment available to help their learning, like ... you have to have the right resources. It's not like your everyday school. (Parent)
>
> In her earlier years, she was learning from PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System), seeing the pictures and making the connection with the words and the picture. (Parent)
>
> Every child here has NEPs which is a Negotiated Education Plan. No child has the same plan that they go by. So they've all got their own set of criteria on how they learn and how the teacher's going to teach them to learn. What works for one might not work for the others. The teachers here are quite dedicated in working out the best way to teach a single child. We're invited to come to here ... You can ring up and make an appointment at any time to sit down and discuss if you want to change it, or if something's not right or something's changed, or your child's needs change. (Parent)

Limestone educators named time as an important factor in helping special needs children to learn because children who have special needs may take a much longer to learn things than a mainstream child. Like the parents, they named emotional factors such as unconditional love, attention, and encouragement as crucial factors. In terms of teaching they cited repetition, experiential techniques such as 'hands-on-hands' activities and noted that for some children these techniques require more than one adult to apply.

6.2.4 What does successful learning mean to you?

The qualities of successful learning for Limestone parents are very much linked to the status of the child's special needs and are often related to completing small reported activities at school. Achieving some level of

independence according to the appropriate level of expectation for each individual child is highly important for these parents.

> Acceptance of the child's condition is a big one. … with [M's] report card, he has a portfolio and they take pictures of him doing activities. Then you have the picture that you fold out, so if he's been painting a picture of him painting, then you fold it out and there's his beautiful painting. That gets sent home every term along with the ... little written report as well. (Parent)

> Facilitator [feedback to grandmother]: if you've got somebody who's living independently at 20 years old with care and she's got a social life, ... she's got friends; she's safe, she's protected ... and she's got work. (Parent)

> I'm still involved obviously, picking her up and taking her different places sometimes. But it's excellent when you know that they're in a safe place and there are carers there keeping an eye on them. It's very good. (Parent)

> You want to give them the opportunities to be like a normal ... be like everybody else. (Parent)

> Have a meaningful life… Yeah, a little bit more independent. (Parent)

> [The principal] said: we don't have to write everybody's reports and measure them against benchmarks here at this school, as opposed to the mainstream schools." They're all getting their ticks against ... outcomes and stuff, but he said "we're a lot freer here. We can just because of the individual learning of each child" ... We still get reports, but they're an individual thing of just showing what they've done and where they're at with that, whether they've achieved a goal or working towards it, or if they're doing it with help … I sometimes don't believe that [my child] does something because he won't do it at home. I think sometimes they get more out of your child ... because they can – "oh well, mum and dad aren't looking, we'll go to school, we'll just do it." (Parent)

The Limestone educators noted that success for these children is not measured by the normal benchmarks of curriculum outcomes because these children are achieving at particular goals that are negotiated with the parents according to each child's ability.

Independence is valued, but not every child is expected to become independent because they have special needs and special ways of succeeding. Being a participant in the community and being able to relate socially to each other and to mainstream members of the community are noted as important contributors to independence for some children while for others it is a success to actually unpack their bag and take the things out and get ready for the day.

6.2.5 Role of parents

Limestone parents identified many ways in which they assist their children's learning, both in relation to school and learning at home.

- Sharing school work across the family

So we make [school work] everyone's problem [within the family] and we don't necessarily tell them the answers or anything, so we'll do it too. We also learn. I just think it's part of being a family … If you're going to be family you help each other out and your job as a parent is to help your children through so that they can have a successful life, hopefully not needing you as much except for a bit of [love] every now and then. (Parent)

- Grandparents helping out with behavioural learning

Well I think they were a little bit easier to control when they were younger. I think as they got older of course, teenage years you get your usual problems. But I had my husband here up until two years ago, so it's made it a little bit more harder especially with [A], because she gets really cranky and most difficult at times and pushes me around a bit and so on. So she's pretty strong … Well I usually say if you can't behave yourself you won't be going down to your mother's. Her mother usually comes up to our place normally every Sunday and has tea with them and all that, but I just have to say I won't let you do certain things if you don't behave yourself. … Every morning without fail - or school mornings - she gets really cranky because she wants to play with things. I try and tell her well you can't play with it until you've got dressed and washed your face and cleaned your teeth and so on. But it's like talking to a brick wall at times, but once everything's done ... and she's waiting for the bus to come, oh I'm good now. (Grandparent)

- Seeking specialist assistance, repetition, sensitivity

Well, we started off with speech therapy and occupational therapy groups. I held him back from kindy until we [really had] a diagnosis and he was too unsafe, until we got diagnosis at four. So we had normal kindy where we had people helping, he had like an SSO the whole way through, even in primary school. It's a lot of knowing when to push him with his work and when to back off and … repeating a lot of things. We have to repeat so many things and still now, over and over and over again, then eventually he will do it. He'll get used to it. Even though - we were reading to him since he was one and it's only since probably 13 he won't let me anymore ... But we suspect he can read more than he lets on. He found something [in the paper] the other day and he said see, "that's what that word says." Yeah, in there when he lets it out - and that's one of the problems with school is that if he's not willing to take it in or let it out … you might as well talk to a brick wall. (Parent)

- Parent role in teaching basic feeding and drinking

We did a lot of repetitive stuff. Like [L] we had lots of physio, OT, speech. Yeah, with [M] I have to do everything for him. Like I said he's in a wheelchair. He can't feed himself so he has a spoon and I have a spoon and we try and get him to scoop it up. He will bring it to his mouth, so when he brings it to his mouth we'll put a teaspoon of food in there, trying to teach him how to be independent along with his drink. (Parent)

- Supporting engagement in sports as spectator

My older two children, they play sports so we go out and watch sport as well and he cheers on the sideline. The club that our kids play for, they're very good. They come up and talk to him and it's good. (Parent)

- Building a relationship with the school

I think it's important to have a good relationship with the school, especially with special needs kids, because if there is a problem like they can say oh bring it up, like 'is this happening at home?' Then you can say 'oh yeah, it's happening at home' and you can work together to either find a fix for it or maybe have that bit of help, like a bit of support. Like here it's a bit like a support system as well for your family as well. One of the reasons I'm in

the parent group is because - and why I'm so involved in the school, is because if you've got that good communication with the school and a relationship with the school, then that helps. If they're struggling - you feed off each other. We do. I don't know what anybody else [here does] … We also pay for our child for a psychologist to come in and we meet every month. They come in and they speak to the teacher and we have personal meetings as well out of school to try and help [C's] schooling. The thing with [C], school's school and home's home so he won't do homework or anything like that because that's home. (Parent)

- Managing multiple family needs

I have a 13 year old boy as well. He's in a mainstream school. He's quite fine, nothing actually wrong with him. I'd say socially he gets affected because he's only known his brother. So socially he can be a bit shy and bit funny, a bit awkward but he's still got mates and all that, but he seems happy. He's quite brainy. He's doing sports and all that and the other one's not because he can't handle losing, so he's socialized. [C's] socialising is very much nonexistent because he just cannot handle losing. (Parent)

6.3 Limestone educators

Limestone educators stated that parents of special needs children have a huge role in children's learning that goes well beyond the time when mainstream children would be expected to become independent. They said however that a big distinction exists between parents and teachers. In the school each child has the help of a team of teachers and a school support officer SSO funded for a particular disability. Quite often with specific learning techniques it requires more than one person. Educators pointed out that a lot of parents are not in the position of being able to apply these techniques because 'they're in survival mode and it's the best they can do to get the child to school every day and work with their other children or with other obligations'.

6.3.1 Barriers and enablers

Barriers

- Educators perceive a clash of values between parents and the schools

- Concerns about special needs children in mainstream schools are spread across all site types in every state. With a few exceptions, the learning of both 'mainstream' children and special needs children are generally regarded as suffering from these arrangements

- Many parents acknowledge that their special needs child is difficult to deal with. Parents often need to engage children's classroom teachers in terms of behaviour management to ensure a common approach to regulating some issues where there could easily be slippage between the expectations of school and home.

Enablers

- Purposeful actions for schools to include parents, to invite parents in, to have special events for parents, to have fun and social things with parents and with whole families and in the community

- Including families, and children with special needs into the local community

- Making the children intentionally visible in the community and allowing them to claim their membership of the community

- Implementing systems of documentation:

  ➢ Daily portfolios that document the children's learning to communicate it to parents

  ➢ A system of assessment that's developed around the Australian Curriculum applicable to children with special needs who don't necessarily meet the academic benchmarks

- Several parents of children with special needs identified helpful interventions made by schools including drawing their attention to and identifying learning difficulties and/or providing support in the school.

6.3.2 Barriers and enablers: Limestone educators

Barriers

- Distance from school

It's also important that parents come into the classroom and seem to be friendly with the staff and the other children. It's very difficult for many of these parents to come into school and to attend social events, excursions and things like that because the school has a catchment area where some children come bussed in or taxied in from up to 60 kilometres away. So there's a huge barrier for parents in participating.

- Necessary focus for parents on survival

> A lot of parents are not in the position of being able to engage, simply because they're in survival mode and it's the best they can do to actually get the child to school every day and work with their other children or with other obligations. (Educator)

Enablers

For Limestone educators, parent engagement in their children's school learning is regarded as a really key part of how successful a child is at school. They provided the following examples of how the school supports parents of children with special needs to be engaged in their children's learning.

- Documentation

> One of the things this school does is to try to include parents in their children's learning by sending home very specific information in the form of very clearly documented learning in terms of photographs and captions that document a child's achievements in the day. (Educator)

- Meeting and greeting

> They also meet and greet parents and they try to spread that throughout the culture of the school by not necessarily having the same person or the allocated SSO meet the children when they come in the morning. It's just somebody from that child's room. (Educator)

- Conversations at end of day

Quite often in those meet and greets and also when the children are escorted out to meet their parents after their day, a conversation appears where a child's achievements are verbally reported. Parents get to pass on their knowledge about what's been happening with the child and how they're feeling that day. (Educator)

- Seeking innovative communication techniques

The school itself spends a lot of time working out how to communicate with parents about their children. The portfolios are thought to help children who may not necessarily communicate verbally, because parents can see what the child has done that day from the evidence of the photographic record. (Educator)

- Developing links in local community

The school makes a really big effort, not only to involve parents, but also the local community and the kids go out very often. Some of them have developed links in the local community and are known by name by shopkeepers and people who run community facilities, go to sports and join in the events of the town; parades and things like that. (Educator)

- Scaffolding special needs adulthood

This augurs well for the children when they get to be older and they're known in the community. Even after they've graduated from school or if they haven't been able to graduate and they're living an adult life of some kind, they're known in the community and they belong there. (Educator)

- Understanding and communicating varying achievements

The achievements of the children are widely varying but because of their individual education plans they're strongly documented and strongly communicated to parents and carers. (Educator)

6.3.3 Barriers and enablers: Limestone parents

Barriers

- Lack of access to resources for specialist help

We decided what money we have is used for the psychologist, so [C's] missed out on speech therapy and OT. We do have an OT that's been helping us on the side via phone calls, but now we've got that money we can get the speech therapy in. Yeah, we were very surprised. Like we missed out on the NDIS because of [C's] age. We miss out on all of that and now they have funded us anyway and we were surprised. We thought we'd lost everything and then last month they said yes. (Parent)

- Extreme consequences of poverty

We missed out on respite on the holidays because we didn't have the money. He needs two days away from us with other kids to be calm and to settle ... it's like a break from us as well. Well he just needs that break from us as well … He became very violent, cost us $1000 in house damage, but we now have the money back. We have the funding back. It's all his, it's not ours and we have to get permission for everything, but we're hoping in the next two years he's going to come a lot further with that funding. We have to fight for it. We fought tooth and nail through [the state capital] and everywhere else and had every specialist we knew working for him, trying to get us help. (Parent)

- Lack of specialist equipment

Equipment for us is the hardest - you have to fight to get equipment. Normally it doesn't come real fast, like we waited 11 months to get his first wheelchair from the time that they prescribed it. He was going to kindy just in a little stroller, because he was starting to get too heavy to carry around ... so that was really hard because a lot of the kindy kids, they thought that he was still a baby because they associated a pram or stroller. But once he got his wheelchair a lot of the kids went [M's] growing up now, like because he had his wheelchair. But everything takes a long time. You're looking at around 12 months from the time that you start for the prescription. [M], by the time he'd got his wheelchair he'd grown that much that they had to actually turn around and order another one. So that's an ongoing struggle. (Parent)

- Challenges for parents confronting classroom of special needs children

It's really hard because some of the kids just don't accept people coming to the school. They're all so different and it can be very daunting for parents. Some of them only know their child. They don't come here, so to see some of the other children it can be daunting. I guess we're all pretty immune to it now, but we've been coming long enough. Sometimes it is hard to get a foot in the door and I can understand they don't want parents seeing how they're dealing with other kids. It's not that necessarily they're doing anything bad, but because some of them do scream, that's just them, it can look different than your normal school setting. (Parent)

Enablers

- Respite for parents

 [A] has three hours per week, usually the Thursday and the outing mostly - oh she goes out for tea and then she goes to a place, for people with a disability. They get together and ...Yeah, like a social group. They do various things: tenpin bowling, just a lot of things that they've got a community hall where they have a bingo night. (Parent)

- Support in a parent group

But that's why I've pushed the parent group so much, so that the parents that want to be involved can. We do, we get together once a month but because the kids come from a wide area, like they have children come from M which is 50 kilometres from here, then B which is another 20 kilometres from there. They all get taxied and bussed and then you've got all the surrounding districts. It's hard to get parents in because they have to travel from quite far away, like half an hour, 45 minute drive some of them. The only time that all the parents really come in all at once would be like the family fun day - you still don't get that many ... and the school concert and the presentation day, whatever it is at the end of the year. I have been trying to push for an art thing like my other son's school had, but it has not been successful yet. (Parent)

- School time as parent relief

Some parents with high needs kids, to send them off to school, that's ...their time where they can go right ... It could be like their respite type thing for the day, so they... [sighs] oh thank God I got ... Coffee time now. (Parent)

6.4 Parents and educators of special needs children in mainstream schools

6.4.1 Overview

Parents with special needs children in mainstream schools were identified across the transcripts, appearing in eight of the thirty-three research sites. Many comments were made about how the presence of children with special needs in 'mainstream' schools and classrooms works in relation to their own learning and the learning of 'mainstream' children (see Appendix V). Concerns about special needs children in mainstream schools were spread across all site types in every state. With a few exceptions, the learning of both 'mainstream' children and special needs children are generally regarded as suffering in relation to these arrangements.

As with the Limestone parents, a wide range of special needs was identified, requiring a higher than typical level of parent engagement with schools. Unlike the Limestone parents, in both primary and secondary mainstream schools, children were identified with a high incidence of unspecified 'difficulties', 'problems' or 'issues'. It was difficult to distinguish between children with disabilities, those who need guidance or behaviour management, and those affected by broader social issues such as poverty, racism and other forms of social marginalisation. The most commonly mentioned disability was ADHD and this occurred across all cohorts and site types. Dyslexia was mentioned, as were autism, auditory processing disability and intellectual delay. Two parents remarked that there is no funding attracted to dyslexia, although it's a recognised disability. So that's why the schools don't do anything for these children. Independent schools with superior resources could afford to provide better support for children with special needs whereas in public schools parents were required to negotiate arrangements between specialist support services and the school.

In some schools the high levels of children with special needs has a profound impact on teachers and students. The attitude of teachers varies to this situation.

> We would have one in four children recognised here as at risk, 25 per cent. … child protection, academic at risk… a formalised … diagnosed special need. We're not whinging about it. That's our backyard, that's what we do. … That's why a lot of these great people are still here because they like that challenge or whatever we do, give for the kids. … whatever we can give a lot of these kids, you can see that it's greatly appreciated too. … It doesn't always have to come from mum or dad. You can see it in the kids. (Educator)

As well as being categorised in the table at Appendix V, the comments from both educators and parents are compiled in the following according to barriers and enablers to parents' engagement in their children's learning. The barriers and enablers for learning for children with special needs are similar for the parent's engagement with their children's learning.

Barriers

Several parents commented on the inadequacy or unevenness of teacher qualifications to deal with children's special learning needs. While in some cases, schools had pro-actively engaged with parents/ grandparents to assist them to meet their children's learning needs, several parents were unhappy with the schools' responses.

- Use of ESL class for learning difficulties

> Their solution to the problem with her was to put her in an ESL class. So ESL is English as a second language. So that in itself is discriminatory… Even when we got the diagnosis, the school didn't believe it. They would not make modifications to assist her. When we actually bucked up and she had to re-sit those tests with assistance, the level in her ability was so different. (Parent)

- Placing special needs children together in lowest grade

I want to be a part of his education. I want to help him as much as I can. I took him to [M] University to get an IQ test, because I needed to know where my son was at … They've put all the children that have educational problems in the lowest grade class possible. Now, I find that [S]'s behaviour - my son - his behaviour is much more destructive, and he's finding it hard to learn more. (Parent)

- Challenge of too busy classrooms

There's too much going on. Having the computers in that classroom with them is going to be a distraction. They need to simplify the classroom … the classrooms are so busy with all the posters and stuff around the walls - maybe make them a little more ADHD, ADD, ODD friendly where the room's not so busy. (Parent)

- Teacher's inappropriate responses

My girl [S] with autism - she takes off out of the classroom. She has a meltdown - they can't catch her. She's too fast. She's too fast for me. So they try and chase her. The more they chase her, the angrier she gets, and the more nonverbal she becomes. I have been into the school; "don't chase her - just let her go - she won't go outside the gates, because she knows when Mum comes she'll get trouble off me, but don't chase her - just let her go. (Parent)

Another perspective that was expressed by many parents and educators was that the proportion of children with special needs in many mainstream classes is too high to allow any of the children's learning needs to be adequately met. In this small sample, this appeared to be more evident in schools in the identified low SES areas. The intensity of attention required by children with special needs is exhausting for teacher and child alike. The sentiment expressed by one teacher that 'if one child mucks up in that classroom, that disrupts the whole class' was a common experience for teachers in mainstream classes with high proportion of special needs children.

On the other hand, many parents acknowledge that their special needs child is difficult to deal with. Where there is a common approach to the education of special needs children, in particular, behaviour management, there is a general beneficial impact on parent engagement in both school and home.

- A common approach to behaviour management

[P] has got ADHD, so she's difficult … her teacher and her clashed. They just constantly fought. Her schooling went down. The teacher was really rude. I told the school. I said, nah, no more. She has to go into another class. The new teacher was comfortable with her. She was patient with her. This teacher, she had her for two years straight which actually helped her to get her schooling, to get her to behave, to get her studying better and all of that, and make her want to come to school and enjoy herself at school. So I think it's good for the kids if they interact with their teacher and they like their teacher. (Parent)

Many of the issues raised as barriers seem to be addressed by a more sympathetic and informed approach to the presence of special needs children in classrooms and schools.

- Educators learning parental values

Some of their values are not the same as our personal values. Sometimes they're not the same as the values perhaps that the school perhaps presents. We have to be a learner here. (Educator)

- Setting expectations for special needs children

We have specially employed staff members who are engaged in helping children with their work –learning support. We still want those children to perform to the best of their ability, so those expectations are still there. They might not necessarily be able to do the same academic thinking or high order patterns that some of the other children do but the bar needs to be set and they need to have those expectations as well, to do the best that they can possibly do. (Educator)

- Scaffolding and assistant teacher support

That's when additional scaffolding may come in to play. … Or if there is an additional teacher in the classroom, or if it's group work and you can be strategic with who you put together to ensure that everyone is working together and they might have a different role so they can work together to solve that problem. Even though you haven't specifically taught them all the skills they need to answer that question. (Educator)

- Knowing how they learn and what their capacities are

It's knowing those children and knowing how they learn and what their capacities are that you can then do that to put the groups together. (Educator)

- Links between specialists and schools

You know how a specialist has one line of thought and then … the education department might have another line of thought. … having them link up so that they unite as a team and can work together, and ... I find I'm the link. I have to do a lot of outside sourcing, like a lot of testing. (Educator)

- Teachers who identify children's learning difficulties

Well I've been lucky. For my children, their classroom teacher did pick up their problems. From Year 1 - they were picked up… They were given testing through the counsellor. Special testing done through them to identify what they think the problem is in the learning. (Parent)

- Teachers with specialist qualifications

For the first year everything was good, because the teacher that he had was actually a teacher that had specialised with learning difficulties. She was helping kids with these problems, and knew how to deal with them. (Parent)

- Family adapting to particular situation

I believe every family has their own issues at home whether it's on the lighter end of the scale, on the severe end of the scale. There's a lot of mental health out there as well and it is showing I feel in younger kids. So each family just has to tailor make for their own options, do you know what I mean, their own best decisions. (Parent)

- Celebrating all achievements

Well even yesterday … I'm not sure how old she is, but she's got Down syndrome but she was even just hanging onto the ring by herself. She's tiny and her mum is going, is she holding on … she was, she was just lying there and hanging onto the ring so we both got a little bit excited and then she cracked when I got her out of the pool. So she wasn't happy that it was the end of her lesson. (Parent)

- Acceptance

Successful learning means that the child is able to perform at their ability level. Not every child is going to be a scholar. So as long as they're being able to achieve the competencies at a level that is appropriate for them. From a teaching background, I know not everyone is going to be able to achieve all the time. (Parent)

For parents of children with special needs, the ability to appreciate their unique contribution was an outstanding characteristic of this study. Parental comments such as 'With her autism, she doesn't see our world the way that we see it - she sees everything differently to what we have, and you've got to understand' (Parent) reveal the truth of the Limestone parents statement that the special needs child can be seen to be a teacher who can teach all of us increased compassion, humour, tolerance and resilience.

6.5 Summary of findings

The research highlighted the complexities for families of children with special needs in both mainstream and specialist classrooms. Their engagement is often fraught and complicated by the great range of needs that children experience. Their engagement with schools is different from other parent groups out of necessity. The research shows they spend a lot of time advocating for their children, and even assisting with their care in the classrooms.

Parents and educators held some shared perspectives on children's learning and parental roles in a special needs context. Parent's perspectives on learning were characterized by their attention to the specific learning needs of each child, underpinned by accurate ongoing diagnosis of the learning problems and teaching that addresses those specific problems. They evidenced a deterministic perspective in which everyone learns from everyone else, both within families and community and where the child with special needs is seen to play a teaching role, enabling compassion and acceptance in his family, associates and community. The goal of learning is independence and the opportunity of a 'normal life'.

From the educator's perspective, learning and teaching needs to be individually appropriate rather than age appropriate and is about learning life skills and behaviours that will help children survive in the world. They believe that most learning occurs at home when a child is very young and that learning takes more time. They emphasise the importance of unconditional love, attention, encouragement and repetition and while they recognize independence is valued, not every child is expected to become independent because they have special needs and special ways of succeeding. Educators perceive a clash of values between parents and the schools with particular difficulties for special needs children in mainstream schools expressed across all site types in every state. Many parents acknowledge that their special needs child is difficult to deal with and often need to engage children's classroom teachers in terms of behaviour management to ensure common approach to regulating some issues where there could easily be slippage between the expectations of school and home.

Enabling these parents to engage in their children's learning included integrating whole families and children with special needs into the local community and supporting these children to claim their membership of the community. Implementing systems documenting children's learning, and communicating that to parents, was helpful in attaining specific learning and development goals of children, and their parents, who participated in this study.

7 Case study: Aboriginal parents and teachers in high Aboriginal enrolment schools

Margaret Somerville

7.1 Introduction

The perspective of Aboriginal parents is the least researched area of the larger question of Australian parent engagement in children's learning. A review of recent interventions in relation to 'Closing the Gap' noted the predominance of deficit constructions and proposed that strength and resilience are as significant as inequity and disadvantage (Bowes & Grace, 2014). Aboriginal parents' responses were characterised by this strength and resilience while acknowledging the profound impact of colonisation and displacement on their families and communities. The opportunity to have their say was important to them and they expressed a strong wish to continue to develop their knowledge, skills and expertise in the area of parent engagement in children's learning. Teachers in high Aboriginal enrolment schools tended to repeat deficit constructions while at times offering unique and innovative activities and programs to increase the engagement of Aboriginal parents and families in their children's learning. Teachers also expressed a desire for professional learning in this area via the overall findings of the national study.

A brief overview of data collection is presented, followed by the findings, which constitute the majority of the case study. The findings emerged by annotating approximately 400 pages of transcripts produced from the focus groups and interviews to identify key themes that emerged in response to the guiding questions. The case study is presented under the major question headings of Learning, Roles, and Enablers and Barriers. Under each major section heading the findings, or themes, are listed with representative quotes for each theme in order to honour the voices of Aboriginal participants. The first two sections, Learning and Roles are addressed separately for parents and teachers. The final heading, Enablers and Barriers is presented in a combined table both because of the many similarities between parent and teacher groups and to allow for direct comparison of differences. A summary conclusion is presented at the end of the case study.

The qualitative ethnographic research approach contributes to a significant gap in the research literature about parent engagement in children's learning. The number of sites and participants for the Aboriginal cohort addresses the typical limitations of case study research for which multi-sited and speed ethnography have been proposed as solutions (Hayes, 2015). Its context within the larger national study also supports its unique findings. Data collection, analysis and findings are characteristic of an ethnographic approach.

Overall 14 focus groups and interviews were conducted involving 72 participants. This included 31 Aboriginal parents and 39 teachers spread across three site types of Urban, Rural and Remote New South Wales. The schools in each site type were selected for their enrolment of high proportion of Aboriginal students ranging from 98% in Remote sites, 90-48% in Rural sites, and 24%, in Urban sites. Teachers and Aboriginal parent groups were aligned with each school allowing comparison between teachers and Aboriginal parent views in the same location.

Aboriginal parents included a range of carers from parents to grandparents, other extended family and custodial carers. Often several members and generations of one family were present. The word 'parents' is used throughout the report in alignment with the project brief but includes all of these categories. The Aboriginal parents who attended the focus groups were variably positioned in relation to their own educational affiliations, some being employed in schools as Aboriginal Education Officers (AEOs) or cleaners, and others with no school affiliation. There were no Aboriginal teachers involved in the study.

The 31 Aboriginal parent/carers were interviewed in groups ranging from one to nine. In the two instances where only one person turned up the participants were interviewed individually, asked the same questions, and for the same length of time. These two in-depth interviews offer rich data from grandparent carers with long-term experience as parent, grandparent and custodial parent. Their responses are integrated into the overall findings below but could equally provide a historical case study of their own.

7.2 Learning: Aboriginal Parent Responses

7.2.1 Where does most learning happen?

The response of Aboriginal parents to the question of where learning happens is key to understanding the question of their engagement in their children's learning. The responses were remarkably similar across urban, rural and remote site types. All Aboriginal focus groups and interviews responded that 'home' is where most learning happens but they extended home to include learning from community and in different places: 'Everywhere you go you're learning something new all day. You're learning from the day you are born. It could be anywhere. You could be out in the bush. Learning how to surf.'

For Aboriginal participants learning begins with birth, or even pre-birth, and continues throughout life. Learning is about 'deep time' as well as the present because it includes learning from ancestral stories of the deep past as well as stories from elders about more recent history in particular places. It includes learning for future generations for cultural continuity. This could be understood as an expanded and expansive view of learning.

The findings in this section about where learning happens are categorised under the following headings:

- Aboriginal culture as a conceptual framework

- Early learning, the first teachers

- Land, language, history, story

- Learning 'respect', an overarching concept.

Aboriginal culture as conceptual framework

For all Aboriginal participants the practice of teaching and learning Aboriginal culture in the home and community was an overarching framework. It is often naturalised, 'It's just natural, that's just the way it is. We don't think about it, it just happens'. Aboriginal cultural understandings offer an alternative conception of being in and of knowing the world.

> A lot of aboriginal culture is taught at home because it's not taught in the school. So we talk about our culture at home. We

> talk about our ancestors at home. We talk about living on a mission at home. We talk about our mission school. We talk about what it was like to live on missions in the country, what we used to do as kids compared to what these kids used to do as kids. So they get a bit of history. They get a bit of life stories. They get all sorts of stuff at home where they learn about all their backgrounds and all the things that they talk about. (Parent)

Early learning, the first teachers

Within this theme Aboriginal participants described their role as 'the first teachers' of basic learning that happens in the home such as learning to speak, eat, crawl, walk, go to the toilet. Importantly, however, this learning is described as taking place within large extended families where kinship is paramount and children learn to become social beings.

> Well, [at home] you learn to talk and walk and crawl, communicate, socialise. They emulate their parents and their family on how to behave. They learn to interact with other people. …They imitate the family, their interaction – with the families because we're big families, there's always cousins. There's always kinship that come into it. That's where all the learning takes place with all the kinship coming in and sharing and playing and enjoying when we have our barbeques, meetings and things like that. That's where all the learning takes place. (Parent)

Kinship, learning about and with extended family, emerged as fundamental to Aboriginal parents' understanding of learning. Learning to communicate and socialise was seen as a vital part of this social learning, which occurs in everyday life alongside parents and family. In this context, Aboriginal children learn 'about being who they need to be in society as adults'. For Aboriginal parents 'academic' learning or 'education' in preschool, school and post-school sits in relation to the many other forms of learning which occur in Aboriginal families with their children.

Land, language, history, story

For all Aboriginal parents, whether they live in urban, rural or remote sites, learning about land, language and history is paramount. Aboriginal parents identify this learning as mainly the role of families and community but they also expect that it will constitute part of all children's learning within school.

Learning about land takes place directly through the senses, learning to look, to see, to listen and to feel. An Aboriginal grandparent growing up in rural Australia remembers her learning with 60 cousins on a mission site.

> We learnt how to play on the land. There was a creek there, so we went to the creek – they were the biggest parts of our life too – we went there in the morning and we'd stay there until the sun was going down. We weren't allowed to be outside after dark. So just played away all day and I think we learned a lot of things by just living in the bush and living off nature. (Grandparent)

Urban Aboriginal parents continue practices of teaching about country through storytelling.

> When we drive, like out country – when we drove out to Dubbo, and just all the stories I had to share with the kids, I was surprised at myself. Because I had all the stories my grandmother and my uncle, two old people, always when we would go for big drives, always had a yarn about different houses on the way, on the road. The fencing, because a lot of my family, grandfather, were always fencers, shearers and all that. When you go out country, you see all that there stuff. So that's a part of storytelling. (Parent)

In many places there has been considerable loss of language: 'our Dunggutti language wasn't allowed to be taught to the children, they had to speak in secret [to keep] the Dunggutti language alive'. Despite this loss for Aboriginal parents and families language is an important component of teaching and learning culture.

> So I'd make little songs up and teaching the names of the fish and teaching the names of the birds and – nyahee- nyahee is look, look – nyooroo rennay nyooroo rennay is listen or hear. So yeah it was good, because that's the way that we were taught when we were little, in nursery rhymes and songs. (Parent)

Learning Respect, an overarching concept

These concepts of land, language, history, culture and everyday life are held together in the overarching notion of 'respect'. 'Respect' is underpinned by reciprocity and while this reciprocity relates to everything that exists in

relation to all other things, it is particularly derived from learning about Country (land). 'Respect' as an overarching concept bridges home and school and is used frequently throughout the focus groups. In the remote site, the notion of 'respect' was explained through the concept of River Rules, which the Aboriginal parents referred to extensively as it is applied in the school.

> They're still learning some of the language, they say good morning and they do River Rules every morning. You teach them at home about the river rules. You've got all your fishing spots. Meeting spots. You've got Boomerang, Black Rock, Sandy Bank and all that. They pick it up at home as well as school. Every classroom has got a river rule painting in the room with different areas on it and they do a different rule once a week. Yes, teach them to be safe and respectful owners. Because the river is a big part of our lifestyle out here, and the kids do respect the river because a lot of their food comes from the river, that's why we use the river as our guideline as safe, and respectful learners. So Boomerang Island is the respect or Sandy Bank is the movement rule here because there's all different rocks and things, that's how it fits in with our school rules with the river. (Parent)

'Respect' is explained as a concept that links past and present, the elders, history, respect for other people, property, tools and things. By these means, children learn to respect their culture, their history and where they come from but also how to behave in relation to others in schools as well as in the community. Significantly, while the Aboriginal parents spoke at length about the River Rules and 'respect', this practice was not mentioned at all by the teachers at the remote site.

What helps Aboriginal children's learning?

The responses to this question moved from learning in family and community to school learning. It seems that Aboriginal parents did not consider that children needed help with their learning culture, language, story and country at home, but that help was needed with their school learning because the key divide was between home and school learning.

The findings in relation to this question are categorised under the following headings:

- Understanding different ways of learning and applying them in school

- Teaching Aboriginal culture and language in schools

- Attending to basic physical and emotional needs at home and in school

- Providing support for Aboriginal children's learning at home and in school

- Role of Aboriginal Education Officers (AEOs).

Understanding different ways of learning and applying them in school

The most frequent response to the question about what helps Aboriginal children to learn was about the importance of understanding different ways of learning and enabling children to learn in the best way for them. This applied both to parents learning with their children and to teachers in schools. The most commonly used term to describe how Aboriginal children learn best was 'hands-on learning', a term which was elaborated with many different ideas including the need for learning to be relevant, meaningful and real, and learning through play, experimentation, songs and story. Learning through the senses and through understanding different ways of communicating was emphasised as an important part of this way of learning: 'Aural, visual and hands-on. That's all language, body language'.

> All kids are aural kids. If they hear something first – if I was telling a story about something, that kid will be interested in – what I'm talking about. Because if it's about animals or if it's about something that they're interested in then they're going to sit and listen. So that's why we speak – a lot of our culture is oral and visual and hands-on. You find if it's for our kids, it's all kids. They all learn the same. (Parent)

Storytelling, visual arts, dance and performance were seen as special gifts 'instilled in every Aboriginal person' and these special gifts can only be retained by sharing. Aboriginal parents draw on a history of storytelling in which their elders learned through stories told around the campfire, 'they all just sit looking at the fire in the bush and it's all dark around them'. This sense of performance and intrigue infuses cultural methods of teaching and can be applied by parents teaching language in schools: 'I try teaching some of the Dunggutti language in song as well – and little actions and hand clapping. That's what you've got to do when you're a story teller'.

Teaching Aboriginal culture and language in schools

Aboriginal parents believe that when Aboriginal culture is acknowledged through performing stories and songs in school it helps their children's learning, 'Last week at school my six year old did the Torres Strait Islander welcome song at the assembly and it was lovely to sit and watch the singing and all in language'. They said that teachers and children should know that Aboriginal children come from 'a very proud background of people who have lived here since time began' and that 'this builds up the children and makes them proud of who they are'.

They expressed the strong opinion that Aboriginal studies should be taught in all schools.

> Get that Aboriginal studies into primary schools, and get it so those kids – a lot of those kids out there don't know their culture. We did a project out there a few weeks ago and it was about 'what is your totem?' We had Aboriginal kids say to us, 'what's a totem?' We included all the white kids too. What we say to them is, 'you find out where you came from in – where were you born, and every town has a crest - you find out what's on your crest and you use that as your totem.' So it's about involving all the children. (Parent)

Aboriginal participants explained about the negative consequences for Aboriginal children's learning when non-Aboriginal teachers deny Aboriginal history with an account of a child who left the classroom and was then suspended when a teacher denied Aboriginal history. They also gave examples of highly positive outcomes when teachers are knowledgeable and can support the teaching of Aboriginal studies.

> I could put my hand up and say, well what happened to the Aboriginals in this area? He'd know straight away to answer it. He'd incorporate the Aboriginal history into the history he actually had to teach. That's why I ended up getting really good grades in my history class. That was one of my favourite classes to go to, because he understood. (Parent)

Teaching Aboriginal language is sensitive and complex and requires the participation of Aboriginal elders. Decisions about teaching Aboriginal

language and Aboriginal dialects of standard English must be in the control of local Aboriginal people and will differ from place to place. More attention to questions of cultural protocol is emphasised as significant in the larger question of teaching and learning about Aboriginal culture.

> We had nine different language groups at [Aboriginal school]. So we compiled 50 words from each different language group and that was a task anyway, finding all the 50 words from each different language group. Then we were trying to get some of the family members to come in – all the mums or dads or uncles or grandparents to come in and help teach that language. (Parent)

Attending to basic physical and emotional needs at home and in school

Aboriginal parents all agreed that attending to basic physical needs was important to help Aboriginal children's learning. This included parents being responsible for maintaining basic routines of sleep and ensuring that their children were well fed and dressed, appropriate hygiene was maintained, and getting their children to school. Basic routine, sleep, food, being at school and staying in class, and emotional safety, trust, security were all named in this context.

Aboriginal parents noted however that each of the schools in this study provided support for children from difficult home situations in the form of breakfast clubs and some also extended this assistance to providing food for families and school clothes for the children. Further suggestions about how to deal with issues arising from difficult home circumstances are discussed later in the case study.

Over and above basic physical needs, a safe, secure and trusting learning environment was also seen as important for Aboriginal children's learning. Aboriginal parents mentioned problems of racism ranging from bullying and name calling to ignorance of Aboriginal cultural practices as significant barriers to learning for Aboriginal children. Aboriginal parents identified both teachers and students as responsible for perpetuating racist practices in schools.

> This [secondary] school really needs to get down on this racism. That's the biggest part in this school. It's disgusting. Yeah. I had

> my big girl come home crying because you've got girls in the class calling them monkeys. Yeah and Abos. Yeah, Abos and Boongs. (Parent)

This was raised as a particular issue by parents of secondary school children in an urban setting, although more subtle forms of racism were evident elsewhere. The professional development of teachers was recommended by parents as an important strategy for helping Aboriginal children to learn by providing a safe learning environment free of racism and bullying. 'Racism' was not mentioned in teacher focus groups.

Providing support for Aboriginal children's learning at home and in school

Supporting Aboriginal children by giving them time and attention at home and parents and family being involved in the school were also named as important in helping Aboriginal children's learning. This does not require parents to have any particular levels of education but to be interested in, and supportive of children's in school learning: 'Putting time into your children. Sometimes our kids [secondary school] they clam up. They don't tell us anything. We've got to find it out hey, ourselves. It's like an onion, you've got to peel it all back'. When parents are engaged in this way it 'changes attitudes of children because children see that that relationship is established and they think this you know, they care for me. They want me to learn. They want me to succeed in life'.

Role of Aboriginal Education Officers (AEOs)

Aboriginal parents suggested that having Aboriginal people employed in the school helped Aboriginal children to learn because of the support they provide both parents and children. They did not specify any particular role for Aboriginal employment although most identified Aboriginal Education Officers as playing a crucial role in liaising with Aboriginal parents. The role of AEOs varied from school to school with at least one AEO employed in all schools and many in the remote school.

> She's a young mum but she knows of her children like the rest of us do, but you can see she just lifts her kids and I think it's lovely. Her children are very special lovely children to have a young mum. I know [AEO's] kids do it too, I watch all the young mums. The ones that build their kids up and this school makes you comfortable to do that. I think that's got a lot to do with

> AEO being here too. I think having Aboriginal people in the school working, that's a successful learning curve for me. (Educator)

Many Aboriginal parents identified the role of AEOs specifically as significant in helping Aboriginal children to learn by building a bridge between the school and the community. The AEOs themselves described many aspects of these roles and also commented on the fact that they are often the most longstanding personnel in the school and that they are the only ones who have insider knowledge of the community. They expressed a sense that they are undervalued and occupy difficult positions in between often alienated parents and schools. They felt that schools could better support and understand this aspect of their roles in Aboriginal children's learning.

> We're out there helping in the communities as well. The more schools understand that, that we can't just be AEOs in our roles in school – we've got to be connected to the community to bring these people into the schools, therefore, to better our kids – to have our kids stabled. Because once a community's settled then the kids are going to be settled. (AEO)

What does success in learning mean?

Success for their children's learning was vitally important to Aboriginal parents who responded to this question in terms of school learning. They emphasised the importance of acknowledging 'where they are at' and recognising them for 'having a go' rather than making judgements or applying external criteria for success.

> Well for me successful learning, and it just fills my soul, my heart up with much happiness, is when I've seen a child, any child or a young person, and they're not doing well in life you know? Dramas at home, drama – you know they struggle all the time, hardship. Then I see them – like a school comes together and works really hard on that child and then that child starts succeeding in life. (Parent)

Aboriginal parents measure success by whether their children can have a conversation with them about what they have learned, demonstrating that

they have understood, and being able to apply what they have learned in real life situations. In this sense measuring success is seen as part of an ongoing relationship.

> [Success is] when a child is able to run with it by themselves, or to strike up a conversation about something by themselves, about a topic that they've learnt about. They're able to tell me about it, not me having to prompt or give them clues or anything like that. They're able to give me all the information and still retain that information for if I want to ask them something later about it. They can still turn around and say, oh yeah I remember we did that. So it's retaining it and being able to tell me all about it without me having to give them prompts. (Parent)

Success is not only about academic achievement but is seen to be about growing in self-esteem and confidence and becoming a better person in life. In this sense success is not necessarily an individual achievement but is achieved collectively by parents, students and schools working together.

> In the schools and they'll put their hand up to be a buddy, they'll put their hand up to be leaders and things. Like Venus' daughter last week, oh she was fluttering around all over the place. To be leaders. She's leaving this school this year, she's going to high school but just watching her the other day and I was thinking, oh how nice is that, she was so comfortable for her to be one of the people that wait on the grandparents and ask everyone if they're alright and I was thinking, wow that's really good because Aboriginal children are basically shy children. (Parent)

For Aboriginal parents successful learning is underpinned by 'knowing about who they are first and their identity', enabling them to adapt to the different requirements of schools and society,

> [Success is] if our kids can and they do adapt to lifestyles, they do adapt to schools, they do adapt out in the society now because of the learning at school. The way society is and I think too being a multicultural school too I think the kids learn from each other and also the teachers are giving them and that in itself, they're knowing about who they are first and their identity, then they feel comfortable like Aunty Elaine was saying if their self-esteem is built up then that will lead into a successful learning. (Parent)

7.2.2 Roles of Parents: Aboriginal parents

The responses in this section tended to echo and reinforce what Aboriginal parents said in the previous sections. The role of Aboriginal parents and families was seen as encompassing the whole of their children's life, beginning as their 'first teachers' and guiding their children throughout life.

> Your responsibility starts from the time that baby turns into an egg – from an egg. It's your responsibility to look after yourself and nurture your unborn child. Then when it's born it's your responsibility to nurture it, show it how to be a caring and compassionate person. (Parent)

Findings under this heading are grouped according to the following categories:

- Teaching respect

- Reciprocal relationship building

- Helping with school learning

- Having your say.

Teaching respect

Teaching respect was seen as the primary responsibility of Aboriginal parents and wider kinship networks. This was seen as a prior condition for learning in schools: 'understanding respect – respecting their elders – and learning from their parents and respecting their parents and having that number one teacher there being involved before going into the white education system'. Once children enter the education system the crucial role of Aboriginal parents is to actively establish a relationship between home and school learning.

Reciprocal relationship building

The most frequent response about the role of Aboriginal parents named the importance of building a reciprocal relationship with schools. This echoed the earlier named sense that school learning is understood through a relationship to all other learning and therefore must be actively cultivated as a two way process in which communication between schools and parents/families is paramount.

> The parents and the teachers work together if they can communicate together then they'll know where their child's at and with the parent talking to the teacher then the teacher will get a better understanding of where the child's coming from and the parent then can know what the teacher expects, the expectation of the teacher for their child. So that communication all 'round helps. (Parent)

Communication involved talking with children about their experience of school, about questions they might have that they don't want to ask the teacher, as well as communicating with teachers about their children's learning needs. Bridging home and school by displaying artefacts of children's learning was one example of parents building a relationship between home and school learning.

> I think that praise at home from parents and the interest in the child's work that they've brought home to show them or even little certificates for sport, for spelling or for what. Make something of it. Ours are displayed on the fridge. It's whoever's got the last one is the first one because it's all on one little clip. But they'll read through it to see who's in line. Who got the last one? (Parent)

Helping with school learning

Aboriginal parents said it was 'vital' that parents help with children's homework and gave many positive examples of how they do this. They explained that it is important to 'make that learning meaningful by backing it up with life issues' and gave many examples of how school learning could be supported in the home.

> Well the two should go hand in hand I think. What you're learning at school here, you should be able to do at home. So if you're doing something at home – even to counting – if I want them to count something out of the fridge, well [I], I say, get me out four oranges or something lighter if we're doing a fruit salad or something like that. So he'll know to count me out four oranges. He knows to count, to cut them into quarters. I don't have to say, well a quarter is four, so it's four pieces. He knows to cut it into quarters because he's learnt quarters here at school. So he can come home and we can talk quarters then at home because we've just cut the fruit into quarters to make our fruit salad. (Parent)

Having your say

Aboriginal parents said they should have a role in generally having a say in their children's education and advising schools more formally about Aboriginal studies curriculum, and school bullying policy.

> We have a parent meeting. It used to be the old Aboriginal parent meetings but now the funding's gone, the Aboriginal parents said we still want to be involved. We still want to know what's going on with our kids' education. We still want to have a say in what happens with our kids' education. So we have the CAP meetings which is the [school name] Aboriginal Parent meetings. We talk about homework. We talk about things. Sometimes we have 30 odd parents depending on the day. (Parent)

Aboriginal parents recognized that it is more effective for parents to be constructive in their communication with the school and for the school to focus on the positives in their communication with parents. They also discussed the importance of dealing with difficult issues such as racism and bullying in relation to Aboriginal children and desired the formation of structures that would allow this to happen in safe and positive ways.

7.3   Learning: Teacher focus groups

Data were collected from six teacher focus groups spread across the three site types including a total of 39 teachers overall. Schools included one high school, one central school, one independent Aboriginal school, and three public primary schools. Teachers were asked to respond to the questions in relation to parents in general rather than Aboriginal parents specifically. An additional question was added at the end: 'Are there any special considerations for Aboriginal parents?'

7.3.1   Where does most learning happen?

Teachers tended to emphasise academic learning in their responses but also recognised that it depends on the nature of the learning happens in a variety of places. This was especially true of the teachers at the remote site. The following are the themes that emerged from the teachers' response to this question:

- Learning happens at both school and home/community depending on what type of learning

- Learning can occur in/from local places, the environment

- Early years/basic learning happens at home

- Social/emotional and ethical/moral/values learning happens mainly at home

- Non-Aboriginal cultural learning happens outside of home in extended families and community

- Children learn from peers and outside school socialising.

7.3.2 What helps learning?

Because of their knowledge of learning, teachers had many wide ranging suggestions about what helps children to learn. Because of their situation in high Aboriginal enrolment schools many of these suggestions echo the Aboriginal parent cohort.

- Understanding of the ways that students learn – hands-on, visual, experimental, engaging students' interest and passion, fun in learning

- Relevance, meaningful to student's lives

- Positive relationships/partnerships between parents and school

- Good relationship between teacher and students

- Safe, secure, trusting learning environment, stability at home

- Good basic routine, sleep, food, school attendance

- Parents taking an interest in and supporting learning

- Communicating/fostering aspiration and purpose for learning

- Schools celebrating everyone's learning journey

- Supporting cultural learning at home and school

- Including group and collective learning activities

- Schools providing for basic needs in food, clothing, transport, medical

- Students sense of belonging and owning their learning

- Teachers being able to see below the surface of children's behaviour

- Interrelationship between social and academic learning

- Supporting students to develop big and small goals

- Helping students to learn how to learn, self-directed learning

- Developing resilience in learning, dealing with failure

- Ability to ask questions and keep asking

- Making learning visible to students

- Providing learning activities to generate success

- Believing in the students/children's capacities to learn.

7.3.3 What is successful learning?

Again there was a high level of synchrony between teachers and Aboriginal parents with a different emphasis from their different positions.

- Being able to retain, apply and innovate on that learning

- Achievement personal milestones, improvement

- Ability to experiment, have a go, make mistakes

- Evidence of resilience, persistence, enthusiasm, engaged, and curious learning

- Having skills to be self-motivated, seek information and apply it

- Ability to learn from mistakes

- Being able to think about how to fit into society.
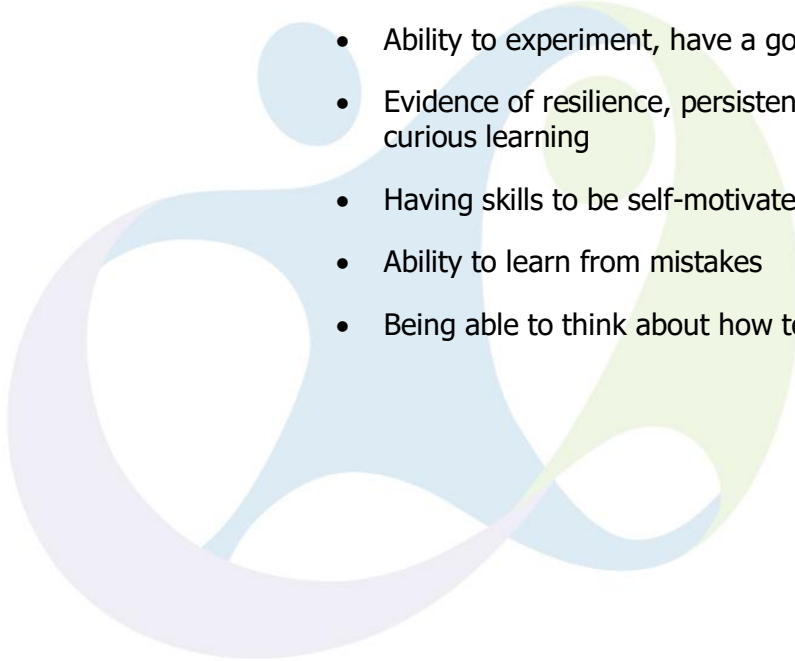
7.3.4 Roles of Parents

Do parents have a role in children's learning?

Both teachers and Aboriginal parents considered that parents play an important role in children's learning.

- Major role in ethics, values, social and emotional learning

- Ensuring children have good basic routine and attend school

- Supporting children's learning by talking with them about school

- Helping with homework in whatever way they can

- Participating in a relationship with the school

- Communicating the value of education

- Assisting children to see positives, deal with failure and mistakes

- Giving students a reason to learn and persist through difficulties

- Being involved everyday, listening to small stuff

- Showing children you care, valuing education

- Doing practical things with children around the home, repairs, mechanics.

7.4 Barriers and enablers of parent engagement (parents and teachers)

There was a large degree of overlap in the responses of parents and teachers in relation to the question of barriers and enablers of parent engagement in children's learning. Both groups focussed on barriers to parent engagement in school learning. The following tables begin with the barriers because the Enablers invariably offer solutions. The first table is the shared responses between parents and teachers and the second shows the different responses.

7.4.1 Common Barriers identified by parents and teachers

The first two, and most pressing of barriers to Aboriginal parent engagement, relate to the effects of colonisation on Aboriginal individuals, families and communities. They are equally acknowledged by both parents and teachers with a much greater emphasis on resilience and strengths for parents. The second two relate to general conditions that apply to all families, that school curriculum and teaching methods have changed and that parents who work or who have young children are less able to be involved in schools.

• Family pressures, poverty, drug and alcohol addiction, domestic violence
• Negative experiences of school, low levels of education, illiteracy
• Lack of knowledge of new methods of teaching and learning
• Time poor – parents who work or those with young children

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Table 4: Different Barriers identified by parents and teachers

Aboriginal parents	Teachers
Lack of cultural knowledge of non-Aboriginal custodial parents	Instability of Aboriginal children's care arrangements, particularly adolescents
Different language of parenting, different cultural practices	Teachers' sense of inadequacy in relation to Aboriginal protocols, sensitivities
Intergenerational change and loss of cultural authority	Impact of technology on family life and communication
Emotional difficulties, becoming angry at the school, children who are angry	Parents fear of being judged, concerns about DoCS involvement

While the responses to Table 4 can be read as highlighting the different responses between parents and teachers, by juxtaposing their responses to similar issues it is clear that they are the similar issues being identified from a different perspective. Aboriginal parents articulate the cultural barriers to their engagement in school learning; teachers on the other hand express their empathy and lack of confidence in this area.

Table 5: Enablers of parent engagement

Categories	Aboriginal parents	Teachers
Establishing relationships	Persistence, just keep going; teachers treating parents as equal	Teachers actively establishing relationship with parents
	Appreciating school staff are sometimes welcoming, others not	Teachers shifting mindsets
	Classroom dates for parents	Linking parents with similar issues of children's learning
	School staff relating to parents outside of school	Teachers learning experientially about Aboriginal everyday practices
	School staff contacting parents for praise rather than negative reasons e.g. postcards	Communicating the positives in innovative ways e.g. postcards
	Mediating role of Aboriginal Education Officers	Role of AEOs liaison with Aboriginal families and community
	Welcoming schools, celebrations, events, food, BBQs, morning teas, NAIDOC week	Involving parents through exhibitions, carnivals, sports, NAIDOC week
	Provision of Aboriginal spaces in schools	Provision of community resource room, Aboriginal designated space for parents and families
Educational	Using computer to assist with homework	Developing resources for parents to use at home Supporting parents who lack literacy and numeracy skills
	Parents volunteering to help with reading, confidence in literacy	Inviting parents into classroom of children with difficulties
	Parents promoting education, encouraging career aspirations, telling stories of value of education from historical experience of lack	Starting with the child for parent engagement, showing parents that teachers know their children and care

Categories	Aboriginal parents	Teachers
	Being involved in Personal Learning Plan development, parent teacher interviews	Schools making welcoming environment, strengths-based approach
	Forming committees, being on school board, yarning circles	
Programs with outside agencies	Programs for children from poor families (breakfast, lunch, school clothes)	
	Schools partnering with intervention organisations such as Brighter Futures	Schools engaging in programs for parent engagement
	Go4Fun program that must involve child and parent; using sports to create relationship	
Cultural/out-of school learning	Involving parents (grandparents, aunties and uncles) in art, dance, song, storytelling, language	Draw on parents' many talents and interests
	Activities for parents appropriate to particular communities eg using fishing as literacy activity	Helping parents to be aware of everyday learning with children-gardening, fishing, sewing
	Modelling school engagement by community members with family problems	Encouraging parents to include children in everyday activities to reinforce school learning
	More awareness of Aboriginal people and Aboriginal culture in schools; more Aboriginal people employed in schools; schools understanding Aboriginal parenting practices	Bridging the gap between cultural and school learning for Aboriginal children and families
	Integrating everyone in Aboriginal cultural performances; understanding each other's cultural backgrounds	
	Language maintenance	

7.4.2 Innovative parent and child sports program Go4Fun

One innovative program run by two AEOs from nearby schools was notable for its outstanding success in getting Aboriginal parents engaged with their

children's learning which they attended school after school hours with their children.

> I run a Go4Fun program that must be the child and the parent. The parent must come with them. I've got…how many parents? They overwhelmed us last week. Aboriginal. We ended up with, I think it was 18 parents. There's a jersey and bag. Because the kids pushed the parents. I introduced it to the kids first and I showed them all the picture of the jerseys to what they get in week 3. Must have been about 25 kids. So that was the incentive for them to come. The other incentive that we put in place for them was a food voucher. (Educator)

Figure 1: Go4Fun jersey incentive

7.4.3 Summary barriers and enablers

Many serious barriers were identified in relation to the engagement of Aboriginal parents in their children's school learning in particular. Surprisingly, as revealed in the above table, both teachers and parents are in profound agreement about the barriers and how they might be addressed, albeit from their different positions. Despite this agreement, there remains a disconnect in which most Aboriginal parents do not know about the range of possibilities

initiated by schools, nor do teachers understand the perspective of Aboriginal parents. In response to the final question almost all teachers said that there was no significant difference for Aboriginal parents in their engagement with their children's learning than for parents in general. They did, however, acknowledge a need for further professional learning in this area.

7.5 Conclusion

From Aboriginal parents' perspective the most significant finding from this study is that Aboriginal participants have an expanded and expansive view of learning in which time and place/space are understood differently. Significant learning for Aboriginal parents happens outside of school in extended families, in community and in country/place. Deep time is significant in Aboriginal learning, which includes learning about the ancestral past through story, from Elders about history, and from the places where their people and language belong. Future time is also important in this expansive view of learning which is importantly open to a future for the child that is as yet unknown.

In common with all other parents, Aboriginal parents want their children to do well in school. School learning is important but is understood only in its relationship to all other learning. Aboriginal parent engagement in school learning can only be achieved through building a relationship between Aboriginal families and schools in which Aboriginal cultural knowledge and practices are respected. The ability to build this relationship is seriously impacted by the effects of colonisation: intergenerational trauma, ongoing racism and structural inequalities for Aboriginal families and communities. In relation to this project Aboriginal parents express the strong hope that their voices will be heard and that there can be continuing honouring of their voices in further professional learning for them as citizens and equals in the educational partnership.

Teachers, on the other hand, considered home and school as equally important and offered a very different view of learning. In almost all cases teachers considered that there was no important difference for Aboriginal parents engaging with their children's learning than for all parents. The lack of knowledge, confidence and skills in relation to Aboriginal families can be deduced from their responses. The main variation in teacher responses appears to be the result of complex school ecologies which includes

dimensions of leadership, collegiality, quality of teachers, socio-economic status of communities, and relationship (or not) with their communities. All of these schools struggled with engaging Aboriginal parents yet each can be seen to offer unique and extraordinary insights into the ways that parents might be engaged in their children's learning. Both schools and teachers expressed a strong desire for further collaborative development of their capacities in this regard and to continue these important conversations into the future.

Analysis of Barriers and Enablers in comparative tables suggests that Aboriginal parents and teachers share many parallel understandings from their different positions about the issues and solutions for engaging Aboriginal parents and yet there is a fundamental disconnect. This suggests a significant opportunity for furthering this challenging area through professional learning for both parents and teachers.

8 Summary of findings

This study makes a distinctive contribution to advancing understandings about parent engagement through its particular focus on parent perspectives and the exploration of parent engagement in contexts where this is known to be more complex. The approach taken enabled the parent voice to be heard. Conducting the data analysis from a sociological perspective rather than behavioural/psychological one, also allowed a more nuanced reading of the data beyond consideration of what works and why in human behavioural terms. The findings demonstrate that there are many views about the role of parents in supporting children's learning and that there is no one particular or right way of implementing or experiencing parent engagement.

A clear theme to emerge across the research strands relates to differences in perspectives between parents and schools, and an imperative to engage in meaningful and sustained dialogue with the parent community is evident. For a variety of reasons, many parents feel excluded, isolated and marginalised, yet almost all parents want their children to succeed, and see education as fundamental to their children achieving personal, social and economic wellbeing. Many want to be more engaged in their children's learning but lack the confidence, the knowledge, the language or the opportunity. However, the desired or appropriate form of this participation might not be according to usual expectations. Many schools are keen to engage parents, but often perceive a lack of interest from parents. The findings in this study suggest this may sometimes be misrecognition of what is occurring for parents.

The research suggests that where parent engagement is strong and effective, the conditions appear to be somewhat idiosyncratic rather than systemic. Factors such as the particular school ecology, existing relationships with families and the community, availability of resources, the nature of school leadership, the level of skills, knowledge, experience and commitment of staff and the presence and active participation of family support organisations are clearly implicated. Where schools have adopted 'whole of school' initiatives, parent engagement appears more robust. This approach pervades the physical and social spaces of schools, as well as the structural arrangements, reflected in welcoming and approachable staff, physical spaces for parents, mutual respect and authentic relationships. Specific to the cohorts, there is a

clear argument for schools to pay closer attention to integrating cultural knowledge into school learning, particularly in Aboriginal communities, and for greater attention by school communities to the aspirations and social isolation factors experienced by CALD families. In the low SES communities, the potential for collaborative community organisations to work within schools utilising their expertise in working in vulnerable communities seems well advised.

9 Recommendations

The research findings suggest a need for:

- Locally and collaboratively developed professional learning, training and resources for parents and educators that support:

  - school communities to scope their community strengths, needs, cultural knowledge, values and priorities in relation to parent engagement

  - meaningful communication and dialogue with parents and communities

  - teachers working in Aboriginal, CALD and special needs contexts

  - parents to develop strengths in relation to supporting informal learning in the home and community

- Investment in community relationships with key personnel to integrate cultural knowledge into school learning

- Promoting continuity and relationships between school and prior to school programs as these provide a foundation for parent engagement

- Resources to guide collaboration between schools and community-based organisations

- Training for school and parents in relationship/ capacity building, democratic communication and change strategies

- Improved resourcing of parent support in schools

- Parent leadership training opportunities

- Appointments of school-community liaison personnel with appropriate knowledge and training

- Development of models of parent engagement that are inclusive, culturally sensitive and capable of diversification at local levels.

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