

**Teacher's Strategies in Developing Relationships with Parents in  
One low SES Primary School:**

**“It Takes a Village to Raise a Child”**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
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# Keywords

Put a paragraph of keywords here in alphabetical order (for cataloguing purposes).

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# Abstract

This case study examines current practices in fostering positive relationships between teachers and families in one low SES school in the North Coast Region of Queensland acknowledged by Education Queensland's School Improvement Unit for its improvement in fostering positive relationships with the school community. The first aim of the research is to review factors contributing to poor attendance of at-risk students, such as high familial mobility, and parental disengagement, which the literature suggests may be due to discomfort with the school environment and/or staff or negative personal experiences. The second, more significant aim is to analyse ways this purposefully selected group of teachers currently attempt to build relationships with hard-to-reach families. Participants were selected from teachers and members of the school. The research aimed to illuminate teachers' perceptions of reasons for absenteeism, their relationship-building with families, as well as their strategies to address absence.

This research draws on Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital to explore teachers' perceptions of parental engagement. The results of this research indicate that teachers' interactions with families were predominantly related to unexplained absences. It was also found that teachers relay information about previous interactions with families and that often this information negatively influences the next teacher's expectations of future interactions. Beginning teachers were more likely to express discomfort when contacting parents, particularly when those families came with a reputation of being difficult to deal with. They were also more likely than their more experienced colleagues to seek support from the school administration when attempting to contact those families. Experienced teachers acknowledged difficult interactions but were more likely to continue attempting to foster positive relationships.

Many participants equated parental communication with the valuing of school, although some stated that often these contacts only occurred during social or every-day interactions rather than during academic progress meetings.

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# List of Abbreviations

AITSL – Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership

DET – Department of Education

EQ – Education Queensland

Low SES – low socio-economic status

P&C – Parents and Citizens Association

SIU – School Improvement Unit

# Statement of Original Authorship

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma. No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis. This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

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Signature:



Karen Elizabeth Crilly

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

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This chapter outlines the background (Section 1.1) and context of the study (Section 1.2), the research aims of the study (Section 0), and the study design (Section 0). Finally, it concludes with an outline of the remaining chapters of the thesis (Section 1.5).

It's the first day back to school for prep and year one students after five weeks of home learning\*. The school gates are adorned with balloons, a small portable speaker regales passers-by with Wiggles songs and a large number of school staff are at the gates, wiggling along to the music, laughing and talking, perhaps more excited than the children themselves. While my class was not returning until a week later, I stood amongst lower school teachers, learning support teachers, the music teacher, and teacher aides, the Principal, Deputy Principals and Community Engagement Officer. New physical distancing restrictions meant that parents were not allowed on school grounds. For prep parents particularly, this led to a number of anxious emails and worried faces on the day. Little ones were reluctantly handed over, supplied with hand gel and ushered to meet smiling teachers and teacher aides in the designated waiting area. Most came happily, willingly, but there were a few, tiny white-knuckles clenched their mother's hands, large salty tears flowed and lips quivered. Teachers cooed and cajoled. The Principal, at a foreboding 6'6, could be seen "racing" the reluctant ones to class.

A week later, upper school teachers waited at the same gate, with a fresh batch of balloons, holding "Welcome back" signs and greeting the returning students with "air fives", elbow or foot bumps. The Deputy Principal, holding a makeshift microphone, "interviewed" returning students about how great it was to be back at school and what they were looking forward to the most. These interviews were then posted on the school's social media page.

\*During the COVID 19 isolation period in 2020, the Queensland Government imposed attendance restrictions in public schools, with only the children of essential workers and vulnerable children able to attend onsite for the first five weeks of term 2. The remainder of children undertook learning at home with teachers supplying online and paper-based resources. In this community, there were many families who did not have access to digital technology or a home WIFI connection, some only accessing data via a smart phone. The school lent out a number of iPads and mobile WIFI dongles to families during this time, as well as paper based resources for those families unable to print out worksheets or resources. Following this, children returned in a tiered approach, prep and year one together with year 11 and 12s returned in week 6, with the remainder of students returning the following week.



## 1.1 BACKGROUND

This research study examines current practices of teachers from one low socio-economic status (low SES) school in the North Coast Region of Queensland in fostering positive relationships with families from low SES backgrounds. Historically, this school recorded declining enrolment numbers together with widespread absenteeism. This school has been acknowledged by Education Queensland's School Improvement Unit (SIU) for marked improvements in relationships within the school community, quantified by 40 per cent increase in enrolments over a six year period, together with increasing community confidence in the school, evidenced in the results of School Opinion Surveys over that period. After reviewing research for factors contributing to poor attendance of at-risk students, this research focused on analysing ways a purposefully selected group of teachers in one low SES school in Queensland currently attempt to build relationships with hard-to-reach families. Participants were selected from teachers from each of the two sectors (P-2, 3-6) together with members of the school administration and the Community Engagement Officer to ensure a balance of participants, from a range of backgrounds (such as attending university directly after finishing high school, change of career, beginning and experienced teachers) so as not to unduly influence the data. An on-line questionnaire was used to collect data, with the results used to select the final participants for the second qualitative interview phase. Recorded interviews of approximately thirty minutes were undertaken and then examined using qualitative thematic analysis. This analysis has been used to illuminate teachers' perceptions of reasons for absenteeism, for their relationship building with families and caregivers, as well as for examples of the strategies they have found to successfully address student absence.

A growing body of research has examined the area of student achievement within the context of low SES schools and highlighted contributing factors such as student absenteeism, low teacher expectations, deficit discourses within staffrooms and poverty-based stereotyping. In addition, lack of training for pre-service teachers and professional development for teachers, high teacher turnover as well as lack of teacher understanding of the needs of students within these contexts can contribute to student absenteeism (Burnett & Lampert, 2016; Comber & Kamler, 2004; Ferfolja, 2008; Geelan & Ronksley-Pavia, 2018; Gorski, 2012; Reid, 2008). The literature highlights a strong correlation between low attendance and poor academic outcomes with Comber and Kamler (2004) for instance, suggesting the perception amongst the middle class that living in poverty is equivalent to being illiterate. Stereotypes such as these impact on teacher expectations, particularly in disadvantaged schools, thereby limiting student accomplishments. Gottfried (2009) asserts that some perceptions of the impact of poverty on education do have a basis in fact. For instance, students who achieve poorly at school are more likely to be absent (Chen, Culhane, Metraux, Park, & Venable, 2016). Both academic achievement and poor attendance are linked with poverty. Academically, non-attending students receive fewer hours of instruction and may consequently perform more poorly; additionally, they may feel a greater sense of alienation from their classmates, teachers, and schools. In addition, Ready (2010) expounds that school

absences have stronger negative effects for socio-economically disadvantaged children than for their more advantaged peers. In contrast, Arthurs, Patterson, and Bentley (2014) found that where teachers held high academic expectations for students, it decreased absenteeism and, more importantly, increased student engagement leading to an improved attitude towards school. Yet, despite the current focus by government and schools in policy documents such as “Every Day Counts” to improve student attendance together with an increasing impetus on teachers to build positive relationships with families and the community, few clear strategies on how to achieve this have been published by these authorities to date (AITSL, 2014; DET, 2016a).

One of the most effective ways parents and families can help children to do better at school is to make sure they go to school every day. School attendance has a major influence on educational outcomes. Students who attend school regularly are more likely to achieve better results at school and are more likely to complete their schooling (Department of Education, 2017).

If it is argued that student attendance is at least partially linked to parental engagement, then the importance of parental engagement cannot be underestimated. According to Lareau (1987), many teachers and principals felt parents from low SES backgrounds did not value education, however her research findings did not support this view. Parents from both low SES and middle class backgrounds valued education but sometimes had divergent goals for their children (Lareau, 1987). Similarly, in their research in a Victorian school, Blackmore and Hutchison (2010) found that while there were varied levels of parental involvement and understanding of what that involvement encompassed, all parents were committed to supporting their children’s education. Reay (2000) found that mothers from both working and middle class backgrounds valued education but held differing aspirations for their children. Social class and gender have both been found to be determinants in parental availability or ability to be actively involved in their children’s education, with mothers being more likely to be responsible for activities such as classroom help and committee membership (Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010). This supports the earlier findings of Reay (1998) who found, with respect to gender, that regardless of social class, mothers reported being predominantly responsible for their children’s education, where the paternal contribution ranged from uninvolved to marginally involved, with very few reporting equal involvement. Participation in educational activities are therefore dependent upon the mothers’ availability and willingness to be involved, but not linked to the value they place on education. As the burden of responsibility for participation in the children’s education has been found to fall upon the mother, it is important for educators to be aware of factors that may adversely affect the mother’s willingness to be involved, including factors related to social class.

Reay (2000) presents the concept of *Emotional Capital* expanding Bourdieu's theory of Cultural Capital (discussed in Chapter 3), which addresses the emotional resources passed from mother to child and navigates the emotions, both positive and negative, felt by mothers during their involvement in their children's education. A child's emotional response to education can be influenced by their mother's attitudes and feelings. For example, where a mother had negative experiences in their own education, their continued negative emotional response to education can be passed onto their children (Reay, 2000). Teachers and members of school administration should consider this when attempting to build positive relationships with families, as these factors can adversely influence a mother's desire and ability to positively engage with their child's school. Geelan and Ronksley-Pavia (2018) encourage educators to acknowledge that children's self-confidence, self-concept and attitudes to their education as well as the development of cognitive and academic skills needed for learning can be affected, either positively or negatively, by parental engagement. Notwithstanding these factors, Lareau (2011) found that parents from low SES backgrounds often defer agency to the school, viewing education as the job of teachers and schools where they expect teachers to be primarily responsible for ensuring their children learn.

Berthelsen and Walker (2008) posit that school-based parental involvement is usually activity based, but is ineffective without the formation of strong family-school partnerships. Schools rarely see parents of at-risk students, making it extremely difficult to foster the positive relationships necessary to encourage regular school attendance.

## 1.2 CONTEXT

While much research centres on the causes of at-risk factors such as student absenteeism, little investigation has been conducted regarding the impact of building relationships with families of the most at-risk students on attendance, particularly those from low SES backgrounds. Poor attendance is clearly a significant marker of risk, and often the families of students whose attendance is low are the hardest to reach, thereby making them the most difficult to build relationships with.

Standard 7.3 of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers mandates that teachers "must establish and maintain respectful, collaborative relationships with parents/carers regarding their children's learning and wellbeing" yet no strategies or guidelines as to *how* teachers establish these relationships are outlined (AITSL, 2014). A recent search of the Education Queensland website uncovered one document *The Parent and Community Engagement Framework* dated May 2019, which is built upon five pillars of engagement: Communication, Partnerships with Parents, Community collaboration, Decision-making and School Culture (Department of Education, 2020b). The webpage contains a number of documents outlining strategies for parent engagement (a

pleasing development), however unless they regularly access the website or are directed to it by principals, teachers may well be unaware of this resource.

The North Coast region of Brisbane, where this research is located, currently has an attendance rate of 90.9%, which is among the lowest in Queensland. There is a disparity in the attendance rates of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous students at the school used in this study. While overall school attendance is reported at 91%, with Indigenous students' attendance rate at 86%, it should be noted that only 47% of Indigenous students attend school 90% of the time. This highlights the need for further investigation as to how to combat chronic absenteeism using positive community-school relationships (ACARA, 2012, 2018; DET, 2016a).

The case study school had suffered a period of declining enrolments and chronic absenteeism. School opinion surveys had indicated that many families were dissatisfied with the school. One of the main areas of parent dissatisfaction was the behaviour issues. In order to address this, a new principal with a proven ability in positive behaviour management, was engaged. This principal introduced the school wide positive behaviour support (SWPBS) framework, now known as positive behaviour for learning (PBL)<sup>1</sup>, employed graduates of the NETDS program (discussed in Section 3.7) and upskilled existing staff. In the ensuing years, further measures have been implemented by subsequent principals.

In 2018, the school acknowledged that the issue of absenteeism was more than the teachers could address and a parent at the school, who had previously worked in the community as a social worker, applied for a grant to employ a Community Engagement Officer. After the grant was awarded, she was then employed in that capacity, tasked to work with teachers and implement additional strategies to address the chronic absenteeism of a number of students. This initiative highlighted some of the reasons why students were absent, including lack of ability to provide daily lunches and/or clean school uniforms. In partnership with local charities and businesses, the school established the "Lunch Club". Students who presented without lunch or with insufficient food are

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<sup>1</sup> PBL is a whole-school framework that promotes positive behaviour and helps schools develop safe and supportive learning environments. Students are explicitly taught the expected behaviours within clear and consistent boundaries. Staff take a proactive, preventative approach to ensure all students receive the appropriate level of support to help them to be successful at school. Accessed: <https://behaviour.education.qld.gov.au/supporting-student-behaviour/positive-behaviour-for-learning>

supplied with lunches. The “Parent Hub” provides laundry washing and drying facilities for student’s uniforms together with lunch making facilities. These facilities are sustained by ongoing partnerships with charities and local businesses.

### **1.3 RESEARCH AIMS**

This research aims to examine current practices in fostering positive relationships between teachers and families from lower socio-economic backgrounds, with a view to identifying examples of good practice, and with a particular focus on improving attendance. The first aim of the research is to review the factors perceived as contributing to poor attendance of at-risk students, such as high familial mobility, and parental disengagement which, the literature suggests may be due to such things as discomfort with the school environment and/or staff and parents’ negative personal experiences. Other factors include: low teacher expectations, deficit discourses within staffrooms, poverty-based stereotyping, lack of training and professional development, high teacher turnover as well as lack of teacher understanding of the needs of students within these contexts (Bourdieu, 1986; Burnett & Lampert, 2016; Comber & Kamler, 2004; Ferfolja, 2008; Geelan & Ronksley-Pavia, 2018; Gorski, 2012; Reid, 2008; Thomson, 2003). The second, and more significant aim of this research is to analyse ways a purposefully selected group of teachers in one low SES school in Queensland currently attempt to build relationships with hard-to-reach families, and to document their strategies targeting the building of relationships with families and communities, thereby encouraging increased attendance of at-risk students.

The research questions are:

1. What do a selective group of teachers in one low SES school in Queensland perceive as the relationship between parental engagement and school attendance?
2. What measures do they take to build better relationships with the most at risk families?
3. What evidence is there of the impact of these strategies on improved attendance?

### **1.4 STUDY DESIGN**

Understandably, Government bodies and schools have placed great importance on combating student absenteeism, leading to a great deal of research being conducted into its causes. However, there has been less investigation into the importance of building relationships with families of the most at-risk students, particularly those from low SES schools. Higgins and Morley (2014) in their paper addressing the engagement of Indigenous parents in their children’s education, for example, state that currently there is little research into whether improving parental engagement leads to sustained improvements in educational outcomes for Indigenous students.

Following a literature review identifying the reasons families of at-risk students may not develop relationships with teachers and schools, one de-identified case study school was used to collect data. This case study used empirical evidence, collected from a purposefully selected sample of primary school teachers in one low SES school in the North Coast Region of Queensland. Teaching and administration staff were invited to complete a preliminary online survey asking participants to indicate their beliefs about parental engagement by selecting from a number of possible answers. This was followed by recorded interviews of approximately thirty minutes in duration, conducted with a purposefully selected sample of teachers with varying levels of teaching experience and from the P-2 and 3-6 sectors together with members of the school administration team. The aim of these interviews was to determine these teachers' perceptions of the relationship between parental engagement and attendance, and to establish which strategies they feel have worked best to build positive relationships with the community, and thereby improved student attendance. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) describe the qualitative interviews being used in this study as semi-structured and generally organised around a set of predetermined, open-ended general questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee/s (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Patton, 1990). In this case, the interviews also included elements of narrative inquiry which allowed participants to share personal accounts about both parental engagement and attendance of at-risk students in a way that allows them to feel listened to, thereby enriching the lives of both the researcher and the participant (Creswell, 2014). The interview data were coded for categories, themes and patterns. Thematic discourse analysis underpins this research and was then employed to determine which strategies, currently in place, were perceived as good practice to foster positive relationships and improve student attendance of those at-risk students.

## **1.5 THESIS OUTLINE**

Chapter 1 introduced the background to this research topic, context, purpose and significance of the study. Chapter 2 will provide a literature review on the research topic as well as identifying implications for this research. Chapter 3 will outline the conceptual framework and methodology, including an explanation of participants, instruments, procedures, analysis of the data together with limitations and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 will describe the results from the research conducted with the participants together with the analysis of the research findings. Chapter 5 will discuss conclusions of the study as well as implications, limitations and recommendations for future research in this area.

# Chapter 2: Literature review

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This chapter will review literature on the following topics: Topic 1 (Section 2.1) Defining absenteeism and its causes; Topic 2 (Section 2.2) Parental engagement and its implications together with current examples of good practise; Topic 3 (Section 2.3) Building home-school relationships and Topic 4 (Section 2.4) The impact of absenteeism. Section 2.5 highlights the implications from the literature impacting on this study.

## 2.1 DEFINING ABSENTEEISM AND ITS CAUSES

There is an abundance of research investigating the causes of student absenteeism, however literature has traditionally focused on high school students with little research into absences of primary school children (Gottfried, 2009). Previously, “truancy” was associated with older students who did not attend school rather than their younger counterparts who had differing reasons for non-attendance. Moreover, there is incongruity in defining student absences, for example Gottfried (2009) asserts empirical evidence has not distinguished between excused and unexcused absences or fails to recognise unexcused absences at all, which is problematic when examining data. This is confirmed by Chen, Culhane, Metraux, Park, and Venable (2016) who report a disparity in research where the terms truancy and absenteeism are used interchangeably. Many of these terms hold negative connotations with Arthurs, Patterson, and Bentley (2014) for instance, describing parental explanations for absences such as “general illness” as *soft excuses* (p. 873). With the literature failing to differentiate between the types of absence, it is difficult for researchers and practitioners to formulate strategies or propose solutions to reduce student non-attendance. In an attempt to resolve this issue, Gottfried (2009) extricates the terms of absenteeism and truancy, defining absenteeism as broadly referring to excused absences and truancy as unexcused absences, which are often connected with low academic performance and “delinquency”. Davies and Lee (2006) agree, contending that even British government policy documents do not clearly define their use of the term truancy. In contrast, Carroll (2010) advocates using the term “pupil absenteeism” which does not hold additional undertones, where implied blame is attributed to the parents by using terms such as excused or condoned absence or to the child in the use of words such as unexcused absence or truancy (p. 116). This appears to be a much more conciliatory term, which would be advantageous when practitioners and schools are addressing families regarding their child’s absence from school, as it lacks overtones of judgment and blame. Queensland Government documents use terms such as “absent”, “student absence”, “failure to attend”, “participation” and “compulsory participation” to describe student’s non-attendance at school, but differentiate between reasonable

and unreasonable excuses (Commonwealth Government, 2014; Department of Education, 2017, 2020a; DET, 2016a; Mills et al., 2017; Purdie & Buckley, 2010). Reasonable excuses include family reasons (transport issues, moving house, and family-member illness), student illness or medical appointments and holidays (although these are discouraged). Unreasonable excuses include leisure activities, shopping, celebrating birthdays and truancy (Department of Education, 2020a). Despite the lack of agreement of definition in the current literature, abundant explanations are offered for the causes of student non-attendance, which will now be examined.

There is a growing amount of literature focusing on the impact of poverty and other historical disadvantage on student attendance. According to Chen et al. (2016) poverty is one of the strongest demographics correlated with school non-attendance, due to factors such as children's health, homelessness, high mobility, and living in single-parent households. Individually, these factors have been found to impact on student attendance. Additionally, in the case of illness for instance, schools discourage attendance to avoid the risk of spreading illness to other students. Occasional or chronic illness, therefore, becomes even more problematic, especially if students also experience other contributing factors such as homelessness or high-mobility. Additionally, low income families may live in dangerous neighbourhoods which further complicates students getting to school safely (Morrissey, Hutchison, & Winsler, 2014).

Gottfried (2014) expands on this issue, citing significant associations between school absences and measures of poverty, such as family structure, homeownership status, and neighbourhood context. Morrissey et al. (2014) suggest that family instability or in families where parents are shift workers, establishing and maintaining routines is difficult which, in turn, leads to more school absences and tardiness. Shift workers, who work irregular hours, will also have differing sleep patterns, thereby making it difficult to ensure younger children are ready for school at the appropriate time. There is also obvious difficulty in the case where children are responsible for getting themselves or younger siblings ready and to school on time, especially if they are reliant on their families for transport. Ready (2010) advances that these factors mean disadvantaged children are significantly more likely to change schools during the school year, leading to subsequent loss of time in the classroom. High mobility, where families are required to move for employment or government housing, results in children being absent from school due to the moving process of packing, travelling and unpacking and then the time taken in establishing relationships with the teacher and peers in their new school.

While concurring with these factors, Reid (2008) also purports that non-attendance is often caused by schools themselves due to outdated rules, structure and organisation which are tied to governmental curriculum guidelines; and continues that parents and pupils quote school-related factors as the main cause of student non-attendance. In contrast, teachers and school administrations



often cite parental attitudes and home environments to be the major contributing factors (DET, 2016b; Povey et al., 2016; Reid, 2008). Just as curriculum and pedagogy are constantly reviewed and updated, so must the operation of school structures and organisation to allow students to flexibly engage in the schooling experience. Additionally, apportioning blame by examining the *factors* of non-attendance is counterproductive. While it is important to acknowledge these causes, emphasis should be placed on how to positively address solutions, with practitioners and schools working collaboratively with students and their families, thereby highlighting the need for further research in this area.

Miller, Murnane, and Willett (2008) contend that teacher absences also negatively impact on the formation of teacher-student relationships. In cases where students have high levels of non-attendance, their relationships with peers as well as their teacher may be an area which could possibly be used to encourage school attendance. Arthurs et al. (2014), in their research in the importance of teacher and student relationships, found that many of the students benefitted far more from the relationship developed with a key member of staff than from an extrinsic reward. If the teacher also has a series of absences and relief teachers are in the classroom, this breaks the continuity of expectations and routines, making the classroom unfamiliar and, potentially, less inviting for both students and their parents. Relationships between schools and communities are also negatively affected by high teacher turnover, which is prevalent in low SES schools (Burnett & Lampert, 2016; Ferfolja, 2008; Zygmunt et al., 2018). Lee (2018) advocates that teachers who already hold positive community relationships should be used to introduce new teachers to the community. Lee (2018) expounds that early introduction to the community will produce community-minded teachers committed to immersing themselves in the culture of the community in which they teach. Zygmunt et al. (2018) found that new teachers who experienced “authentic” caring through supportive community relationships, developed the ability to care about their students and communities in more authentic, culturally responsive ways (p.128). This sense of belonging positively affects teacher resilience, potentially increasing retention over time, thereby serving to foster trust and contribute to positive relationships with the community (Burnett & Lampert, 2016). Zyngier (2011) states that strong school-community partnerships garner improved school attendance, discipline and, improved student behaviour. Fostering positive community relationships serves to harness the social capital available within the community. Moreover, this social capital can promote educational achievement because community social capital has been found to influence students’ educational performance (Zyngier, 2011). This is particularly true for Indigenous students (Purdie & Buckley, 2010).

McConnell and Kubina Jr (2014) add to this, positing that students who “skip” school may receive negative reinforcement by avoiding the feelings of fear and anxiety they hold towards school or trying to avoid what they perceive to be undesirable situations (p. 250). Conversely, they

may receive positive reinforcement by gaining parent attention or accessing preferred activities such as watching television or using electronic devices. In addition, Davies and Lee (2006) describe the significance of teacher expectations, stating that often those who are most at risk of becoming disengaged are the students for whom low expectations are held. Students seek teacher approval and by setting high expectations, teachers furnish students with the opportunity to meet the challenge, thereby gaining the desired approval. Arthurs et al. (2014) expound that in cases where students return from school-imposed exclusion, many felt isolated which becomes a “continuous cyclic experience from which it is difficult to escape” (p. 870). Often students who experience academic difficulty engage in disruptive behaviours, perhaps preferring to be seen as the class clown or bad rather than struggling to keep up with the curriculum (Austin, Partridge, Bitner, & Wadlington, 1995; Reid, 2008). The most common method of dealing with these behaviours is to remove the student from the classroom, resulting in the student missing large amounts of classroom instruction, putting them even further behind their peers and potentially fracturing their relationship with their teacher.

With the many causes of school non-attendance outlined in the literature come strategies and theories of how to combat it, one being the importance of parental engagement, which will now be discussed.

## **2.2 PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT**

The majority of research on parental involvement centres on increasing student academic achievement, however there is a gap in the research with regards to increasing parental engagement to improve attendance of at-risk students, despite a proven correlation between regular attendance and student achievement (Mills et al., 2017; Purdie & Buckley, 2010). Gershenson, Jacknowitz, and Brannegan (2016) for example, state that student absence is associated with a significant decrease in achievement. Education Queensland websites and documents assert that higher attendance is associated with higher achievement (Department of Education, 2020a; Department of Education and Training, 2016). The terms parental involvement, parent partnerships, parent participation and parental engagement also appear to be used interchangeably within the current research. Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) describe parental involvement as communicating, volunteering, teaching at home and collaborating with the community. Pushor (2012) notes that parent involvement implies that student learning is owned by the school and the teacher with parents choosing whether or not to be involved. Lareau and McNamara Horvat (1999) describe how notions of advantage and disadvantage together with parental involvement can be linked to student learning outcomes through the two types of discourses, agentic and deficit. Blackmore and Hutchison (2010) state that agentic discourse associates parental involvement with student learning outcomes, serving to reproduce the values of the middle class, which portrays good parents as being actively involved in

their child's education, exhibited by participation in parents and citizen's associations and school based activities. In some cases however, parents have been found to defer to an authority, the teacher or school, and do not assume responsibility for its actions or consequences (Lareau & McNamara Horvat, 1999). Olmstead (2013) extricates parent involvement into two categories, reactive and proactive, describing reactive involvement as attending meetings, family activities, or volunteering, whereas proactive involvement includes helping with homework, staying informed about school events, and following their child's progress.

McNeal (2014) asserts that parent school relationships showed little association with academic achievement, but suggests initiatives should be considered that raise student expectations which may, in turn, reduce absenteeism and truancy. The Department of Education however, explicitly states that parental engagement promotes "improved learning outcomes" for students (Department of Education, 2017, 2018, 2020a, 2020b). Olmstead (2013) contends that the greatest impact on student learning comes from parent involvement, where parents actively support their children in home-based activities, rather than school-based activities. In their research examining the role of school and parent organisation leadership in building parent-school partnerships, Povey et al. (2016) found that, overall, Principals and Parents and Citizens Association (P&C) Presidents held positive attitudes towards parent engagement, citing the benefits to include: improved attendance, positive behaviour and learning outcomes for students, as well as increased social capital. Which parents are identified as involved, by this definition, will now be discussed.

The literature points to a number of factors that appear to cause some parents to avoid school relationships, including the perception that schools do not adequately deal with issues such as peer pressure, bullying or student's problems with teachers (Davies & Lee, 2006). Parents who feel that the school does not acknowledge their concerns or child's difficulties, or do not offer acceptable solutions are less likely to seek involvement. Additionally, Lareau and McNamara Horvat (1999) purport that schools hold homogenous, and inequitable views of the appropriate role of parents in their children's schooling, favouring middle-class parenting over families from low SES communities and making assumptions about why they do or not become involved in schools. Preferred parent involvement usually takes the form of classroom assistance (e.g. reading to children) or committee membership where the teachers and schools hold unspoken expectations, such as parents working to create congruence between them and mutual educational and social goals, as well as aligning themselves with the school's stated aims and strategies (Macfarlane, 2008). While advocating school and family partnerships and maintaining good communication, the prevailing expectation held by many school administrations is that parents will defer to the school's professional expertise (Lareau, 1987; Macfarlane, 2008). Blackmore and Hutchison (2010) assert that parental involvement has become prescriptive with many schools and policies outlining appropriate ways for parents to be involved, such as reading at home and assisting with assignments,

and, moreover that parental support of government policies is assumed; with few parents refusing to carry out these tasks.

Berthelsen and Walker (2008) expound that low-income families often have fewer years of education or negative experiences with schools; and describe how the variances in cultural backgrounds between parents and teachers can impact parental involvement. Parents who do not understand these implicit expectations may experience negative responses from schools or other members of the community thereby limiting their desire to be involved. Far from being neutral, school requests for parental engagement may require cultural and social experiences that some parents do not possess (Lareau, 1987). Equally, Morrissey et al. (2014) contend that some low-income families are unable to be actively involved in their children's schooling, due to fluctuating work rosters or shift work. Povey et al. (2016) concur citing time pressures from work and family commitments together with timing of events as significant factors inhibiting parent involvement. In this case, parents may desire involvement and possess knowledge of the appropriate role but are limited to activities which occur outside of school hours. Povey et al. (2016) refers to the parents who do not formally participate in school activities as *invisible parents* (p. 134). As discussed earlier, research shows that parent involvement in education is traditionally gendered with Blackmore and Hutchison (2010) stating it is usually the mother who is responsible for the children's education at home and at school. Many working class mothers however, do not possess the economic, social or cultural capital required to confidently participate in school activities, whereas their middle-class counterparts, with more autonomy over working hours, do (Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010; Lareau, 1987). Conversely, there are a number of factors that attempt to explain why teachers are less likely to actively seek relationships with families, including the perception that low income families do not care about or lack interest in their children's education or that parents may negatively impact on the running of the classroom. Povey et al. (2016) found a disparity between the beliefs of Principals and P&C Presidents from the same schools, where Principals attributed a lack of parent interest as a barrier, in opposition to P&C Presidents who cited family commitments. This finding highlights the importance of cooperation between school leaders and parent organisations to understand potential barriers of parental engagement within their school context (Povey et al., 2016). It also points a spotlight on the persistent deficit discourses occurring in school administrations that parents from disadvantaged backgrounds are not interested or do not care about their children's education, despite direct evidence from the parents in their own school to the contrary. Comber and Kamler (2004) describe these deficit discourses of teachers and staffrooms as a major contributor to the beliefs teachers hold about some students and the creation of the *us* and *them* dichotomy. Berthelsen and Walker (2008) suggest that parents in low SES schools may feel unprepared to be involved in their child's schooling due to negative experiences in their own schooling. Teachers are less likely to request parent involvement if they hold the belief

that the parents are uninterested in their child's education. In fact, parental involvement is sometimes actively discouraged, even for privileged families. For example, Lareau (1987) describes instances where teachers believed parental involvement was unhelpful or where middle-class parents challenged the professional expertise of teachers. In a perceived misguided attempt to help their child, these parents may place pressure on their child to perform in class by encouraging them to answer questions or providing them with answers. Additional parental pressure, particularly from those from the middle class, was seen to increase anxiety in children, thereby producing negative learning experiences (Lareau, 1987). Teachers will also actively avoid contact with parents they feel undermine their authority in the classroom. Blackmore and Hutchison (2010) found teachers believed that some middle-class parents may not offer the expected assistance or add to the teacher's workload, whereas they believed parents from working class backgrounds were intimidated by school environment. Povey et al. (2016) suggest a lack of parent confidence and an unwelcoming school environment as potential barriers to parental engagement. Blackmore and Hutchison (2010) state that working class parents are less likely to possess the types of expected cultural capital and that schools exclude certain groups of parents from visible involvement. Sime and Sheridan (2014) add to the complexity of the issue by countering that certain parents can also provide a barrier to parental engagement, particularly in the case of committees and parent and citizens associations, where these positions are filled by "white, middle class mothers" who do not seek to include the wider community (p. 328). Macfarlane (2008) continues that parents allow their participation to be dictated by a set of unspoken rules, with some actively demonising individuals who fail to observe those rules, believing this to be reasonable behaviour. This is a particularly complex issue, as often schools consider the community to be a whole entity which they attempt to engage, rather than sub-cultures which require differentiated approaches, particularly if one group actively excludes other groups. Blackmore and Hutchison (2010) describe how many education policies reinforce this belief by failing to distinguish between families.

Lareau (1987) suggests that families with the most social and cultural capital are more actively involved in their children's schooling because they have had positive experiences during their own schooling and are accustomed to dealing with teachers and schools. Berthelsen and Walker (2008) present the dichotomous view stating that previous negative experiences and attitudes towards school may also prevent parents building a relationship with their children's school, continuing that children may also adopt the same negative attitudes to school and learning. In both views, children are likely to adopt the attitudes and beliefs of their parents, whether positive or negative, which ultimately impacts on their desire to attend school, together with beliefs about themselves, their ability to learn and, ultimately, their achievement. Reay (2000) found that it was more prevalent that working class women, often concerned with financial insecurity, reported difficulties in supporting their children with schoolwork, also stating they lacked confidence in their

own knowledge due to a history of personal academic failure. McNeal (2014) purports for many parents, involvement is not usually engaged in proactively but rather reactively, once their child experiences social or academic difficulties. In some cases, the only contact families receive from schools is to address problems with achievement or behaviour. Povey et al. (2016) asserts Principals may mistakenly attribute social class stereotypes to the reasons why parents from disadvantaged schools are not engaged, believing parents in disadvantaged schools experience different barriers to becoming involved compared with parents in more advantaged schools. Principals from disadvantaged schools were more likely to identify parents lacking confidence, lack of interest or trust in the school's ability to address parent concerns and transportation problems as barriers to parental engagement (Povey et al., 2016).

Reid (2008) states that while the causes of non-attendance are increasingly recognised, workable solutions are more difficult to find, with much of the literature examining the causes of non-attendance or the importance of parental involvement to increase student achievement. Thomson and Comber (2003) assert that the type of language used is imperative, particularly when framing strategies which address non-attendance and advocate using positive rather than deficit terms. Geelan and Ronksley-Pavia (2018) advocate moving the focus from parent involvement, which tends to be activity based and predominantly during the early childhood and primary school years, to engaging parents in student learning. Geelan and Ronksley-Pavia (2018) provide the following definitions:

**Parent involvement:** when parents come in to schools and participate in activities on school property.

**Parent engagement** that includes partnerships between families and schools, which foster positive parent-teacher relationships, communication, and school community engagement. These provide parents with the support needed to foster their child's education and wellbeing and are underpinned by parents and teachers sharing responsibility for a student's learning with each playing unique, but important roles (p. 9).

Pushor (2012) contends that the terms parent partnerships and parent participation both hold similar assumptions to the term parent involvement, preferring the use of parent engagement which infers parent connection with the school beyond casual, once off or ad hoc contributions. Finally, Gavidia-Payne, Denny, Davis, Francis, and Jackson (2015) elaborate that while it is imperative for schools, parents and communities to encourage parent involvement, they must also seek to remove potential barriers to this engagement.

Having considered existing strategies for parental engagement, this literature review will continue with an investigation of examples of good practice.

## 2.3 BUILDING HOME SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS

Genuine parent engagement exists when there is a meaningful relationship between parents and teachers with the shared goal of maximising learning outcomes for students. (Department of Education, 2020b)

In examining the current research, the use of the term “best practise” is widely used, particularly in the medical profession where the outcomes have binary results for example, following treatment, the patient recovers or not. In the field of education, it is not that clear cut. Finding strategies to build positive relationships with families and communities, the strategy that always works, is highly sought after. Put simply, one size does not fit all. There cannot be one example of “best practise” as each family and community is different and has diverse needs and values. Therefore, for the purpose of this research, the use of the term “examples of good practise” will be understood to mean appropriate strategies for the context in which they are employed, designed and differentiated to suit the unique needs of the community.

In reviewing the literature, a number of existing strategies for reducing student non-attendance were illuminated. Generally, reported strategies for addressing absence were reactive and punitive rather than proactive and restorative with Reid (2005) citing examples, such as in England where, in an attempt to reduce many of the anti-social behaviours associated with truancy, fast-track punishment schemes, such as monetary fines for parents of “truants” have been trialled. Years later, Reid (2012) assesses that these measures are punitive rather than restorative, particularly for parents and carers and, despite being legally justified, have tended to exacerbate the situation, with one of the consequences of not paying the fine being exclusion from school. This appears to be counterproductive when the aim of the scheme is to encourage student attendance. Additionally, this policy would increase financial pressure on families who are already economically disadvantaged. A similar strategy has been suggested in Australia, however most recommendations of fining parents for their children’s non-attendance have been targeted at Indigenous families in the poorest remote locations (Smail, 2014). One glaring issue with this proposal is that school non-attendance is not confined to Indigenous children. One program trialled by the Australian Government at the commencement of the 2009 school year, until its conclusion in 2013, was The Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM) at six Northern Territory sites as well as an additional six trial sites in selected Queensland, suburban Logan and remote locations (Commonwealth Government, 2014). SEAM participating schools in Queensland sites included 30 government schools administered by the Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment. The trial ended on 30 June 2013. This initiative attached school attendance conditions to income support payments made to parents. Its aim was to ensure that children of compulsory school age were enrolled in and attending school

regularly. If school-aged children were not enrolled, or Centrelink assessed that they were not making adequate effort to ensure attendance at school, payments could be suspended (Commonwealth Government, 2014; Purdie & Buckley, 2010). Education authorities in the Northern Territory and Queensland acknowledged that a policy measure like SEAM (which included punitive actions together with social work contact) was useful as part of a suite of strategies, including those which rewarded attendance. In their assessment of the scheme, Justman and Peyton (2018) state that, at its commencement, SEAM induced large numbers of Indigenous parents to begin sending their truant children to school in 2009 however, the initial success was not sustained as threatened sanctions (of withholding welfare payments) were rarely enforced. Justman and Peyton (2018) further assessed that SEAM failed to address the economic and social conditions which inhibited school attendance, nor did it consider the role of the schools in contributing to student absence, continuing to rest responsibility solely on the family for their children's poor school attendance. The Government's final evaluation report found that while the program had some initial success, reasons for student non-attendance were complex and required a multi-faceted approach including engaging communities and local agencies (Commonwealth Government, 2014).

Raffaele and Knoff (1999) advocate proactive collaboration between schools and families, advancing that the most effective practice to foster home school relationships should start at the beginning of a child's school experience, rather than waiting until students experience difficulties, continuing that educators should strive to understand cultural differences and value the contributions of all parents. Fostering positive home school relationships early in the child's education builds trust and confidence in parents that the teacher and school are seeking to work in partnership for the benefit of their child. Additionally, exhibiting acceptance of culture and differing family structures will serve to enhance those positive relationships. Justman and Peyton (2018) advocate directly addressing the individual circumstances in the home that hinder regular school attendance as well as aligning measures with cultural traditions and needs of students and their families. Auerbach (2007) proposes that in order to "broaden the value-laden, traditional, middle-class definition of what counts as parent involvement", marginalised parents' voices should be privileged, which will lead to more inclusive discussions about how families can engage with their child's education (p. 278). Berthelsen and Walker (2008) elaborate advocating *quality contacts*, where parental concerns and suggestions are sought and addressed, which they found can make a greater difference in fostering positive relationships than frequency of contact and that schools should empower parents by providing opportunities for participation that increase their confidence in involvement. Berthelsen and Walker (2008) suggest that teachers should extend invitations to families to foster the trust necessary to create appropriate partnerships around children's learning at home and at school. Invitations for involvement that take into consideration each family's



circumstances will build trust as it shows that the teacher has taken interest in the family. As well as inviting parents into the school, a number of strategies around contacting families were revealed.

McConnell and Kubina Jr (2014) found that telephone calls where staff members praised parents for student attendance, thereby giving immediate feedback, had a greater impact on improved attendance than negative calls following up on student absences. They continue that positive phone calls enhance the home-school connection. Interestingly, there was no significant difference noted in who made the calls, for example a secretary or the Principal, and that this contact might also incorporate advances in technology such as text messages and electronic mail (McConnell & Kubina Jr, 2014). A survey of school leaders undertaken by Education Queensland reported a greater use of SMS texting and less use of letters to parents for individual absences (DET, 2016b). Newsletters notifying families of upcoming school events and inviting parental attendance, together with verbal reminders to students have also been found to be positively received (Lareau, 1987). Data from research into the use of technologies to promote parent involvement revealed that both parents and teachers perceived technology as an effective way to promote parent engagement however, it is important that teachers choose the right type of technology to deliver information to parents (Olmstead, 2013). Olmstead (2013) found that while one of the parents' preferred methods of communication included text messages, as they provide quick and direct access to teachers, teachers however were found to be reluctant to use personal devices, preferring the use of email. Communication protocols in schools often allow for a 24 hour turnaround for email replies, whereas text messages can give the perception of urgency, requiring immediate response or action. Additionally, teachers expressed concerns with providing parents with their personal phone numbers which has the potential to cause a number of issues. Parents indicated that messages from schools were also favourably received and websites, if updated regularly, provide timely feedback for parents as well as access to important news and events at the school. Olmstead (2013) discusses lack of training for teachers in how to use technology to increase communication with parents, as well as the lack of research into the use of technologies in the field of education, as potential barriers to the use of emerging technological tools. Current departmental documents do not include digital technologies as communication tools, with Education Queensland currently listing reports on student performance, school annual reports, newsletters, letters, personal appointments and parent-teacher nights as well as the MySchool website as appropriate ways to communicate with parents (Department of Education, 2018, 2020b). Olmstead (2013) asserts it is imperative that teachers and school administrations stay current with the tools that families are using to communicate and advocates using staff meetings to present technology tips or practise integration of technology as well as professional development days to expand teachers' knowledge and proficiency with digital communication tools.

Maintaining home school relationships through positive contact, builds a foundation for dealing with any future issues which may arise. Additionally, using a variety of contact types shows consideration of the individual circumstances of each family. Higgins and Morley (2014), in their evaluations of programs designed to improve parental engagement, found that no such programs were found to be ineffective. In short, something is better than nothing.

Reid (2005) laments that much of the good practice that now exists in English schools for combating absenteeism is uncoordinated and, moreover, there is also very little evidence of this good practice appearing in the literature. This remains true years later and exposes a need to investigate and disseminate more fully successful strategies which build positive relationships with families to reduce absenteeism. Additionally, Reid (2005) asserts that few staff reported receiving any direct or indirect professional development training on how to deal with student non-attendance matters and while this is vital in combating the issue, programs must be based on emerging priorities identified by individual teachers and schools. The same is true of Australian literature with Geelan and Ronksley-Pavia (2018) stating until recently, there have significant gaps in Australian literature in supporting development of strategies for parental engagement. It seems logical that teachers should receive professional development in good practice examples of how to positively address student non-attendance, in the same way they do for advances in curriculum and its delivery. Similarly, just as curriculum and its delivery are differentiated to suit the individual needs of the class and its students, so this professional development should be differentiated to suit the needs of schools and its teachers.

A review of the impact of absenteeism will now follow.

## **2.4 THE IMPACT OF ABSENTEEISM**

A large amount of literature affirms the serious impact of absenteeism on student achievement as well as being a predictor of long-term difficulties. Reid (2008) asserts that schools and local authorities spend a disproportionate amount of time in an attempt to encourage regular attendance as well as dealing with the results of student non-attendance. Gershenson et al. (2016) state student absences diminish the student's exposure to classroom teaching; disrupt learning of peers; and weaken the classrooms' sense of community. The effects of absenteeism on student achievement has been widely investigated showing significant correlation, therefore it must follow that the return of the absent student would impact on the remainder of the class as the teacher attempts to help the student catch up. Gottfried (2009) however, extricates excused absences advancing that they seem to have little effect on academic performance, as these students are usually not disengaged. Absences such as illness or family holiday, which are infrequent, are less likely to significantly impact on student achievement than non-attendance stemming from lack of engagement, perceived difficulties with teachers or peers and bullying, which may be ongoing.

Gottfried (2009) asserts that academically, chronically absent students receive fewer hours of instruction and may consequently perform more poorly; adding, they may feel a greater sense of alienation from their classmates, teachers, and schools. The less time a student spends at school, the fewer opportunities they have to engage in learning and social experiences which form the foundation on which to build relationships with their teachers and peers. In addition, Reid (2008) asserts that persistent absentees develop lower academic self-concepts and lower self-esteem, making them more disruptive than students with regular attendance. Regular absence equates to a loss of classroom instruction so when the student returns, they do not have the same content knowledge as their peers, thereby adding to their disengagement. Continuing this idea, school absences have stronger negative effects for socio-economically disadvantaged children than for their more advantaged peers, as low income families may be less able to compensate for the loss of learning due to time constraints, lack of resources or lack of confidence in their own academic ability (Morrissey et al., 2014; Reay, 2000). There is also a disparity in attendance of early childhood education programs such as pre-school, long day care and playgroups. Watterston and O'Connell (2019) elucidate the significant gaps in achievement between children from low and higher socio-economic backgrounds, with children from the low SES backgrounds three times more likely to commence primary school behind their peers from more advantaged backgrounds. Moreover, children who attend early childhood education programs have also been found to exhibit more regular attendance in their future schooling (Watterston & O'Connell, 2019). Furthermore, Kearney (2016) posits that absenteeism is linked to lower academic performance and achievement as well as lower reading abilities which can also contribute to school-related fears and anxieties together with sleep difficulties.

The majority of the Australian Curriculum is reliant on a student's ability to read and without regular exposure to reading, primary school students quickly fall behind their peers. Gershenson et al. (2016) found that continued absence from school is significant for students from low-income families, impacting on their achievement in reading and mathematics and quantifies that absences are about 25 percent more harmful to the reading achievement of students from low-income families than their more advantaged peers. These effects can have far reaching implications for students.

Gottfried (2009) asserts, possibly overstating the case, that chronically absent students also show maladaptive behaviours outside of the classroom and well into adulthood. Being absent from the classroom equates to loss of learning as well as social interactions, including conflict resolutions skills. Gottfried (2009) links chronic absenteeism with future difficulties such as a greater high school dropout rate and an increased risk of unemployment. Chen et al. (2016) concur stating students with higher absenteeism rates tend to have lower academic performance. Regular absences from school impact on student achievement and reading ability, making it extremely difficult for

them to catch up. This will then influence the student's academic achievement in high school and future employment prospects. Similarly, Kearney (2016) indicates that chronic absenteeism is a precursor of serious risk factors such as economic difficulty and other long term problems. Limited academic ability and social skills are therefore likely to adversely affect relationships and inhibit employment prospects.

## **2.5 IMPLICATIONS**

Looking through the lens of building productive relationships with families to improve student attendance of at-risk primary school students, this literature review examined the definition and causes of absenteeism, the importance of parental engagement together with historic examples of good practice and finally the impact of absenteeism. While there is disparity in the definitions, it was found that the causes of school non-attendance ranged from family holidays, high mobility, health issues, and illness, to school-imposed exclusion. Factors, such as parental lack of confidence in the school system to deal with issues; deficit beliefs held by teachers or even the unwillingness of certain parent groups to include the wider parent community, were found to inhibit the formation of home-school relationships. Notwithstanding the traditional, more reactive and punitive approaches to increasing student attendance, a number of proactive, restorative methods emerged. These included making positive phone calls when students attended school, which builds positive relationships, as well as providing all families with the opportunity to express and have their concerns and suggestions heard and valued. Finally, the impact of absenteeism is far reaching. It affects students' academic attainment, particularly reading ability and can be attributed to problems with anxiety and sleep interruption as well as predictors of unemployment and financial difficulties in the long-term. It is therefore imperative that further research is undertaken into how practitioners and schools can build positive relationships with families of at-risk primary school students to encourage regular school attendance.

While it is beneficial to understand the causes of student absences, what the literature and this study has shown is that this information should be used to inform the way teachers approach families. Historically, policy makers and school administrations have used this information to label students and families, creating punitive policies in accordance with the perceived wrongdoing. Reid's call for schools to update their policies, rules and structures seems to have gone unheeded (2008). For example, many schools still utilising "Codes of Behaviour" which further perpetuate the middle-class cultural capital required for normative students and which marginalise those who do not easily conform (Raby, 2005). There is beginning to be a shift to a carrot rather than stick response to student absence and communication with families, with the teachers at least. Positive proactive communication is beginning to replace the reactive punitive style of the past. Teachers

who have undertaken university subjects addressing building positive relationships with families, although these are few and far between, are starting to affect change in their school settings.

The results of this study confirmed what the literature is beginning to show; that proactive and early communication creates a foundation for the future (Purdie & Buckley, 2010; Reid, 2002, 2005, 2012). However, there still needs to be a top-down approach. While there is one document on the Education Queensland website advocating using positive, early and timely communication with families to foster positive relationships, it is not exerting much influence due to its timid positioning buried amongst other, mostly unseen documents. At least email it to teachers or include it the yearly mandatory training. This research found that teachers' experiences confirmed the research families are more likely to be receptive to addressing issues with academic performance, behaviour or attendance when there has been preceding positive communications. These results were garnered from experienced teachers who had learnt from trial and error. Those same teachers stated they ignored the deficit discourses in the staffroom yet did not counter them or attempt to redirect those making the comments. Ascertaining preferred types of communication as well as using current technologies shows consideration of each family's needs (Olmstead, 2013; Zygmunt et al., 2018). Again, this was found to be true of the participants who were more experienced or had undertaken university subjects but was not shared with the remainder of staff.

# Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework and Methodology

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This chapter describes the design adopted by this research to achieve the aims and process objectives stated in Chapter 1. Section 3.1 discusses the conceptual framework, Section 3.2 outlines the methodology and the stages by which this methodology was implemented; Section 3.3 details the participants; Section 3.4 lists the instruments that were used in the study, together with the justification for their use. Section 3.5 outlines the procedure and timeline for completion of each stage of the study; Section 3.6 discusses data analysis; and, Section 0 discusses the ethical considerations of the research together its potential problems and limitations.

## 3.1 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and, to a lesser extent, social reproduction, habitus and field formed the conceptual framework by which the data from the surveys and interviews were analysed. These will now be defined:

### *Cultural Capital*

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital explains how certain customs, social relationships, skills, material possessions and kinds of knowledge are valued over others, creating inequalities between those who have these forms of taken-for-granted capital. Bourdieu posits that the education system is, knowingly or not, designed for the students and their families who possess this cultural capital. This can potentially inhibit the academic success of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Bourdieu, Passeron, & Nice, 1977; Lareau, 1987; Sullivan, 2002).

Cultural capital is defined as those skills and knowledges which are often conveyed by family and education and which add status and relative positions within a social field, especially to those from a socio-economically advantaged background (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Bourdieu (1986) asserts that capital is accumulated over time and has the potential to reproduce and expand itself, continuing that particular stations carry within them associated forms of capital, stating "every soldier has a marshal's baton in his knapsack" (p. 241). Thomson (2003) extends this idea with an educational equivalent, describing how students have "a virtual schoolbag full of things they have already learned at home, with their friends, and in and from the world in which they live" (p. 1). Bourdieu compares education to a

game and that success comes from familiarity of the rules. Cultural capital allows some students access to the rules of the game of the education system, recognising and rewarding that cultural capital, which are unavailable to others in the educational system (Jæger, 2011; Lareau, 2015; Thomson, 2003). Thomson (2003) advances that the rules of the schooling game perpetuate particular kinds of knowledge which, in turn, gives advantage to those who hold those knowledges. The most successful students to navigate the game of schooling are those who possess the necessary cultural capital. At least in part, this cultural capital is acquired at home from parents who know the rules of the game and have the ability to pass on the kinds of knowledge which will make their children comfortable and au fait with the practices of school (Thomson, 2003). Jæger (2011) asserts that students who possess the necessary cultural capital consequently receive preferential treatment and more positive feedback from teachers and peers.

Bourdieu (1986) advances that as cultural capital is acquired over time, not just in length of schooling but in early “domestic education”, it can be ascribed a positive value, a gain in time or “head start” (p. 244). Conversely, a delay or lack of domestic education would therefore attract a negative exponential value in time lost, coupled with time spent in rectification of its effects or “catching up” (p. 244). According to Bourdieu, cultural reproduction is inculcated in the education system, where the majority of teachers derive from the middle social class, and which places great value on education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). It could be argued that Bourdieu’s assertion of the evitable failure of disadvantaged students, who generally do not possess the required cultural capital, does not take into account an individual’s ability to adapt to unfamiliar settings (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Sullivan, 2002). Furthermore, Sullivan (2002) posits that, instead of challenging it, academic success achieved by students from low SES backgrounds legitimises the system due to its appearance of merit based achievements.

Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital is important to this study because educators need to be aware of the potential differences between what is valued by a family and what is valued in the education system. Webb, Schirato, and Danaher (2002) state education is an important field because of its capacity to confer cultural capital upon its participants. Students exhibit the desired capital based on their knowledge, use of vocabulary and attitudes towards learning as well as comfort with objects such as books and computers, which are laden with cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital can be viewed as a form of currency which is used to acquire the goods and services of education. For example, a child begins school possessing an abundance of the capital (or currency) valued in their home, perhaps the ability to engage in active, outdoor family activities, robust debates and conversations, chores and cooking, or another language, however when they attempt to use that currency in the school environment, it is may not accepted or valued. The currency or capital required in the classroom is the ability to sit quietly and listen, read, and complete set tasks. Another child may be very familiar with the use of a smart phone or tablet, using

multiple apps and “swiping” or using the touch screen, this capital however, does not convert in the school environment, where students are required to use a physical keyboard to login into the school computer system and use computer programs such as Word or PowerPoint.

Webb et al. (2002) assert there is an increasing trend for governments to view education as a principal means for alleviating social disadvantage. Bourdieu, however, notes that the capital accrued from educational institutions only has value in fields that recognise and share this value (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). It is therefore important for educators to acknowledge that a lack of cultural capital associated with formal school qualifications does not preclude students from finding success in other fields.

### *Habitus and Field*

Habitus is the degree of cultural attainment (the degree of legitimate competence in legitimate culture) by which not only the dominant but also the dominated classes tend to recognize the 'cultivated man' and against which the products of the dominated pedagogic actions, i.e. the different forms of the accomplished man as defined by the culture of the dominated groups or classes, come to be measured objectively (Bourdieu et al., 1977, p. 61).

Bourdieu et al. (1977) define habitus as a set of attitudes and values, a system of schemes of thought, perception, appreciation and action. Habitus is the vehicle by which the rules, values and ways of relating in schools are instilled and reproduced within a child. The child takes to school the habitus (rules, values and ways of relating) acquired from their upbringing and interacts in the school's environment in keeping with their home habitus. According to Bourdieu, the amount to which the child's family habitus mirrors the school habitus can affect the degree to which the child acquires the values and cultural capital that define the school. This can cause tension between the family and school where the two habitus differ greatly. All families want their children to succeed, but the difference in habitus is how that success is measured. The prevailing belief or habitus is that the acquisition of a good education is a goal in itself; if, by definition, a good education is indicated by its completion and length, i.e. finishing high school and going onto further study. It could therefore be argued that the belief that families from disadvantaged backgrounds do not value education is partly true. The difference in habitus in valuing education is its ultimate goal. Families from disadvantaged backgrounds for example, may place value on education as vehicle to obtaining employment. In contrast, middle class families value a “good” education. Lareau (2011), for example, posits that a “better job [good pay and conditions] requires a better education” (p. 264).

Familiarity and comfort with the education system means more success in its navigation (Reay, 2000). Lareau (2011) describes how educational settings build upon family practices



unequally, affording advantages to families who know and understand these practices. Reproduced and added to over time, these benefits serve to transform individual actions into “well-worn social pathways” (p. 265). Schools expect parents to be involved in their children’s education and to be part of decisions regarding their children’s education, yet families from disadvantaged backgrounds often lack the necessary habitus to comply with these requests and defer agency to the school by relying upon school staff to assist in educational choices (Lareau, 2011). An example illustrating a difference in habitus between a family and school can arise when it comes to choice of shoes. A child may desire shoes that will help them fit in with their friends or make them feel popular, such as a pair of Nike Air Jordan’s. The family will save for this expensive purchase, perhaps sacrificing other amenities to provide the desired shoes. When the child wears the prized shoes to school, they may be informed by their teacher that they do not meet the standards of the school uniform which requires black leather, lace up shoes, thereby creating a conflict between the values of the family (providing the child with a desired object, thereby gaining acceptance and popularity amongst their peers) and the school (adhering to the dominant belief that all children should wear the approved school uniform, thereby displaying pride in their school).

The prevailing habitus is that which is held by the dominant class, including a positive attitude towards education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Reay (2000) qualifies that while an individual’s habitus is initially created within the family structure, as a product of early childhood experience and family socialisation, it continues to be shaped by the individuals’ ever-changing environment and the difference in socialisation of individuals from different social positions creates habitus or a sense of normality and comfort. Capital in the form of resources are then derived from these experiences from which the individuals draw upon to then navigate fields within the social world (Lareau, 2014). Reay (2000) asserts that when habitus encounters an unfamiliar field, it has the potential to invoke disorientation and negative reactions however, in a self-aware individual, it can potentially produce change and transformation.

In this study, habitus is a useful concept because it illuminates the ways in which cultural capital and values are reproduced within families. Teachers and members of the school administration must acknowledge that there is likely to be disparity in habitus. Children bring with them the habitus acquired in their early years, the experiences and ways of understanding the world which shapes how they view their school experience, predominantly acquired from their parents, who are largely responsible for creating these knowledges. Just as a child’s habitus may differ from the school habitus, so will that of their families and the community. Webb et al. (2002) assert that children (and families) from disadvantaged backgrounds may resist the pressure to adopt the values and language styles embedded within education if they perceive incongruence between their values and ways of relating and that of the school. In this way, families may feel that the value of their background (or culture) is diminished. Essentially, different is not lesser. Because habitus is largely

considered to be an unconscious way of learning values and rules as well as the appropriate responses, it is therefore crucial for teachers and members of administration to be cognisant of difference in habitus. Acknowledging these variances is key when considering strategies to build relationships with families and the community.

### *Social Reproduction*

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) assert that every educational system reproduces its distinct characteristics which are necessary to continue the cultural reproduction of the prevailing habitus, together with the social reproduction of the relations between the classes. In the case of social reproduction, Bourdieu proffers an example by which students from working class families are less likely to undertake higher education in preference to obtaining employment. It could be argued that working class families therefore value education but only as a means to obtaining employment (Lareau & McNamara Horvat, 1999). This idea however can be criticised as a stereotype. While educators such as Ruby Payne (2005) support ideas such as these, some of her critics including, Comber and Kamler (2004); Bomer, Dworin, May, and Semingson (2008) as well as Gorski (2008) argue against these notions, instead believing schools reinforce or reproduce these class-based myths. For instance, once young people reach high school they are quickly divided into academic and non-academic vocational streams. In this way, stereotypes about aspiration, gender and class are reproduced.

Au (2008) found that high-stakes standardised testing exerts control over classroom content, where these tests define what is considered as “legitimate” school knowledge (p. 3). Where student identities are outside of the test-based norms, they are essentially removed from the curriculum. Au (2008) suggests that this style of testing consequently selects student identities that fit in and while this is a negative for some students, it serves to add to others who reflect the appropriate knowledges or comfort with the style of pedagogy required to achieve success in these settings, thereby structuring and legitimising the reproduction of certain school knowledges.

Webb et al. (2002) assert that the tendency for fields such as education is to reproduce existing social inequalities rather than challenging or attempting to transform them. This is in congruence with the findings of Reay (1998) who cites research which reveals that despite post-structuralist views of gender neutrality in education, it continues to reproduce the gendered expectation of women being responsible for the raising (and educating) of children (p. 56). Reay (1998) found that as the role of supporting a child’s education generally falls on the mother, it is also dependent on the time available to the mother, concluding that mothers from middle class backgrounds are able to add to the education of their children by their ability to pay for early childhood education, whilst simultaneously engaging in their careers. They were also found to have more confidence in their ability to assist with homework tasks. Therefore, mothers from middle

class backgrounds, while lacking available time to engage in school activities, still add to the reproduction of the education values by placing validity on its tenets through the use (and apparent valuing) of early childhood education programs.

In this study Bourdieu's description of social reproduction helps explain how students who mirror the values and attitudes of their teachers, who generally derive from middle-class backgrounds, are potentially favoured by those teachers. Students from working class or low SES backgrounds will be less likely to be familiar with these values or attitudes, finding the requirement to sit quietly or interact a certain way as foreign. A difference in vocabulary and the use of more formal speech can also add to the foreignness of the school environment. Webb et al. (2002) liken this to students being required to learn a foreign language, which other students are already accustomed to and which is not explicitly taught by the teacher. This has the potential to fracture the relationship between teachers and those students, and by extension their families, if they feel that their teacher does not understand them or shows preference for other students.

### **3.2 METHODOLOGY**

This research employs case study methodology of a school which has been acknowledged by Education Queensland's School Improvement Unit (SIU) for its improvement in fostering positive relationships with the school community, quantified by 40 per cent increase in enrolments over six years together with increasing community confidence in the school, evidenced in the results of School Opinion Surveys over that period (SIU, 2017).

Data from an online survey was collected and analysed, with the results used to select the final participants for the second qualitative phase. Purposefully selected participants were then interviewed and these interviews thematically analysed to illuminate teachers' perceptions of reasons for absenteeism, for their relationship-building with families and caregivers, as well as for examples of their strategies to address absence.

### **3.3 PARTICIPANTS**

The staff members from the case study school were invited to undertake an online survey regarding their knowledge of strategies to build positive relationships with families of at-risk students and the community, together with where they garnered their suite of strategies. Four teachers and three members of the administration staff were then selected to participate in thirty-minute semi-structured interviews. Participants with differing levels of experience were selected from the two teaching sectors (Prep–2 and years 3–6). To ensure a diverse range of participants, teachers from a differing backgrounds, such as attending university directly after finishing high school, change of career, beginning and experienced teachers were selected.

### 3.4 INSTRUMENTS

Data collection for this study was undertaken from two data sets. Participants were invited to complete a preliminary online questionnaire and then purposefully selected participants participated in thirty-minute semi-structured interviews. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that a good qualitative case study presents an in-depth understanding of the case, where the researcher collects and integrates multiple forms of qualitative data such as surveys, interviews and observations. Patton (2002) suggests that studies that use only one research method are more vulnerable to errors linked to that particular method, whereas studies employing multiple methods, in which different types of data are collected, provide more rigorous cross-data validity checks. Patton (2002) asserts that the sole use of documents and records has limitations as they may be inaccurate or incomplete and that interviews might be distorted due to personal bias or may potentially be affected by the emotional state of the interviewee. They can also be subject to recall error. Employing a variety of instruments allows the researcher to build on the strengths of each, while minimising the weaknesses of any single approach (Patton, 2002). Creswell and Poth (2018) concur stating that relying on one source of data is typically not enough to develop an in-depth understanding, particularly for case studies.

### 3.5 PROCEDURE AND TIMELINE

There were four phases of the data collection process in this study. The following table outlines the procedure used in each stage and timeline for the completion of each stage.

Stage	Procedure	Timeline
1. Preliminary online questionnaire	Research introduced to staff, who were invited to undertake online survey	August, 2018
2. Analyse results of surveys	Thematic analysis undertaken to form basis of interview questions. Participants for interviews confirmed	October, 2018
3. Recruitment	Consent forms provided to participants. Collection of informed consent. Participants supplied with their copy	April, 2019
4. Semi-structured interviews	Interviews conducted, transcribed and coded	June-July, 2019

### 3.6 ANALYSIS

This research employed a case study methodology. Merriam (1985) describes how educational researchers have only recently recognised the advantage of using a case study approach to gain a better understanding of the process or dynamics of certain features of educational practise. A case study allows for a level of understanding and explanation which may not be possible through traditionally used experimental or survey designs (Merriam, 1985). Creswell and Poth (2018) define case study research as a qualitative approach in which the researcher explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection, involving multiple sources of information, and which reports a case description as well as case themes. Stake (2005) describes case study as a useful way to study a case when it itself is of special interest, identifying case study methodology as the examination of the peculiarity and complexity of a single case, where the researcher comes to understand its activity within important circumstances.

Case study research involves the examination of an organisation within a real-life, contemporary setting to develop an in-depth understanding of how that setting addresses an issue (Yin, 2014). Merriam (1985) notes that selection of the case is determined by the purpose of the research and the interest of the researcher, therefore the case to be investigated is often identified before any data is collected. The collection of multiple forms of data serves to develop an in-depth understanding of the case. Merriam (1985) states that data gathered through interviews, observations and document analysis are primarily qualitative in nature and it is these data that are used directly to build the intensive, thick description of a case study.

Following critiques that the results of case studies are difficult to navigate as they are often written as lengthy narratives without predictable structure, Yin (1981) advocates building the study on a clear conceptual framework and replacing the case study narrative with a series of answers to a set of open-ended questions. Merriam (1985) states the main purpose of the conceptual framework is to make sense out of the data; to identify patterns and themes among the data which give meaning to the case under study. Case study researchers study current, real-life cases that are in progress so that they can gather accurate information not lost by time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This case study could be described as an “Instrumental case” because it serves the purpose of illuminating a particular issue and provides insight into that issue (Creswell, 2014; Stake, 2005). The use of an instrumental case study in this instance is for the purpose for addressing the research question of what strategies are used by teachers in a low SES primary school to build positive relationships with the families of at-risk students and to gain insight by studying how it is addressed in the case study site (Stake, 2005). As the case study site has been acknowledged for its success in that area,

it is appropriate to use this site as a “within-site” (or single location) case study where the researcher can analyse each case for themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2014).

In his review of the prevailing literature, Merriam (1985) identifies that there has been much debate as to whether data from a single case can be generalised, noting that can be seen as a limitation of the method. However, Merriam (1985) noted that many writers dismissed the notion of making generalisations as inappropriate to research in the social sciences, continuing that generalisability is ultimately connected to what the reader is seeking to learn from the case study. He comments further that it is common practise in other disciplines, such as law and medicine, to leave generalisation up to the practitioner (Merriam, 1985).

Having discussed the reasons for employing a case study methodology, an analysis of the data will now follow.

The online surveys were used in two ways: firstly, to provide an overview of the types of strategies teachers perceive as useful in building parental engagement, and as an overall gauge of what teachers believe work to improve attendance in low SES schools and secondly, to select respondents for the in-depth interviews. The in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed using identical protocols and included, but were not limited to, a pre-determined set of questions which were informed by the survey. The interviews were then analysed qualitatively, to identify themes. These face-to-face interviews provided participants with an opportunity to give further examples, engage in stories, or tell stories, all intended to elicit rich data. The transcription of each interview was read line by line and subsequently coded around the emerging themes. These code labels were assigned to segments that addressed the research foci. The codes were grouped to form the final broad themes that formed the basis for my analysis (Creswell, 2014). This process of analysis predominantly examined the themes through the lens of current literature and the findings discussed earlier.

An additional aspect of the interviews was the potential for the process to draw on elements of narrative inquiry. This component of the data collection involved a specific part of the initial half hour interview where respondents were asked to tell one (or more) story about a strategy they used to engage parents in their classroom and how they feel it affected student attendance. The use of ‘storying’ to collect data is useful in that it documents teachers’ lived experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The use of narrative inquiry in the field of educational research draws on an everyday, normal form of data as everyone has stories to tell about their experiences (Creswell, 2014). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) describe how narrative inquiry creates a relationship between researchers and practitioners, constructing a “caring community” and as the stories of the research relationship are told, they have opportunity to become “stories of empowerment” (p. 4).

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) assert that it is vital for participants to have a voice in beginning the process of narrative inquiry, continuing that practitioners have long been silenced in the research relationship. Moreover, the practitioner must be given the time and space to first tell their story as the researcher listens, giving the research story authority and validity (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Data collection and analysis will be strengthened by the ability to draw comparisons between participants' responses.

The data from the interviews were analysed through the lens of Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital including aspects of social reproduction, habitus and field (Bourdieu et al., 1977). Bourdieu's social theory was selected and employed in this study because it furnishes educational researchers with "a rich conceptual apparatus for their practice" to examine some of the most important features of the field of educational research (Grenfell & James, 2004, p. 1).

A case study approach is most appropriate when the research seeks to examine the beliefs, experiences and strategies of the teachers in the case study site in order to find commonalities or patterns and interpret these data with high validity (Reay, 1998). A number of researchers have employed Bourdieu's cultural capital as a conceptual framework within a case study methodology, particularly when examining the schooling experiences of vulnerable populations (Lareau, 1987, 2014; Reay, 1998). The use of Bourdieu's cultural capital as a methodology is a logical choice as the participants in the study unconsciously interact with families according to their own cultural capital. Further, it is important to interrogate whether practitioners take into account parents' previous experiences and level of education when attempting to build relationships with families (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Lareau, 1987).

### **3.7 ETHICS AND LIMITATIONS**

There are a number of issues which could possibly arise when employing a qualitative interview model (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2002). Ethical considerations were addressed in conducting this research, including garnering permission from La Trobe University, Education Queensland and the participating case school administration. Participants were informed of the research process and purposes so they could give informed consent. Education Queensland<sup>2</sup> and La

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<sup>2</sup> Education Queensland approval received from school site Principal, Date of approval: 27.07.2018

Trobe University Ethical<sup>3</sup> permissions were secured, taking into account consent for potentially interviewing participants several times during the course of the study. Interviewees were provided with the opportunity to reconsider their participation and withdraw from the research at any time. Interviewees' anonymity was ensured with the use of an anonymous online survey together with the secure storage of de-identified interview transcripts, which were given individual codes names, and stored separately. Participants are able to "own" their stories through the acknowledgement of the contribution the respondents made to the success of the research process (Creswell, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002).

Clandinin (2006) suggests that researchers engaging in narrative inquiry need to consider ethics as being more than just completing required institutional forms but rather making the narrative inquiry reliable and stable. Josselson (2007) advocates an ethical attitude toward narrative research, which involves considering matters and deciding how best to respect and protect participants of the research study while maintaining standards for responsible research. Clandinin (2006) states that narrative inquirers cannot remove themselves from the inquiry but should find ways to inquire into their own experiences, and the experiences of participants together with co-constructed experiences which develop through the interactive inquiry process.

As a practicing teacher in a low SES school context where absenteeism is prevalent, it is important to acknowledge the researcher's interest in this topic. In 2010, as part of my undergraduate studies I was invited to join the ETDS program (now NETDS) whose aim is to ensure that disadvantaged schools are furnished with high achieving, reflective, social-justice minded teachers who were appropriately prepared to address the unique challenges presented in low SES schools. Following graduation, I was offered employment in one such school. Years later, I felt compelled to undertake further research with a view to interviewing teachers from like schools about the strategies they used to build positive relationships with families and the community to combat absenteeism of at-risk students, under the guidance of the creators of the NETDS program. Being at the coalface, I wanted to add to the body of knowledge, including my own, as there seemed to be a lack of published strategies despite policy documents mandating that teachers foster positive relationships with families.

When formulating the proposal for this research, I realised that the school where I worked had been successful in this area and so a case study seemed the most appropriate way to address this research. This school has employed a large number of NETDS graduates since my commencement, however I

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<sup>3</sup> La Trobe University Ethics Application ID: HEC18281, Date of approval: 06.08.2018



was careful to ensure a balance of participants, from a range of backgrounds (such as attending university directly after finishing high school, change of career, beginning and experienced teachers) so as not to unduly influence the data. Working in the case study school makes me an *insider-researcher* which offers a unique set of challenges as well as advantages, which will now be discussed (Taylor, 2011; Unluer, 2012).

Unluer (2012) notes research in the field of education is concerned with human beings and their behaviour, each of whom brings a broad range of perspectives to the research process, including that of the researcher. Taylor (2011) lists advantages of insider-research as having deeper levels of understanding afforded by prior knowledge; knowing the lingo or native speak of field participants; easier and better informed selection of research participants; as well as quicker establishment of rapport and trust between researcher and participants, all of which are afforded by the researcher's continuing interaction with the site. Unluer (2012) concurs citing many advantages for an insider-research, such as ease in entering the research site, not having to attend other research areas, defining the researcher's role to participants and *surviving* in the research site (p. 10). Data are easily accessed, colleagues are likely to be supportive and helpful, and the whole school may benefit from the research results. Taylor (2011) however, warns the insider-researcher to be cognisant of the fact that insider friendships can impact upon the processes of awareness and interpretation of the field under examination.

Unluer (2012) describes how an insider-researcher already has established relationships which promote both the telling and the judging of truth as well as an appreciation for the "the politics" of the institution, not only the formal hierarchy but also how it "really works" together with a greater understanding of the culture being studied, which takes an outsider time to acquire (p. 1). Taylor (2011) states that the insider-researcher must ensure they do not privilege their position as they cannot automatically escape the problem of knowledge distortion, and must be aware of their own multiple and contestable viewpoints. Due to my familiarity with the case-study site, there was the potential for participants to assume I already know what they know. During the interviews, I realised from some of the answers I received that participants took certain knowledges for granted, which furnished me with the opportunity to ask clarifying questions and garner more rich data. This allowed the participants to elaborate as well as reflect on their answers more deeply.

In order to conduct credible insider research, Unluer (2012) advocates maintaining an explicit awareness of perceived bias on data collection and analysis, considering the ethical issues related to the anonymity of the case-study site and participants, while acknowledging the issues of coercion, compliance and access to privileged information, at every stage of the research. Unluer (2012) states when the research area is simultaneously the place of employment, there is the potential to discover sensitive information which can cause difficulties. While it is important to accurately report findings, the researcher still has an ethical responsibility to the school and their colleagues. In order to preserve

the anonymity of participants, I did not disclose the names of interviewees, what was discussed or the observations that I made with any participants or other members of staff. Participants are aware, through reading and signing the Participant Information, Consent and Withdrawal Form (see Appendix B) that the results of this research will form part of a Master's thesis, with the potential to be published at a later date, but their identity has been de- identified.

# Chapter 4: Analysis, Findings and Results

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The research questions framing this study are:

1. What do a selective group of teachers in one low SES school in Queensland perceive as the relationship between parental engagement and school attendance?
2. What measures do they take to build better relationships with the most at risk families?
3. What evidence is there of the impact of these strategies on improved attendance?

## Surveys

Members of staff at the case study school were invited to complete an anonymous online survey (see Appendix C for survey questions). As per the ethical research requirements of Latrobe University and Education Queensland, prior to the commencement of data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants in the online survey gave consent by completing the survey.

It should be noted that several of the surveys were incomplete with respondents electing not to answer certain questions. As the survey was open to non-teaching staff, some questions were not applicable. In hindsight, an option to select not applicable would have benefited these respondents and provided more accurate data. The first five questions were designed to collect background information about participants, yielding the following data:

Of the 24 total respondents, three were male and 21 female. It should be noted that the ratio of male to female participants is indicative of the gender balance in this school at the time this survey was conducted. Four respondents were aged between 20–30 years, six aged 30–40 years and 14 aged over 40. Twenty-two respondents provided the following data regarding years of teaching experience: Nine had less than 5 years, three had 5–10 years, two had 10–15 years and eight had over 15 years.

Respondents were asked to identify their current teaching sector. Seven indicated they were from P-2 sector, six were from the year 3–6 sector and eight non-teaching staff (including members of administration and teacher aides).

Respondents were asked about their level of education and 16 respondents provided the following data: 13 hold a Bachelor's Degree, three hold a Graduate Diploma, with two having obtained a Master's Degree. The purpose of this question was to ascertain at what level of tertiary study, if any, provided subjects addressing how to build relationships with members of the community. The next question asked participants to provide their pathway to education. There

were fourteen respondents with answers ranging from attending university straight from high school to change of career.

Having provided background information, respondents were then asked about building relationships with families and communities. Fourteen respondents continued with the survey, the results of which will now be discussed.

There is a lack of literature outlining strategies to build positive relationships with communities, as discussed in the literature review. Geelan and Ronsley-Pavia (2018) state, prior to 2017, there were significant gaps in Australian literature in supporting pre-service teachers' development of the skills and dispositions for parental engagement. It must therefore follow, that previously it has been up to teachers to find and develop their own suite of strategies to engage parents and the community. New initiatives to incorporate this into the university studies of pre-service teachers identified by Burnett and Lampert (2016); Ferfolja (2008) and Reid (2005) have highlighted the need for these programs for aspiring teachers prior to entering the classroom. Geelan and Ronsley-Pavia (2018) report that since 2018 all participating institutions in their research have either implemented relevant courses in their initial teacher education programs or planned to do so, under new Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) accreditation requirements. While is beneficial for the upcoming cohort of pre-service teachers, there is still an absence of literature for existing teachers to access. This lack of programs in university courses was highlighted in the survey results where respondents were asked if their university studies addressed how to build relationships with students, their families and communities with only one respondent indicating that it had been thoroughly addressed. Seven reported to "to some extent" and six respondents stated it was not addressed at all.

The survey results did indicate that some schools are attempting to address this paucity by including professional development in teacher induction programs together with professional development opportunities. When asked about their participation in professional development around building relationships with family and community, nine respondents stated they received induction/mentoring as well as professional development at the case study school. Five indicated they received induction/mentoring as well as professional development at other schools. It would be beneficial to investigate what types of professional development programs were accessed in those schools as well as whether these schools were located in low-socio economic areas similar to the case study school. An area for further investigation would be if schools located in higher socio-economic areas place the same importance on their relationships with the community, for what purpose, and whether they include mentoring and professional development for teaching staff in this area. A survey of school leaders conducted by Education Queensland found that schools with higher attendance rates tend to have students from higher socio-economic status families, but failed

to address if there were other contributing factors, such as positive relationships with the community (DET, 2016b). Blackmore and Hutchison (2010) found that some teachers viewed working with the parent community as a potential area of professional development.

When asked what they believed to be the significant outcomes from building strong relationships with students, noting that respondents could select as many as applied to them, all fourteen respondents believed it leads to improvement of academic achievement which is in congruence with the findings of the literature review and prevailing research in the area (Gottfried, 2009; Lareau, 1987; Reay, 2000; Reid, 2008; Sime & Sheridan, 2014).

All fourteen respondents indicated that building relationships with students was a goal in and of itself with one respondent stating that building relationships with students provides “Positive outcomes for students’ social and emotional health, and provides an important role model and builds a love of school”. Another respondent commented “Building positive relationships with parents, who will then support their child in school attendance”. Twelve respondents believed it would help to build a positive school community, while only five indicated it was due to their obligations under AITSL Professional Standards for Teachers. These responses indicate that teachers value the building of relationships, albeit for differing outcomes, rather than viewing it solely as a professional obligation, aligning with the findings of Lareau (1987).

When asked, what they believed to be the important outcomes from building strong relationships with families and the community, noting that respondents could select as many as applied to them, all respondents believed that it had positive effects on student behaviour. Twelve indicated strong family and community relationships positively impacted on student academic outcomes. Six indicated it was due to their obligations under AITSL Professional Standards for Teachers whereas thirteen stated it positively affected the classroom climate. Twelve respondents indicated that building a positive school community was a goal in and of itself. One respondent provided an additional comment “Building positive relationships with the community helps resource the school”. Further investigation into what this respondent meant by “resource”, whether that refers to physical resources such as funding or the community relationship, which can be viewed as a resource, or human resources, where families volunteer in classrooms and on committees, would be beneficial. Zyngier (2011), asserts that community relationships should be viewed as a resource as input from adults from all parts of student’s lives and community has a profound impact on community life and on their development, contending that the absence thereof deprives them essential sources of guidance, support and socialisation.

Participants were asked if they felt successful in building positive relationships with families and the community. Of the fourteen respondents, nine stated they felt thoroughly successful while only five reported they felt successful to some extent. When asked how they developed their

skills in building relationships with families and the community, noting that respondents could select as many as applied to them, ten indicated it was from workplace learning provided by the school, while thirteen cited immersion in practise. Five indicated they undertook formal learning such as professional reading or further studies, whereas six cited professional development from organisations outside of school and included the following additional comments: “Previous career as a social worker”; “Interacting with customers in previous employment”. Interestingly, one respondent noted “Some people have natural skills at developing relationships with others”.

When asked which strategies they used most often to build relationships with families and noting they could select as many as applied them, it was found that phone calls were the least preferred strategy with nine responses. Ten selected parent teacher meetings as their preferred communication, with twelve favouring email and thirteen choosing informal conversations. Four respondents provided additional comments: “Due to being in Prep we have morning and afternoon chats with parents daily (at drop off/pick up)”; “Informal chats outside the classroom”; “Sending certificates and notes home, Home visits” and “Greetings in the classroom of a morning, Class Dojo”<sup>4</sup>.

Participants were then asked to indicate which responses influenced their decision to build relationships with families and community. Eight respondents indicated it was wanting to have better relationships with students. Four cited personal beliefs, yet none of the respondents stated it was planning for student learning or the expectations of school leadership. Two respondents offered additional comments. One stating “Building relationships is just part of my everyday practices, and part of who I am. At times, I find it easier to build relationships with the families that I teach and the community rather than my work colleagues due to the very nature of teaching.” The other noting “Job requirement. Better opportunities for students who were previously disengaged from learning. They deserve a chance in life, regardless of their parent’s choices.”

Participants were asked if they believed that building relationships with families and communities can influence students’ attendance at school. Thirteen of the fourteen respondents selected “thoroughly” with one choosing “to some extent”. This is in congruence with the raft of literature which shows a strong correlation between attendance and academic achievement.

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<sup>4</sup> Class Dojo is an online classroom management platform where teachers can record and track student behaviour, facilitate classroom activities, curate student portfolios, and communicate with parents. Retrieved from <https://www.common sense.org/education/website/classdojo on 17.05.2020>

When asked how often they communicate with families of at-risk students (“at-risk” referring to students with poor attendance and/poor academic performance), five respondents indicated once a month, three stating less than once a week, whereas three chose more than once a week. None of the respondents choosing “never” or “only in emergencies”. One respondent added the following additional comment: “As a Student Engagement Officer, my whole role is about engaging with at-risk students and their families.” Another respondent commented “Depends on the family and the student, the circumstances that they are going through at the time.” A third respondent said “Whenever necessary, depends on the interaction required and how often.”

Ten of the fourteen respondents indicated that they would be prepared to be interviewed about building relationships with families and the community. Four teachers and three members of the administration team were selected. For the purpose of comparison, two teachers (one beginning and one experienced) from each of the two sectors (P-2, 3-6) were chosen together with the Principal, Deputy Principal and the Community Engagement Officer. Of the two beginning staff, respondents of different ages were also selected (one having entered university directly from High School and the other as a mature aged student with a family). This was considered to give more rich data and diverse perspectives in ease of speaking with parents.

## **Interviews**

Following an initial review of the survey data, an email request was sent for those respondents who indicated they were prepared to be interviewed to reply, so appropriate participants for the second phase of data collection could be selected. The final participants were purposefully selected from those respondents who indicated willingness to participate in the interviews. They were provided with Participant Information Statement, Consent and Withdrawal Forms (see Appendix B) prior to the interview.

In the process of collecting interview data, separate interviews (see Appendix D for interview questions) were conducted with the seven participants: the Principal, Deputy Principal, Community Engagement Officer and four teachers from both lower and upper sectors of the school. Teachers self-selected through responding to the online survey from an open invitation placed in the staffroom. Their time was acknowledged time by providing refreshments during the interview or a box of chocolates post-interview to thank them for participation in the study. These interviews were taped and transcribed. A second reading focused on identifying issues and themes grounded in the interview data. I am aware that selection of teachers, on the basis of their willingness and readiness to participate in this study, may have influenced the sample of respondents.

The semi-structured interviews used in this study provided flexibility in the interview to allow other themes to emerge, some of which were: beliefs about reasons for non-attendance; the difference

in valuing of education; differing beliefs about the importance of education; perceptions of parental involvement in education; the need to educate/re-educate families; barriers to parental engagement together with strategies addressing those barriers; successful strategies (first build the relationship with the child and then with the family); being seen by the community as well as being approachable; the different types communication as well as pointing out positives first when communicating with parents and families.

The analysis of the interviews was underpinned by Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital including aspects of social reproduction, habitus and field. The results of this analysis will now be discussed.

## **CULTURAL CAPITAL**

Six of the seven of participants provided responses and anecdotes where they overtly stated that families from low SES backgrounds hold different values (from them) regarding the purpose of education or the value they placed upon it, using phrases like "in stark contrast to my personal values" and "they don't place the same importance on education".

Sullivan (2002) advances that cultural capital and habitus (attitudes) are deeply embedded within the teacher and that these scripts are created from life experiences and assumptions within their own fields. The views expressed by most participants reflect Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. Lamont and Lareau (1988) define cultural capital as:

Institutionalised, i.e. widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviours, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion (p. 156).

When responding to the question do you think parents from low SES backgrounds value education, respondent one stated:

I would suggest that it is twofold, I think they value education and I think they fear education at the same time. I think they want the best for their kids, I have no doubt about that. I think sometimes they don't know what that looks like or what that it is. I think that, for a lot of our parents, they sometimes confuse their child's happiness with what they perceive to be good outcomes for them. I think as a whole our parents genuinely want the best outcomes for their kids but they don't necessarily have the same value structure in terms of middle class education.

This respondent acknowledges that many parents from low-socio economic backgrounds hold differing values to educators and moreover that education is underpinned by middle class values. This respondent stated that he believes parents living in low SES circumstances do value



education but in relation to their child's happiness rather than the middle class expectation of education preparing their child for a future in the academic and business world. Whilst aligning with the findings of research that parents from low SES backgrounds do value education, this respondent still holds a deficit view based in the belief that this value is placed in the desire to build family relationships (their child's happiness) where relationships are valued over education (Lareau, 1987, 2014; Payne, 2005). This view also contrasts the neoliberal goal of schooling, as measured by tests, academic outcomes and preparation for their future in the academic and business world. This participant's response further implied that parents from the middle class are more *genuinely* interested in education and demand higher standards from schools and teachers and want "their pound of flesh" or an "additional element from the school". He continued that alternatively, some middle-class families criticised the school for using time and resources to supply disadvantaged children with lunch and uniforms, or disapproved of families whose habitus differs from their own. The conflict of habitus occurs for example, from the middle-class expectation that families should supply their children with food and uniforms so that school resources are used for educational purposes. This attitude was also reflected by another teacher who stated:

The middle class is more interested in the academics and their achievement and the lower 25 percentile are possibly more about their behaviour and that sort of thing. (Respondent 3)

The connotation from these comments is that families from the middle class possess the appropriate cultural capital, in that they value education however, they then hold the school administration to higher standards or seek that which is over and above what the administration deems appropriate. This is in congruence with research which found the prevailing expectation held by many school administrations is that parents should defer to the school's professional expertise and not question its decisions (Lareau, 1987; Macfarlane, 2008). In their recent study of a school in Victoria, Blackmore and Hutchison (2010) found many teachers reported parents acting like consumers within the school system, becoming more assertive and holding expectations that teachers should meet their child's individual needs. Lareau (1987) recounted how parents from a middle class school were more likely to be involved in their child's education by requesting children receive additional reading, receive testing from school psychologist, or be enrolled in the gifted program as well as requesting homework or additional materials that they could complete at home with their children.

Many of the remaining participants however articulated the view that parents in this low SES context did not value education. They equated valuing education with regular school attendance, with responses such as the following from respondent two:

It varies a lot, the students with poor attendance clearly don't value it as much as the ones with very good attendance, it is really quite a broad spectrum.

This comment does not address the reasons why students are absent from school, only that this respondent equates regular attendance with valuing of education. Much of the literature states that families living in low SES circumstances often have fewer years of education or negative experiences with schools (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Lareau, 1987). Parents who have had negative experiences with education previously or do not understand the implicit expectations due to their differing cultural capital or social experiences may then continue to receive negative responses from teachers or the school environment when this becomes evident, thereby compounding their discomfort (Lareau, 1987). Gavidia-Payne et al. (2015) describe how children from low SES backgrounds potentially take on the negative attitudes reflected by their parents, including their lack of potential for academic achievement. In order to address these attitudes, Kearney (2016) advocates finding appropriate ways to best engage parents who lack confidence engaging in the school environment. School requests for parental engagement often hold imbedded and unspoken expectations that require cultural and social experiences that some parents do not possess (Lareau, 2015). This was exhibited by the Community Engagement Officer's recount of a story of a young couple where their first child had commenced formal schooling:

They wouldn't answer the phone, so I went down and did a home visit. They were very shocked that I turned up at their house. They were very, very young and the dad's schooling experiences were very negative and so he envisioned that school was like part time thing and they were going to do a little bit of home school and normal school, with no home school plan at all.

The child never got any sort of kindy, mum and dad don't work, and so they are all together all the time, so they just didn't understand the significance of school, even though it hasn't been that long since they were in high school themselves. So, it has been a slow education process. This is how you parent. They've never had to be anywhere on time because they are at home together, no work requirements, no kindy. The younger ones are getting enrolled in kindy now and it's been this process of getting them to understand that this is the importance of attendance, this is what your child is going to miss out on and it turns out that they are fairly new to the area. Mum is from Perth, she has no friends here, so I've linked her in with playgroups, kid's activity.

So the little one's attendance has improved, but it still isn't 100% and, more importantly, dad has changed his perspective of schooling. He came in very defensive and ready to argue and now he realised it's not quite the same as his school experience.

This response outlines how the family's cultural capital does not align with the middle class valuing of school and is steeped in the belief that the family needed to be educated or their views reframed to the dominant habitus (Lareau, 2014; Lareau & McNamara Horvat, 1999; Payne, 2005). Sime and Sheridan (2014) advocate the importance of the mother's level of education together with the home learning environment in influencing children's social and academic outcomes. This respondent also reflects the middle-class belief in the importance of early education of children, including playgroups and kindergarten programs. Research indicates that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are often already behind their peers in terms of language, social and emotional development (Sime & Sheridan, 2014). Watterston and O'Connell (2019) discuss the disparity in attendance of early childhood programs together with the significant gaps in achievement between children from low and higher socio-economic backgrounds. They continue that children from the low SES backgrounds are three times as likely to start school behind their peers, with half of these failing to finish their education or gain future employment.

Respondent three gave a description of parents whose first child was attending school, which aligns with the previous respondent's beliefs about families from low SES backgrounds and their valuing of education:

It is their first time engaging in the school environment and they don't see the importance of sending their children to school every day, so education isn't high on their priority list.

I think they think school is just a place to go... where she could come and play and socialise, they didn't realise school was so formal and so much was placed on education.

A lot of the conversations they come to me about are "Oh they have tuckshop today" or "so and so is picking them up" or it is more of that everyday sort of stuff, more so than their academics.

This is in congruence with Lareau's findings which stated that parents from low SES backgrounds did not contact the school often, but when they did it was to raise non-academic issues (Lareau, 1987). They continued:

They will book an interview but not turn up. Maybe they feel like they are showing an interest, but use an excuse like "I couldn't make it" or "my child was sick". Maybe they are embarrassed to hear how their child is going, maybe they feel inadequate or uncomfortable around the teacher.

There are two or three that identify as aboriginal, some lower socio-economic, some average, and run of the mill families as well. We have a broad range within the class. I'm

finding the ones would be the lower socio-economic are the ones who aren't attending regularly or they've got big families or young parents, a couple are very young.

One of the little girls she is the eldest in the family, with two younger siblings, it's their first time engaging in the school environment. Another family has older siblings at the school, so education isn't high on their priority list, so they don't see the importance of sending their children to school every single day. (Respondent 3)

These responses reflect the disparity between the parent's cultural capital which appears to place value on family relationships as opposed to valuing of school, and that of the teacher, including attendance at formal pre-schooling facilities such as kindergarten together with regular attendance at school and events such as parent teacher meetings. Whilst the parents from respondent two's story did show valuing of school, by stating their child would attend school and have some home school experiences, it did not match this respondent's expectation that there would be a formal plan for home schooling their child.

Respondent seven reflected the prevailing view that parents from low SES backgrounds do not value education for the "right reasons", highlighting the incongruence of cultural capital between teachers and parents.

There are definitely parents who don't see the value at all and are kind of just ticking the box, because that is what you have to do and you can pull out when you get to grade, whatever it is now, 9 or 10 and "I only did that, so that's good enough". And again, trying not to judge that, but you do have parents who are genuinely trying to have more, they want more for their kids and they are actively trying to get them more.

There is a range in terms of the value placed on education and it is generally indicative and reflected in their achievement and their results in school. Not always, you certainly have kids where ... well, actually it probably is really, because the few examples I am thinking of the kids have rubbish background, really tricky situations but the parents are valuing of education and so then they are almost, in spite of all those things, doing well. There is that key in there to unlocking it.

This comment serves to illuminate one of the finer points of differing cultural capital, that it is not just regular attendance of school that is valued by teachers, but the dominant habitus that education in and of itself should be the goal (Comber, 2016; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Lareau, 2015; Reay, 2004). Lareau (2011) found that regardless of social class, parents do pay close attention to their children's education but take a different approach. Moreover, that working class parents fear doing the wrong thing when it comes to their interactions with teachers and schools and that they are more respectful of the professional expertise of teachers. While they seek guidance from

teachers regarding their children's education, they prefer to maintain a separation between school and home rather than fostering interconnectedness (Lareau, 2011). This does not align with schools' objectives, where they seek active involvement from parents in their child's education. Education Queensland documents state:

Quality partnerships require a reciprocal commitment from staff and parents to work together to improve student learning and wellbeing. Effective partnerships can help to raise parents' awareness of their ability to improve their children's learning and wellbeing. Understanding the school, home and community contribution to student learning helps cultivate a holistic learning environment (Department of Education, 2020b).

Reay (2000) found that as the role of supporting a child's education generally falls on the mother, it is also dependent on the time available to the mother, concluding that mothers from middle class backgrounds are able to add to the education of their children by their ability to pay for early childhood education, whilst simultaneously engaging in their careers. They were also found to have more confidence in their ability to assist with homework tasks. Therefore, while lacking available time to engage in school activities, mothers from middle class backgrounds, still add to the reproduction of the education values by assigning validity through the use of early childhood education programs.

As an experienced teacher, respondent four noted a change in attitude toward education. She also equated parental contact and communication with the teacher with the valuing of education.

I think fairly high. I think it has definitely changed at the school from what it used to be. I think they value education a lot more...

You have the parents who make constant communication and they want to know all of the ins and outs so they actually ask the questions "How can I support my child at home" and then you get the families that may never come and ask those sort of things and then you offer it and may get no response. Yes, there definitely is a difference in the ones across the class, you get the ones who want to help their children as much as they can and then the ones that cruise along and go "well, if you're not in my face it must be okay."

These comments align with the findings of Lareau (2011) who found that children from a working class background, like their parents, were more likely to accept the actions of authority figures and were often unaware of expectations of the teacher and school administration. Respondent six reported differing levels of interest with regards to her class:

Half that are really interested in making sure their students do well and then I've got the other half who couldn't really care less. I know that my two indigenous children, their parents do not value education in any sense at all. (..) It falls on deaf ears, the advice, and telling her how I can help her with her coming to school more regularly and you working with her at home and none of it happens.

I try to be open with them and keep them in the loop as much as I can and some do really appreciate that and so they are making the effort to come and to see me. It definitely comes down to whether they value education or not.

These comments serve to illuminate the deficit view of families from low SES backgrounds held by many teachers. This respondent attributes a strong correlation between regular school attendance and parent involvement (helping their children with schoolwork at home) with the valuing of school. These statements are underpinned by the belief that parents from low SES backgrounds need to be (re)educated to the dominant habitus (Payne, 2005).

Respondent four stated that she is more confident communicating with parents than in the beginning of her career, feeling more self-assured and possessing a bank of relationship building strategies. However, she acknowledged that the relationship is not necessarily transferrable to other staff members, citing one example where her teaching partner had a difficult encounter with a parent with whom she enjoys a positive relationship. This is contrary to research which found that positive communications were well received by parents regardless of who conveyed them (for example a teacher, secretary or Principal) (McConnell & Kubina Jr, 2014). She also noted that building relationships with parents can be intimidating for inexperienced teachers, particularly in the case where they have been "warned" about particular students or parents by previous teachers. This attitude was reflected in comments from a respondent in the beginning stages of her career:

I have been told from previous [teachers] that she is not interested. Teachers who had their child previously, they had forewarned me that she doesn't care, I don't know if whether she said it to them previously or if that is their opinion, but I've had that in mind.

This respondent further expressed how she was less likely to pursue alternate avenues to foster positive relationships.

Well they can't say they don't know what is going on, if they are not replying then that is on them. At least, I've done my part in letting them know. (Respondent six)

This attitude aligns with the research which found that the deficit discourses of teachers and staffrooms were major contributors to the beliefs many teachers hold about some students and

families (Comber & Kamler, 2004; Gorski, 2012; Reid, 2008). Thomson and Comber (2003) for example, assert when societal metaphors for the way students are discussed resound with criticism, they may appear to be reasonable. Remnants of these metaphors then appear in school staffrooms and classrooms (Thomson & Comber, 2003). These differing attitudes or values often lead to deficit opinions (which later enter staffroom discourses) that some families are lacking the appropriate habitus, which will now be discussed.

## **HABITUS AND FIELD**

Because learning is an irreversible process, the habitus acquired within the family forms the basis of the reception and assimilation of the classroom message, and the habitus acquired at school conditions the level of reception and degree of assimilation of the messages produced and diffused by the culture industry, and, more generally, of any intellectual or semi-intellectual message (Bourdieu et al., 1977, p. 70).

Habitus includes the knowledge and mastery of a particular language which, as the dominant mode of inculcation, corresponds with the interests of the dominant classes (Bourdieu et al., 1977). Lareau (2014) offers an example of differences in habitus, where a contrast in disciplining children between middle class and working class families, for example, serves to increase the subtle advantage in family-school interactions. The use of reasoning rather than corporal punishments, which are often deemed to be too severe and are likely to bring sanctions from authorities, provides middle class families with matching cultural practises to schooling institutions. Lareau (2011) describes how working class families are more likely to use directives and tell their children what to do rather than using reasoning to persuade them. Further, parents from low SES backgrounds were more also likely to encourage children to use physical force to resolve playground issues, in accordance with the kinds of discipline used at home. Other times, school rules were dismissed as unreasonable as they were in direct contrast to their own values (Lareau, 2011). Additionally, working class parents expressed distrust in their relationships with school officials, worrying that the school could take away their children. Some examples of this distrust are outlined below:

Parents often don't answer the phone when they know it is the school calling, particularly with chronic absenteeism because they know it's probably due to that.

There is a lot invested in lying for them, in keeping the school away from seeing what's happening at home sometimes, because sometimes there are child protection issues or just their shame. They have incredible shame.

Mum was really very hesitant of me, not suspicious, but she really didn't trust me with her child and didn't think I had the child's best interests at heart, which was tricky to try and prove otherwise. (Respondent two)

Respondent five discussed the disconnect of expectations around communication between parents and school staff.

We established a communication protocol. Our parents had a perception they we were accessible as teachers and admin, 24 hours a day and it would be nothing for them to email you or call you after 6 o'clock [at night] or before 6 o'clock in the morning, so we established a communication protocol to say that we had a 24 hour turnaround to respond to their emails or communication. But we very much had to have a positive approach first and, for want of a better word, build up their emotional bank account, so when you did have to make those calls about negative things that occurred at school that they were more prepared and more open to accept it.

These comments highlight how the teachers and school administrations' habitus influences how they receive communication from parents. As discussed earlier, teachers request communication from families, believing it to show value in education yet is it underpinned by unspoken expectations of appropriate timing (Macfarlane, 2008).

Respondent five stated how parent's attitudes towards education and school is often reflected in their children.

From my understanding, it is their own negative perceptions of not only school but any form of authority. So they have a poor previous history about anyone in authority.

I can tell you that it has a significant impact, because their negativity towards school or towards authority very much has permeated to the student, where their perception of anyone in authority is also negative. So the parent's perception certainly trickles down to the student's belief about what school is for and teachers and principals. So it has a great negative affect on them.

These respondents' beliefs reflect much of the research which states that parents who lack the cultural capital to recognise the implicit expectations of school therefore limits their ability to be involved (Lareau, 1987). Moreover, that parents' own negative experience with the education system makes them reticent to engage with their children's school (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Lareau, 1987; Morrissey et al., 2014). Lareau (2011) also found that while working class parents were less likely to openly disagree with educators, they were more likely to state to their children that the teacher was unreasonable, unfair or untrustworthy. Moreover, they often felt the school's



approach to discipline was inappropriate. This difference in habitus has the potential to cause conflict between families and school as well as confusion in children where parents defer to the school in public, but express dissent in private (Macfarlane, 2008).

Respondent Two is the Community Engagement Officer who stated that relationships take a lot of time to build and that is the basis of her role. She commented that she had visited one family 27 times. “I invite parents to have participation in their own solutions and I invite them into accountability”.

By building relationships over time, this respondent reported that parents will admit that something is more of an issue than they had previously indicated. She further commented that relationship building is often done in many different ways, for example, taking a stern approach with students as a *pseudo partner* to a single parent and telling the student “it’s not just mum’s job to get you to school, you need to participate as well”.

For so many families life is incredibly disappointing, they have legitimately had one horrible thing after another happen to them from being born and their hope and their idea of hope, there is no hope. It’s like everything is terrible and I can’t cope, so I just try to give them some hope as best I can. (Respondent two)

The implementation of the Community Engagement Officer’s role together with the programs she has implemented has shown a positive increase in attendance by some students and has been positively received by the families at the case study school. This role has been positively acknowledged by the North Coast region, resulting in a request for the Community Engagement Officer to provide professional development for other schools within the region. A survey conducted by Education Queensland of both primary and secondary school leaders was found that having a dedicated attendance officer in the school was perceived as having had a significant and positive impact (DET, 2016b).

Respondent Two continued that after building a relationship with families, she is then able to increase their self-belief and confidence, stating:

Even if they are not perhaps being very spectacular in their achievements. People can never be praised enough. It is not about false praise, it’s about you can do this. It’s not about behaviour modification I work in identity modification “you are a parent who can get their kid to school on time, you’re a parent who can cope” as opposed to you’re a parent who fails every day. I find when people’s identity and how they see themselves change it then flows out of that. “Yes I can get my kids to school; I can get up at 7 o’clock in the morning”

because I can't turn up to people's houses every day and wake them up and get their kids here.

Respondent three stated that knowing the families meant she could gauge what the family needs and how much to "push" or ask for information. She stated that the lower school, particularly prep, allowed easier access to parents, as they drop off and pick up most of the time.

I think it comes down to what they perceive as school. Thinking about this little girl's dad, you can see that he has possibly had a very difficult experience at school himself and so he's gotten has his back up and you can see that he has his guard up when he comes in. So, if I'm as nice as pie to him, "Hey how are you, great to see you, love that little *Suzie* is here today" you can get around that and he softens. You can see he lets the guard down, so it is working at that relationship with him and seeing that everything is okay and working to change his views of what education is at school.

Lareau (2014) discusses how families navigate a field within the dominant standard in schools, continuing that the cultural practises transform into cultural capital or lack of cultural capital. Middle-class families, who generally adopt those standards, gain forms of capital that are not available to families from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, thereby gaining an unspoken advantage. Sullivan (2002) describes habitus as competence in specific social settings. This is described by respondents who acknowledge that parents have often had negative experiences with the education system which adversely influences their perception of school and teaching staff, thereby impacting those relationships. This was described by respondent five:

The school opinion survey also suggested that there was some negativity around parent perception of education and certainly attendance at things like school fetes or carnivals or parent education nights were low.

Our parents have often had a negative experience with education themselves, you need to support a change in the parent, and community with education before you can get successful outcomes for those students. It is very much a two-way process that you need to sustainably work on parents to understand the level of importance, and then you can get into the learning.

Probably in all schooling environments, but certainly ones with lower ICSEA, significant mental health issues face our families. Whether it be one parent, both parents, whether it be the child itself. When you run into families with significant mental health issues, they are the hardest to communicate with successfully, because one time you could communicate successfully and have a positive outcome with the parent and then due to their own personal

circumstances, the next time you interact is isn't as positive. For those parents, I would call central office or get external support to get strategies on how to successfully communicate or support them. But I think that you need to acknowledge with the parent the outcome, when you have those tricky or difficult conversations, start off with what you as a Principal hope to succeed at the end, what your success criteria is, so they know from the outset, what you want to achieve from the conversation, meeting and so that you both work towards that. (Respondent five)

Sullivan (2002) suggests that like cultural capital, habitus is diffused within the home. While cultural capital consists of the possession of certain knowledge, habitus is a set of attitudes and values. The dominant habitus dictates a set of attitudes and values held by the dominant class, which includes a positive attitude towards education (Lareau, 2014; Sullivan, 2002). Where families hold different attitudes to the dominant habitus, namely a positive view towards education, there is conflict in the field. Respondent two articulated this disconnect:

There is one Indigenous family with very poor attendance and Mum is very hostile, very antagonistic and claims that her children are excluded from the requirement to attend school because it is a "white man's system" and they don't belong in that.

There has been a lot of parents where their school experiences have produced a lot of fear in them around their child coming to school. There are a lot of generational attitudes. (Respondent two)

Respondent five cited another example.

We had one family that came from the housing commission estate, directly across the road. She was single mother with six young boys, two different fathers. She lived 10 metres away from the school, but was continually late or absent. When we got down to the concerns of the family, the mum was significantly overwhelmed with having six young boys, two separate fathers not paying child support, not being able to supply lunch for the students, not being able to have them in clean uniforms.

It is their own negative perceptions of not only school but any form of authority. So they have a poor previous history about anyone in authority. I can tell you that it has a significant impact, because their negativity towards school or towards authority very much has permeated to the student, where their perception of anyone in authority is also negative. So the parent's perception certainly trickles down to the student's belief about what school is for and teachers and principals. So it has a great negative affect on them.

Respondent five expounded that positive attitudes towards the school can be built by beginning with positive interactions.

It is exceptionally important to communicate with families, not just the negative aspects of a child's behaviour, but also the positives. So, at our school, I haven't seen a school that has gone above and beyond to celebrate success [like this one does], so when it is time to make those tricky calls to parents, you have got some emotional money in that bank account to be able to make those tricky conversations. So, Student of the Week, Student of the Month, incidental phone calls to say "hey they had a great lesson today", seeing them at the gate to say "well done, they did this today" is exceptionally positive, because parents themselves get a positive perception of the school, rather than a negative perception.

In contrast, respondent seven recounted how some parents expressed the value of education as a vehicle to future employment Reay (2000).

I can think of one kid saying along the lines of, and it was a classic statement where you know it came from a parent, something about "Oh, you need to learn this stuff on the computer because when you are older it will help you get a good job". It's little things like that where parents are clearly wanting more for their kids and wanting them to do well and if that is getting a good job, whatever that means, is the hope and school is a way to get there.

Respondent seven elaborated further on the disconnect in understanding of habitus or what is appropriate in the classroom context.

Coming from a pretty middle class upbringing and schooling as a child and as a teacher now, kind of being in a very different environment it very difficult to remove your bias. Acknowledging my bias, honestly, the parents should be involved heaps. It's funny, because I think that parental engagement here is showing up at the classroom door at inappropriate times and wanting to talk to you, but that's not what I want. I want you to help with their homework, read with them at home, talk to them about their day and ask questions about what they are learning about and, even just if there is a problem, talking it through with them and getting to the bottom of the problem, rather than just judging it or jumping to conclusions.

This respondent describes the disconnect between the expectations that teachers hold with regards to what they believe to be appropriate engagement and parent's expectations. Lareau (1987) states that teachers recall which parents participate or fail to participate in schooling and, further they believe all parents, regardless of social position, can help their children.

Lareau (2015) discusses Bourdieu's recognition of the existence of *dominant standards*, which she describes as "rules of the game in the field" (p. 2), positing that the tenet of capital offers the beneficial potential to forecast an individual's trajectory in the social space. Bringing individual habitus (inherent qualities) to the fields of interaction (rules of the game) creates different responses and actions at that point in time (Lareau, 2014).

A number of staff discussed how they adjust their language choices for families who they believe do not exhibit the dominant habitus.

When I'm working with any client or family, I reflect the language that they use. So even the words that they use, so how they describe their children (not in a negative way) so I use the same language when I'm speaking with them, than I do with other parents. (Respondent two)

Even my language, the type of language I use, I still try to be professional, clear and fair, especially if you are trying to develop a relationship and you are just having a chat with a parent, mirroring their body language or their language in terms of more informal, conversational, picking my vocab a bit more and not using teacher talk, because they just won't understand that. (Respondent seven)

This respondent went on to discuss how teachers' interactions, language and even clothing choices can be dictated by their habitus and how these choices further highlight the differences between teacher and families' habitus.

This is something I never considered during pracs and things, but I always remember a comment from a student, when I was on prac and she asked if I was a businesswoman and worked in the city because what I was wearing, to her, was a very corporate look and I had never considered my clothes to be a barrier prior to that. In fact, I was trying to go so far the other way on my prac, I was trying to look, what I deemed to be professional, but in hindsight, parents probably looked at me and thought "what is she doing" and that I'm really unapproachable. So sometimes, even what I'm wearing, I think about if it's a parent teacher meetings or if I know they are going to be coming into the room for an open afternoon, I will think about what I'm putting on. (Respondent seven)

In changing or adapting the way they relate to parents, these respondents exemplify the belief that parents and families lack the appropriate habitus to engage with the teacher as an equal. Thomson and Comber (2003) states there is a tendency in low SES schools to adjust the curriculum and the way it is delivered under the belief that "these children simply can't do that" (p. 6). Moreover, that an attributed lack of ability, a fixed identity or a lack of motivation can lead to

damaging deficit assumptions about student engagement. It must follow therefore, that these ascribed assumptions about identity would also be attributed to the families of students.

## **SOCIAL REPRODUCTION**

Bourdieu (1986) theorizes that the existence of a network of connections or social capital is not a “natural given” that is automatically instilled or created by families or institutions but which is purposefully given in order to produce a network of useful and lasting relationships which secure material or emblematic profits (p .8).

Lareau (2014) states social capital focuses on the use of social networks to transform social position into social advantage, described by Bourdieu as the collection of actual or potential resources of networks or institutionalised relationships through recognition or mutual acquaintance. Lareau (2014) continues that the relationships are not fixed but flexible and developing, requiring continued effort to produce longstanding relationships that secure material or symbolic returns.

Respondent five describes how, in the absence of these social networks, the school attempts to create them for families.

It’s not our role as a school to give financial support; our role is to give that knowledge or capacity. We will tee them up with community resources, we will tee them up with financial institutions, and we will give them strategies on how to cope in the morning to get their kid out of bed. We will give them support, but it is not our role to fix them per se, our role is to build their capacity.

(..) To understand why they are absent and we will endeavour to break that. Whether it is transport, we will offer to set a car-pooling system, if it is DV, we will connect them with Community Engagement Officers outside of the school to support home movements. If it is just, can I say, just bad parenting, parents being overwhelmed, we support them. We have a fact sheet that we give out to parents, so we endeavour to support them that way.

When it started, we probably had about thirty children a day accessing the lunch program. After about four or five months, it has dropped down to about four or five students, because those parents now have the capacity to bring lunches for those students now. Whether it was poverty, whether it was, again lack of parenting skills, disorganisation, we were able to break down the barrier to minimise students accessing that program.

The parent hub is open to all of our parents, it has a washer, a drier, it’s got clean uniforms, it’s got lunch boxes in there and the concept is that the parents can come quietly, with some dignity, make lunches for their children or put on a load of washing, because often they would be embarrassed to come if the students didn’t have clean washing or they could come

and borrow some uniform items. So it is open before school, at 8 o'clock each day and then it's opened three afternoons a week until 3 o'clock.

The washers and driers were donated by Rotary, so we put in a grant and Rotary donated both the washer and the drier. The plumbing was already in the system. Bunnings created a new space for us at the back of the hall. The food is supplied by Oz Harvest so we have sustainable relationships, where it is not so much the school supplying, but outside factors are supporting the school to continue that sustainability.

By attempting to provide these social networks, the school is perpetuating the reproduction of relationships which are required to obtain the material profits described by Bourdieu, namely social advantage acquired through those networks.

Respondent two articulates the deficit belief held by many teachers where families from low SES backgrounds do not exhibit the expected habitus.

A lot of families have put an email in [to the school record keeping system] but they don't have a computer anymore, or they don't check it on their phones or they have put an email but they never use it because they are very low functioning people.

In contrast to the other respondents, respondent three did not originate from a middle class background and stated that far from not valuing education, her family simply did not possess the cultural capital to help her continue her education.

I wouldn't say that my family didn't value education, they often said "we don't know how to help you with what you need to do" and my background is a father who worked seven days a week from daylight to dark, and struggled to make ends meet. I possibly identify with that lower percentile, even though I'm not in that percentile now as an adult and I suppose if I wanted anything, I had to work hard for it.

While it is important to acknowledge that many families from low SES backgrounds do not mirror the cultural capital or habitus of the dominant system, it should not be portrayed as a lack or deficit (Comber & Kamler, 2004; Gorski, 2012; Reid, 2008).

In an attempt to address the differences in attitudes and values, many school administrations seek solutions from available programs, such as that offered by Ruby Payne in her "Framework for Understanding Poverty". A critique will follow.

### **Critiques of Ruby Payne**

For a number of years, the case study school underpinned its staff professional development using Payne's "Framework for Understanding Poverty". Much of the deficit discourses used

language and ideas emanating from its tenets. The school administration sought to improve the school's relationship with families and the local community, which had been in decline in the preceding years. In an attempt to equip teachers with a greater understanding of the school community and the challenges faced by its families, the framework was presented to staff and underpinned many of the suggested strategies. This is evidenced in the following quotes from of the interview respondents.

The school, in 2017, after a significant amount of research into what was causing some of our students to non-attend, research into Ruby Payne's "Understanding Poverty", having a look at our demographics, talking to and surveying our parents, came to the realisation that often absenteeism in our community was not so much the students' concern, it was the parent's ability to get the students to school, for a variety of reasons. In 2017, the school employed a Community Engagement Officer to work directly with families to endeavour to sort out what the issue was, whether it was transport, DV, poverty, so actually individualise student's absenteeism. (Respondent five)

This school, along with many others, has based their approach to non-attendance, which they predominantly attribute to poverty, on Ruby Payne's *Framework for Understanding Poverty*. The school's approach carries the undertone that families living in poverty do not place high importance on education, as indicated in Payne's Framework. In contrast, Lareau (1987) states that whilst many teachers and Principals hold this perception, her research found parents from low SES backgrounds did, in fact, value education, albeit for differing reasons than parents from middle-class backgrounds. Reay (2000) concurs stating mothers from working class and middle class backgrounds valued education but held differing aspirations for their children. Sime and Sheridan (2014) found that while parents from disadvantaged backgrounds recognised the value of education for their children's social mobility and future opportunities, they were aware of the limited resources they could draw upon, particularly their inability to support them academically.

Ruby Payne's *Framework for Understanding Poverty* identifies three models of social stratification: Generational Poverty, Middle Class and Wealth and then outlines the "hidden class rules" of each stratum. According to Payne, the driving forces for those living in generational poverty are survival, relationships and entertainment; where relationships are valued over education, incorporating a fear that too much education might cause the individual to leave the family structure (Payne, 2005).

This stance was reflected in Respondent One's response to the question about the hardest families to reach.



Two of those are people with much older children and all of their children have significantly terrible school attendance and what I feel happens for some parents is very, very, very unconsciously, they are creating a dynamic where their child will dependent on them and never leave them. They are people who have experienced incredible rejection and loss in their life relationally and there some parents – some of my approaches are the Dream Big. What could your child be and do with great school attendance? I’ve seen it backfire because I’ve seen parents go “Hell no, I don’t want my kid to achieve, they are going to leave me and they are going to become more intelligent than me, they are going to get a job and look down on me”. These are families with substance use, quite extensive criminal behaviours and so there is a sense that “I need to keep them tethered to me by not educating them” and therefore they have no future and all of their children are like that. So they all have adult children living at home with them. There would be no conscious decision in that process but the idea of their child achieving and dreaming is terrifying to them.

Sime and Sheridan (2014) however found that parents from working class backgrounds often desire to help their children overcome their families’ economic circumstances, however it is often superseded by the need to maintain strong social and family networks. Similarly, Lareau (2011) found that where families maintain these closed networks, children are more likely reproduce the educational attainment and life trajectory of their parents.

One respondent espoused Payne’s assertion that parents living in low SES circumstances place a higher value on entertainment (Payne, 2005).

There are some pretty evident ways in terms of if we were to have school events, fetes, special nights and things or anything where there is entertainment value, they are generally pretty happy to hand over their cash. However, things like student resources schemes or even where there might be an occasion for contribution towards their education, they’re not so willing to part with their funds. (Respondent one)

Arguing that schools are underpinned by middle-class values, Payne asserts that students from backgrounds of poverty cannot succeed academically without learning the views, language and accepted behaviours of the middle-class (Payne, 2005). Payne (2005) states that the Framework:

Identifies what one must do to develop relationships, what must be reframed to go from poverty to the decontextualized world of formal schooling, and the skills and behaviors that must be repeated in order to do that (p14).

Many members of teaching staff and, particularly administration, advocate Payne's theory of reframing the community's understanding of schooling to instil in them the importance of education. Those views were reflected in the following comments from respondents:

When I commenced there almost four years ago, the perception of education was very poor and the relationships that often our families in those lower ICSEA numbers was poor and you had to very much over the long term, create a strategy where you could help their understanding of the importance of education. So it has been a long-term goal of the school, even before I came to ensure that the parents were instilled of the importance of education. (Respondent five)

The child never got any sort of kindy, mum and dad don't work, so they are all together all the time, so they just didn't understand the significance of school, even though it hasn't been that long since they were in high school themselves. So, it has been a slow education process. This is how you parent. (Respondent two)

Another story is about a student in grade 5 last year who started missing at least two days a week of school and was often late. Mum has only ever answered the phone once so I did a home visit, to bloody Redcliffe! Mum is very young. No transport. Living in a garage. She didn't really seem to understand the value of daily attendance. After just one visit, the child's attendance improved to nearly 100%, and he went up 14 reading levels in 3 months. He's now continued to have good attendance this year in grade 6, is hardly ever late, and I can see him being much more interactive with students and school staff. He's still going to struggle in high school a bit, but he's much better prepared. He always says hi to me now and I give him a lot of encouragement about his attendance. We will be supporting his mum with getting him enrolled into high school as she doesn't have a computer or the executive functioning skills to get all that organised. I give her encouragement when I can about how she's improved the child's future, what a great mum she is, what she's achieved etc. I feel it's really important as she now has a 16 month old and a newborn, so if I can build her belief in herself as a mum who can get kids to school on time, it will benefit those little ones too. (Respondent two)

They didn't realise school was so formal and so much was placed on education, what they have to achieve and they thought it was just a place where she could come and play and socialise at this age. It's also about educating them that they are at school now. (Respondent three)

Despite being widely employed by schools, Payne's Framework has been extensively criticised and critiqued. For example, Comber (2016) purports Payne's approach leads teachers to

believe that children from backgrounds of generational poverty must be trained in the rules of the middle class, and moreover that middle-class teachers need to be taught about the differences and realities of poverty. Gorski (2008) notes that Payne attempts to furnish educators with an understanding of the “culture of poverty, the values and mindsets poor students carry into the classroom as well as how to help them develop middle-class values and culture” (p. 1). In contrast to Payne’s assertions that students from a poverty background need to learn middle class norms, Lareau (2011) stresses, that adopting particular practices would not improve their success at school.

Notwithstanding that many of the teachers held deficit beliefs of the families from disadvantaged backgrounds, a number of successful strategies in building positive relationships with those families were identified.

### *Successful strategies*

This research, including the initial surveys and the interviews, identified a number of successful strategies used within this one school to build positive relationships with families and the community. One was ascertaining parents’ preferred style of communication at the beginning of the year. Participants stated that they took the opportunity during parent meetings held at the beginning of the year or made initial contact with parents via email with a request that they provide their preferred contact method. This approach reflects the research which suggests fostering home school relationships at the beginning of a child’s school experience, rather than waiting until students experience difficulties is beneficial (Raffaele & Knoff, 1999). It also showed consideration of the individual needs of those families (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008).

Experienced teachers further advocated cultivating positive relationships with the community in the years before the child entered their class. This was achieved by attending school functions and being involved in community events together with being friendly on the school grounds when speaking to students and their families as detailed below:

I had built the relationship previous to this year, I always do that with the kids and the families, people I may have in the future, I say hello to the parents. I have that in my mind every year. (Respondent four)

Research has also indicated that early introduction of new teachers to the community has the potential to produce community-minded teachers who are committed to immersing themselves in the culture of the community in which they teach and who care about their students and communities in more authentic, culturally responsive ways (Lee, 2018; Zygmunt et al., 2018). Literature also suggests that teachers who engage with the community are less likely to be transient which fosters trust and positively contributes to the community relationships (Burnett & Lampert,

2016; Lee, 2018; Zygmunt et al., 2018). Additionally, Arthurs et al. (2014) found that where a student builds a positive connection with a teacher, it is more effective in improving attendance than the use of even the most highly desirable extrinsic reward.

Four of the seven participants referred to making “deposits” in parents’ “emotional bank accounts”. This is a concept taken from Stephen Covey’s *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* which the school included as part of its staff professional development in 2018. The Emotional Bank account is a metaphor created by Covey to describe the effects of interpersonal interactions. The metaphor links a person’s emotional state to a traditional bank account, the balance increases when money is deposited and, when money is withdrawn, the balance decreases. Covey (2012) states:

An Emotional Bank Account is a metaphor that describes the amount of trust that’s been built up in a relationship. It’s the feeling of safeness you have with another human being (p. 188).

Participants described how they had “deposited into parent’s emotional bank accounts” by creating a positive communication protocol and making regular contact with positive feedback about the student’s academic and social progress. They continued that when it was time to make a “withdrawal” (i.e. having to address an issue) parents were usually more receptive to their communication (Covey, 2012). Unlike Bourdieu’s cultural capital or Thompson’s virtual backpack metaphor, which are both determined by a person’s background and family influence and which take time to cultivate, Covey’s emotional bank account does not start out with a pre-determined balance and can receive deposits or withdrawals from a number of different sources or situations at any one time (Bourdieu, 1986; Covey, 2012; Thomson, 2003). In keeping with the metaphor, there is a different account for each person, setting or situation. For example, a person may have a positive view of education, but there is one member of staff they have difficulty with, therefore while their “school bank account” receives regular deposits from positive interactions, that one difficult member of staff withdraws from the account.

Of those surveyed, beginning teachers were more likely to express concern about contacting parents together with a reliance on administration or the Community Engagement Officer to provide support to make the difficult contacts. For instance, one respondent said,

Another particular student I had at the beginning of the year, I had heard a lot of stories about this particular person and a lot of issues, so that naturally got me very anxious about talking to her in the beginning. It got to the point where I really needed to talk to this parent, but I didn’t know how to. I ended up going to Stuart’s office and he was just there as moral support when I made the phone call. (Respondent four)

These participants stated much of their concern was derived from deficit discourses in the staffroom, where more experienced teachers “warned” them about particular families or described past incidents. A number of experienced staff members acknowledged these deficit discourses, and admitted that while they did colour their opinions of families, went on to describe how they consciously chose to continue fostering positive relationships. This is in congruence with research which describes the deficit discourses of teachers and staffrooms as a major contributor to the beliefs teachers hold about some students and families (Comber & Kamler, 2004). Auerbach (2007) describes how these deficit discourses depict certain families, in particular working-class or sole parents, as failing to be good parents due to their inability to support their children’s learning, which is evidenced by their lack of visibility in schools.

Many participants equated parents’ valuing of education with the amount the parents made contact or communicated with them, although some stated that often these contacts were often only for social or every day matters (such as school pick up arrangements or lost property) rather than academic progress.

The participants also credited in-school support systems set up by the school, such as the appointment of Community Engagement Officer as well as the creation of “Lunch Club” (which supplies food to students without lunches) and the “Parent Hub” (which provides laundry washing and drying facilities for student’s uniforms) with fostering positive community relationships, which they could then build upon.

The Deputy Principal recounted instances where teachers proactively sought to increase positive relationships with families and the community:

I have seen some masterful teachers who over the years have gone above and beyond for their students, putting relationships at the heart of both their decision making and their actions. These are the teachers who are able to see the bigger picture when it comes to their students, and are able to make quantum leaps with regards to student outcomes, not just in relation to learning, but for the whole child, and in many cases their families also. Some of these measures include:

- Meeting up with a student and their parent outside of the classroom for milkshakes and a catch up as a means of positive reinforcement.
- Attending a student’s sports match and sitting with their parents in the grandstand cheering them on.
- Calling a student’s parents and informing them of positive behaviours, changing their paradigm when it comes to school and also their child.

- Visiting a student when they were in hospital and taking them an item to comfort them throughout a difficult time.
- Teachers who give up their lunch breaks to spend time with a student who has selected this as their reward incentive for hard work.
- Staff who have eliminated shame for students/families by removing barriers to their learning and circumstances that could otherwise negatively impact them, including paying for excursions, personal items, uniforms and lunches.
- Staff who connect parents with opportunities including life changing services, agencies and support networks.

Some of these strategies such as visiting children in hospital together with attending sporting events (presumably on the weekend or after school) involve additional emotional labour as well as time commitment from teachers. Notwithstanding that Education Queensland and AITSL standards require teachers to foster positive relationships with families and the community, as these comments imply the measures described are over and above what would normally be expected of teachers. While AITSL and Education Queensland do not explicitly outline strategies of how to build relationships with families and the community, other than “regular communication” and “involving parents in student learning”, it would be useful to investigate which strategies used by teachers that this respondent believes to be usual (Department of Education, 2020b).

The case study school also employs the use of the social media platform Facebook to remind parents of upcoming events and to pass on information and reminders from teachers. There is also a monthly staff profile, which includes a photograph and short outline of the teacher’s experience and role in the school, together with some personal background information about their family and interests. The school has attempted to address the lack of social interactions between staff and the community, during the COVID-19 physical restrictions, by including staff profiles on its Facebook page. Teachers also provide photographs and details of learning experiences in their classes together with excursions and special events such as sporting events, visiting dignitaries and the annual school talent competition. The site is administrated by the Principal and a number of staff who respond to parent queries and comments.

A fortnightly electronic newsletter is also used to keep families informed of upcoming events, excursions and reports from members of the administration. Classroom teachers take turns to provide learning updates and photographs of students’ learning experiences. The Principal’s report, which was previously included as prose, has been replaced with a video recording of the Principal.

The use of social media and electronic newsletters is in keeping with recommendations by Olmstead (2013) who states parents positively view the use of technologies such as websites, if

updated regularly, as they provide timely feedback as well as access to important news and events at the school. An issue which has arisen from the use of social media platforms such as Facebook is where parents do not wish their children's images or names to appear online, for a variety of reasons including privacy or domestic violence concerns or where their parents are members of the defence forces. To address this, media consent forms are provided to families at the beginning of the year for parents to indicate whether they give permission for their child's image and/or name to appear in social media.

Whilst a number of positive strategies and outcomes were identified, many still stem from a deficit approach, i.e. the need to reframe or educate those families from low-socio economic backgrounds to the dominant habitus; being the positive view of education (Payne, 2005; Reid, 2012).

Subsequent to conducting the surveys and interviews for this research, the case study school's Community Engagement Officer has introduced a reward system called *Attend to Achieve* to encourage increased attendance of students who have been identified as being at-risk, quantified by low academic achievement and low attendance. Students who show improved attendance and who maintain an 80% attendance rate receive free tutoring from an experienced, retired learning support teacher who volunteers their time twice weekly. The Community Engagement Officer recounted an instance where a child was absent from school and when the Community Engagement Officer rang, the parent offered the excuse that she was unable to get the children to school, stating that the child did not have tutoring that day anyway. As tutoring was scheduled for that day, the parent allowed the Community Engagement Officer to collect the child from home to attend school. The Community Engagement Officer commented:

Since implementing this tutoring program, there have been 20 tutoring sessions offered to four children. Three sessions have been missed: One due to illness, two due to unexplained non-attendance. Three of the four children have experienced significant improvement in school attendance since commencing. Parents are aware their child will lose their spot in the program if attendance declines and they are not wanting this to occur. Two children, in particular, have attended school every day for the last fortnight, arriving either on time or before 9am on seven out of the last 10 school days, and before 9.30am the other three days. Historically, these children would have at least two unexplained absences per fortnight, or generally arrive between 10.00am and midday.

Prior to the creation of this program, the Community Engagement Officer used punitive legal sanctions such as police visits and compulsory attendance orders for students who were chronically absent. These strategies further damaged the school's relationship with families and failed to acknowledge families' individual circumstances or address the underlying reasons for

students' non-attendance (Justman & Peyton, 2018). In contrast, this program rewards improved attendance with the added benefit of improving the students' academic outcomes thereby serving to foster positive family-school relationships. While the program is still reactive (responding to student attendance or non-attendance) it is restorative in that it is attempting to reverse the ill-effects of time lost in the classroom (Reid, 2002). This is in keeping with the research which found that punitive measures such as monetary fines or legal action were less effective than positive responses, such as phone calls praising parents for improved attendance (McConnell & Kubina Jr, 2014; Reid, 2005, 2008, 2012).



# Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

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This research sought to investigate the current practices used by teachers in one low SES school in the North Coast Region of Queensland to foster positive relationships with families from lower socio-economic backgrounds in their community. The case study school has been acknowledged for marked improvements in relationships within the school community, quantified by 40 per cent increase in enrolments over a six-year period together with improved results from School Opinion Surveys.

After conducting a literature review of the factors contributing to poor attendance of at-risk students, this research analysed the responses from an online survey and face to face interviews on how participants currently attempt to build relationships with hard-to-reach families. Participants were a purposefully selected group of teachers, with differing levels of experience, across the upper and lower sectors of the school. Qualitative thematic analysis was used to examine the transcribed interviews and to illuminate teachers' perceptions of reasons for absenteeism, how they built relationships with families and caregivers, as well as which strategies they believed successfully addressed student absence. Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, including aspects of social reproduction, habitus and field, formed the conceptual framework by which the data from the surveys and interviews was analysed.

## Summary of Findings

This research examined the current practices of teachers in one low SES school to foster positive relationships with lower socio-economic families, to identify perceptions of good practice, focusing on improving attendance of at-risk students. A review of the factors these teachers perceived as contributing to poor attendance was undertaken, followed by analysis of their responses addressing how they attempt to build relationships and encourage increased attendance of at-risk students. The study was framed by the following research questions:

1. What do a selective group of teachers in one low SES school in Queensland perceive as the relationship between parental engagement and school attendance?
2. What measures do they take to build better relationships with the most at risk families?
3. What evidence is there of the impact of these strategies on improved attendance?

An open invitation was placed in the staffroom to all members of staff at the case study school to complete an anonymous online survey. Teachers self-selected by completing the online survey. There were 24 initial respondents including teachers, teacher aides and administration staff. As many of the questions were directed at teaching and administration staff only, fourteen members of staff completed the survey. The results of the online surveys revealed the following:

Thirteen of the fourteen respondents who were surveyed indicated that face-to-face communication such as parent teacher meetings and informal conversations followed by email were their favoured strategies to build relationships with families. Phone calls were least preferred, with most respondents stating they were only used when other forms of communication were unsuccessful. Respondents detailed reasons such as the inability to gauge body language, personal discomfort in making telephone calls combined with the fact that parents often would not answer the phone when they saw it was the school calling for their dislike of this form of communication. Additional comments revealed that the use of digital communication platforms, such as *Class Dojo* are beginning to gain favour with teachers as they provide instant feedback on student behaviour and learning to families. The case study school uses the positive relationship it has fostered with families as one way to combat absenteeism. This was evidenced in the survey results where thirteen of the fourteen respondents indicated the belief that building relationships with families and communities can positively influence students' attendance at school.

Despite the fact that building positive relationships with families and community is a professional obligation under the AITSL teaching standards, as well being expected by the school's administration, only one respondent indicated this was their primary motivation. The remaining respondents reported that, for them, building positive relationships with families and the community was a goal in and of itself. Nine of the fourteen respondents stated they felt thoroughly successful in fostering positive relationships with families, with five reporting they felt successful to some extent. When asked how respondents developed their skills in building relationships with families and the community, less than half reported undertaking formal learning such as professional reading or further studies. Results indicated it was more common for participants to gain their experience from immersion in practise, from learning provided by the school or professional development from organisations outside of school. Ten of the fourteen respondents indicated that they were prepared to be interviewed about building relationships with families and the community. Separate interviews were conducted with seven participants including the Principal, Deputy Principal, Community Engagement Officer and four teachers from both lower and upper sectors of the school. These interviews were taped and transcribed, with a second reading focusing on identifying issues and themes grounded in the interview data. This revealed the following:

The majority of respondents indicated a belief that building relationships with students does, in turn, help to foster positive school community relationships. These responses indicate that teachers value the building of relationships, albeit for differing outcomes, rather than viewing it solely as a professional obligation or as related to attendance or absenteeism. However, almost all of the participants provided responses during their interviews where they overtly stated that the values of families from low SES backgrounds regarding the purpose of education or the value they placed upon it were different to their own. They did however; acknowledge that education is underpinned by middle class values, which does serve to disadvantage families from low SES backgrounds.

This research found that despite employing a broad range of effective strategies to build positive relationships with family and community, many of the respondents still did so from a deficit belief that students and families had to be “educated” into prevailing habitus of a positive view of education. Furthermore, most participants believe that an education should be more than a vehicle to obtaining employment and were critical of some families who they believed only complied with their child’s regular attendance as a necessity to avoid sanctions. Many participants referenced Payne’s *Understanding Poverty Framework* as well as exhibiting beliefs stemming from its tenets. Ruby Payne underpins the case study school’s professional development, despite her framework being heavily critiqued and widely criticised for its stereotyping and reproduction of class-based myths.

When asked whether they believed parents from low SES backgrounds value education, one respondent acknowledged that he believed parents living in low SES circumstances do value education but define their child’s happiness or enjoyment of school as being the most important outcome of schooling. This is in contrast to the neoliberal goal of schooling, as measured by tests, academic outcomes and preparation for their future in the academic and business world. This participant’s response further implied his perception that parents from the middle class are more *genuinely* interested in education and, possess the appropriate cultural capital, in that they value education. Conversely, this respondent then went on to criticise those middle-class parents who display what he considers the expected habitus of valuing school, but then act as consumers or hold the school administration to, what he considers to be, unrealistically high expectations of what the school and teachers should do to meet the individual needs of their child such as requesting their child receive additional support (over and above what is available to other students) or conversely, being included in extension programs.

Many of the remaining participants, however, reiterated the view that parents in this low SES context did not value education, equating the valuing of education with regular school attendance. One respondent stated that building positive relationships helps “resource” the school,

although it is unclear what those perceived resources entailed, whether it was associated with financial commitment to resources for school or human resources such as assisting in the classroom and membership of the parent and citizens association. Other respondents reflected the middle-class expectation that children should attend early education programs such as playgroups and kindergarten and expressed concern that some children at the case study school had not accessed those programs or their parents did not demonstrate understanding of their importance (Sime & Sheridan, 2014; Watterston & O'Connell, 2019). A number of respondents indicated that parental contact and communication with the teacher showed a value in education. They further stated that families did not contact the school often, and when they did, it was to discuss concerns with lost property or changes to pick up routines, rather than academic issues. Other comments from respondents were steeped in the belief that families needed to be educated in particular culturally endorsed ways and that their views ought to be reframed to the dominant habitus.

The beginning teachers both indicated they were less confident than their more experienced counterparts were when contacting parents. An experienced teacher suggested that building relationships with parents could be intimidating for inexperienced teachers. This attitude was reflected in comments from a respondent in the beginning stages of her career who stated she sought support from members of the administration such as the Deputy Principal when she had to contact parents that were deemed to be difficult. This respondent further expressed how she was less likely to pursue alternate avenues to foster positive relationships with those families if initial attempts at communication were unsuccessful. A number of respondents also stated that deficit staffroom discourses where teachers were warned about “difficult” parents affected their confidence and willingness to communicate with those families. A more experienced respondent acknowledged that she is more confident communicating with parents than in the beginning of her career, feeling more self-assured and possessing a bank of relationship building strategies acquired throughout her years of teaching and from professional development.

A number of respondents described the disconnect between the forms of capital available to families from low SES backgrounds. Those families navigate a culturally bound field of schooling with unspoken standards and dominant cultural practises. Moreover, families who adopt those standards acquire an unspoken advantage. Respondents acknowledged that parents from disadvantaged backgrounds have often had negative experiences with the education system, which adversely influenced their perception of school and teaching staff. Two of the respondents advocated expressing the intention of their communication at the beginning of their interactions with parents [for the benefit of the child] which meant their approach was more likely to be positively received. Four respondents expounded that beginning with positive interactions builds positive attitudes towards the school stating that, in their experience, where families have received positive initial communications, they were more likely to be receptive to communications to address

issues with academic progress or behaviour. Furthermore, that these positive interactions served to change those perceptions.

Additionally, it was found that a number of respondents discussed how they changed or adapted their language choices for families who they believe do not exhibit the dominant habitus. Moreover, this adjustment shows that these respondents believe some parents and families lack the appropriate habitus to engage with the teacher as an equal. One respondent elaborated on the difference between parents in how they understand what is appropriate in the classroom context, as well as the differences of expectations between families and the teacher. They described experiences where parents would come to the classroom during the school day to discuss issues whereas the teacher expected they would make an appointment outside of school hours. These examples relate to differences in cultural capital.

This research identified a number of successful strategies used in the case study school to foster positive relationships with families and the community. Respondents stated that they assessed parents' preferred style of communication at the beginning of the year, through avenues such as parent meetings and introductory phone calls. Alternatively, they would make initial contact by email requesting families provide their preferred contact method. Experienced teachers further advocated that teachers should attend school functions and be involved in community events together with being friendly on the school grounds when interacting with students and their families. This presence served to nurture positive relationships with the community in the years before the child entered their class.

Where a lack of social networks was identified, the school attempted to create them for families by helping them to access community resources such as financial institutions, as well as providing parenting strategies. Respondents also credited in-school support systems, such as the appointment of Community Engagement Officer as well as the creation of "Lunch Club" and the "Parent Hub" with fostering positive community relationships, which they could then build upon. The case study school has used its positive relationship with businesses and charity organisations within the community to provide and sustain these additional facilities. Other ways that teachers in the case study school have built relationships with families include attending students' sporting activities, visiting students in hospital and spending lunch breaks with students as a reward.

The aforementioned strategies undertaken by the case study school to create social networks reflect the Bourdieusian theory that the existence of a network of connections or social capital cannot be taken for granted as powerful capital. While the respondents acknowledge that these networks provide relationships, which obtain quantifiable or symbolic returns, their motivation generally appears to be to transform the families' social capital to reflect that of the middle class (Bourdieu, 1986).

The case study school has implemented professional development for teachers to assist in building positive relationships. One of the resources employed is from Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Four of the seven participants used the terminology from the book referred to "depositing into parents' emotional bank accounts". This metaphor refers to interpersonal relationships however does not rely on a person's background and family influence and which take time to cultivate, in contrast to Bourdieu's cultural capital or Thompson's virtual backpack metaphor (Bourdieu, 1986; Thomson, 2003). Where cultural capital or the concept of a virtual backpack sees the individual begin with a collection of knowledges, Covey's emotional bank account can be positively or negatively affected by different sources or situations simultaneously (Bourdieu, 1986; Covey, 2012; Thomson, 2003)). A number of respondents referred to building capacity in families using these tenets, which, while it still implies deficit and recommends parents compensate for what they do not have, exhibits a positive strategy stemming from a deficit approach.

This research found that there was a lack of access to professional development prior to the school's implementation of the *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* program in 2018. While some respondents had accessed professional development on how to foster positive relationships with families and the community at previous school sites, only one respondent indicated that building relationships was thoroughly addressed during their university studies and pre-service training. It would be beneficial to investigate what types of professional development programs participants accessed as well as whether those schools were located in low-socio economic areas similar to the case study school. An area for further investigation would be if schools located in higher socio-economic areas place the same importance on building their relationships with the community, for what purpose, and whether they offer mentoring and professional development for teaching staff.

Subsequent to conducting the surveys and interviews for this research, the Community Engagement Officer at the case study school has introduced a reward system called *Attend to Achieve* to encourage increased attendance of students who have been identified as being at-risk. Students who show improved attendance and who maintain an 80% attendance rate receive free tutoring twice weekly from a retired learning support teacher who volunteers their time. Previously, punitive legal sanctions such as police visits and compulsory attendance orders addressed chronic absenteeism and damaged the relationship between the school and community. The implementation of this new program fosters positive family-school relationships while at the same time, adhering to the Department of Education's principle that "Genuine parent engagement exists when there is a meaningful relationship between parents and teachers with the shared goal of maximising learning outcomes for students" (Department of Education, 2020b).

The advent of COVID-19 has seen a dramatic change in the way in which the case study school now interacts with parents and the community. Physical distancing restrictions have also seen the suspension of community support programs such as The Breakfast Club, Lunch Club and Parent Hub. Outreach activities such as parent teacher meetings, P&C meetings, the annual bush dance, school discos and even the weekly Friday afternoon sausage sizzle previously brought families into the school and furnished teachers with the opportunity to build positive relationships through social interactions. These strategies have now been replaced with less favoured forms of communication such as phone calls, emails and the use of Skype for meetings. Strict physical distancing rules restrict onsite visitors, meaning that parents are no longer able to offer classroom assistance such as helping with reading or small group rotations or attend weekly parades to see class performances and student awards. This has also meant that informal conversations have been replaced with email or telephone conversations. The use of social media has also moved to the forefront. The case study school introduced “The Morning Show” where the Principal and Deputy Principals employed social media platforms to remain visible to families.

The Principal commented:

As the majority of our students and community were unable to come onto school grounds, it was important for the school to come to them. With this in mind, we looked at what measures could be implemented to connect with families in a sustainable and effective manner. *The Morning Show* capitalised on the school’s successful Facebook following and the shift towards online access for continuity of education for families working and learning from home. By providing a daily school news program, which incorporated key messages and important updates and presented with humour and a sense of fun, the school was able to remain connected with our community on a new level and stay relevant.

Our school also had the opportunity to partner with a local radio station for a ‘Virtual School Excursion’, allowing school staff and families to connect further via the Zoom software, and broadcast the messages from the school all across Brisbane through the radio and the internet.

Although this time was difficult for school staff, students and families, we focussed the school’s energy on those things that would have the most significant impact, thereby adopting a mantra of ‘turning lemons into lemonade’. The feedback from the community was exceptionally positive throughout this time. A school survey (n96) indicated that 100% of the parents and carers surveyed were happy with the school’s response, communication and action throughout this difficult time.

COVID 19 has seen the need for schools to re-evaluate the way they interact and communicate with parents and families. Yet, despite results of a survey of current school leaders that showed the use of SMS texting was more effective than letters to address absence, current departmental documents do not include digital technologies other than the MySchool website as appropriate communication tools. Education Queensland still advocates the use of traditional types of communications such as letters, newsletters, and reports on student performance, school annual reports, personal appointments and parent-teacher nights as appropriate ways to communicate with parents. This is also contrary to the recent literature, which advocates that teachers employ the types of technology used by parents as a way to use communication to build positive relationships. By using social media platforms, such as Facebook, the case study school has attempted to engage with parents using the most current types of technology in line with recommendations contained in recent literature (Olmstead, 2013).

Historically, research has established the effectiveness of programs designed to improve parental engagement however, recent research has strongly advocated that teachers and school administrations stay current with the tools that families are using to communicate. A barrier to this is teachers' lack of confidence in the use of evolving technology together with unwillingness to use personal devices such as mobile phones for text messaging, which is perceived to create a sense of urgency for responses unlike email. Introduction of these forms of technology would also require updated protocols for appropriate use together with turnaround times. Professional development opportunities for teachers to expand their knowledge and proficiency on how to integrate the use of digital communication tools will also see a greater teacher uptake of technology to replace previously favoured methods of communication. This is particularly true, in light of current physical distancing restrictions imposed since the advent of COVID 19, which removes the previously favoured face to face communication.

The use of technology to deliver curriculum to students learning from home during COVID 19 restrictions exposed the unequal distribution of resources for families from low SES backgrounds. Van Lancker and Parolin (2020) highlight the digital deficit, stating children from low SES families live in conditions which make home learning difficult as they often do not have access to the required technology or reliable internet. In the instance of the case study school, many parents found that existing tablets did not support the programs required to access home learning websites such as The Learning Place. This provided the school with a further vehicle to build positive relationships with the families and community. In order to address this need, the case study school lent out a fleet of 60 iPads. Many families reported that data was accessed through their smart phone and either did not have a printer or could not afford to print resources. Teachers provided online technical support for parents who expressed inability to navigate digital learning together with printed resources for those who could not access this technology. Additionally,



teachers made frequent contact via phone calls and emails to students and parents to check on academic progress and general wellbeing. By addressing the community needs during this time, teachers were able to build upon the positive relationships which had been already established by showing “authentic caring”, another recommendation found in recent literature (Zygmunt et al., 2018).

Where there was previously no documentation provided by Education Queensland detailing strategies on how to build positive relationships with families and communities, recent inclusions on their website now details some such strategies. However, unless teachers seek out these documents or are directed by Principals, it is likely that most teachers will be unaware of their existence.

This research found that early establishment and maintaining of home school relationships through positive contact, builds a foundation for dealing with any future issues, which may arise. Additionally, using a variety of communication tools and types of contact shows consideration of the individual circumstances of each family. Together, these foster the positive home school relationships required to encourage parental engagement in their children’s education.

## **Recommendations**

It would be beneficial to conduct a further study using a larger sample size across differing school sites to examine diverse perspectives from both low and higher SES schools. Differing socio-economic backgrounds can often present unique needs and challenges for teachers, families and communities. Further investigation into the importance schools located in higher socio-economic areas place on building their relationships with the community and for what purpose would also be useful for comparison. In particular, what strategies, if any, were successful across both contexts and if it is possible for those strategies to be adapted to suit the different socio-economic contexts. Additionally, examining whether these schools offer induction programs, mentoring and professional development for teaching staff or if staff are required to access their own professional development or professional reading opportunities in light of their obligations under the AITSL teaching standards.

Further studies should also investigate the effectiveness and longer-term effects of pre-service teacher training in building positive relationships with families and communities. As indicated by the results of this study, only one participant reported that building relationships with families and the community was thoroughly addressed during her university studies, with half of the remaining respondents reporting it was not addressed at all. Until recently, where AITSL accreditation has mandated its inclusion within pre-service teacher education, education students only accessed training in a perfunctory fashion or through invitations to specialist or pilot programs.

It would also be beneficial to conduct a longitudinal study of whether this training coupled with further induction, mentoring and professional development opportunities have had an effect on early teacher career retention rates.

Investigation into how COVID-19 has changed the way schools communicate with families and the affect these changes have on their relationship building strategies also needs to occur. Whether communication is now more purposeful or purely results driven; for example, for providing students with online home learning, when the issue of attendance is moot. Moreover, whether this supersedes previous mandates to foster positive relationships and whether it is proactive rather than reactive. Another area for further exploration would be if teachers are communicating with families less now that they have been forced into using less preferred methods such as phone calls and online meeting platforms such as Skype and whether their confidence in using technology impedes or promotes its use. Conversely, it would be useful to know if expectations of families regarding communication from teachers and schools have changed, for example, whether they expect more communication, particularly during the period of home learning and the lack of face to face interactions, and now in light of physical distancing restrictions, since students have returned to school.

I see the ultimate goal as being the creation of a professional development program for teachers which addresses the challenges faced by families in low SES schools. A program that uses positive school and community relationships to address absenteeism. This would be a program which is not underpinned by deficit, but which transforms deficit staffroom discourses to strength-based approaches and fosters positive practices. One where examples of *good practise* are furnished to teachers and school administrations to help them create appropriate relationship building strategies for the context in which they are employed and are designed and differentiated to suit the unique needs of their community.

# Appendices

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## Appendix A: Letter of Invitation Requesting research participants



### Letter of Invitation requesting research participants

Researcher: **Karen Crilly**  
(Supervisors: Professor Jo Lampert, Associate Professor Joanna Barbousas)

Research title: **Teacher's strategies in developing relationships with parents in low SES school ( HEC18281)**

Lawnton SS has been acknowledged for its success in building positive relationships with the community. My research is a case study of that success and will focus on staff beliefs of absenteeism and strategies to develop positive relationships with the community. An integral part of research is gathering information from practitioners at the coalface.

You are invited to:

1. Complete an 18 question online survey (you can elect to remain anonymous)
2. You will be invited to participate in a follow up interview, if you indicate your willingness in the survey

The fine print:

1. You will be asked to sign a consent form
2. You can withdraw at any time
3. Your answers will "coded" so that you will not be able to be identified

The details...

Research problem	While much research has been centred around the causes of at-risk factors such as student absenteeism, little investigation has been conducted regarding the impact of building relationships with families of the most at-risk students on attendance, particularly those from low socio-economic schools. Poor attendance is clearly a significant marker of risk, and often the families of students whose attendance is low are the hardest to reach, thereby making them the most difficult with which to build relationships.
Research aims	This research aims to examine current practices in fostering positive relationships between teachers and lower socio-economic families, with a view to identifying good practice, and with a particular focus on improving attendance. The first aim of the research is to review factors contributing to poor attendance of at-risk students, such as high familial mobility, and parental disengagement, which the literature suggests may be due to such things as discomfort with the school environment and/or staff or negative personal experiences. The second, and more significant aim of this research is to analyse ways a purposefully selected group of teachers in one low socio-economic school in Queensland currently attempt to build relationships with hard-to-reach families, and to document their strategies targeting the building of relationships with families and communities, thereby encouraging increased attendance of at-risk students.
Research benefits	Department policy documents such as "Every Day Counts" focus on improving student attendance, yet no clear strategies on how to achieve this have been published to date. In addition, Standard 7.3 of the Australian Professional Standards mandates teachers "must establish and maintain respectful, collaborative relationships with parents/carers regarding their children's learning and wellbeing". This research seeks to identify good practice in building positive school community relationships, which has improved attendance. The benefits to participants in this research is that it will allow them to reflect on their strategies. It is anticipated that this research will add to the body of research in this area, thereby offering further approaches for teachers in other locations to add to their suite of strategies.

## Appendix B: Participant Information Statement, Consent and Withdrawal Form



### Participant Information Statement and Consent Form

The research is being carried out in partial fulfilment of Masters of Research Degree under the supervision of Professor Jo Lampert. The following researcher will be conducting the study:		
<b>Role</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Organisation</b>
Student	Karen Crilly	LaTrobe University
<b>Research funder</b>	This research is supported by in kind support by La Trobe University.	

**1. What is the study about?**

You are invited to participate in a study of current practices in fostering positive relationships between teachers and lower socio-economic families, with a view to identifying good practice, and with a particular focus on improving attendance. We hope to learn about the factors contributing to poor attendance of at-risk students. The second, and more significant aim of this research is to analyse ways a purposefully selected group of teachers in a low socio-economic school in Queensland currently attempt to build relationships with hard-to-reach families, and to document their strategies targeting the building of relationships with families and communities, thereby encouraging increased attendance of at-risk students..

**2. Do I have to participate?**

Being part of this study is voluntary. If you want to be part of the study, we ask that you read the information below carefully and ask us any questions.

You can read the information below and decide at the end if you do not want to participate. If you decide not to participate, this will be kept confidential and won't affect your relationship with La Trobe University or Lawnton State School.

**3. Who is being asked to participate?**

You have been asked to participate because:

- You are employed by a low socio-economic school with a number of students who at risk due to poor attendance. This school has proven success in fostering positive relationships with its families and the local community as well as increasing student attendance.

**4. What will I be asked to do?**

If you want to take part in this study, we will ask you to complete an online questionnaire and engage in an interview. It will take approximately 60 minutes of your time to be part of this study.

**5. What are the benefits?**

The benefit of you taking part in this study is that this research aims to identify the good practise in the case study location. The results will be available to participants potentially increasing your suite of strategies, helping to fulfil your obligations under Standard 7.3 of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, which mandates that teachers "must establish and maintain respectful, collaborative relationships with parents/carers regarding their children's learning and wellbeing". Therefore participating in this research will allow you to reflect on your current practise of building relationships with the community and families.

The expected benefits to society in general are that the results will add to body of research in Australia in this area, thereby offering further approaches for teachers in other locations to add to their suite of strategies.

**6. What are the risks?**

With any study there are (1) risks we know about, (2) risks we don't know about, and (3) risks we don't expect. If you experience something that you aren't sure about, please contact us immediately so we can discuss the best way to manage your concerns.

Name/Organisation	Position	Telephone	Email
Professor Jo Lampert LaTrobe University	Chief Investigator	(03) 94796367	j.lampert@latrobe.edu.au

We have listed the risks we know about below. This will help you decide if you want to be part of the study.



There are no risks beyond normal day-to-day living associated with your participation in this project.

**7. What will happen to information about me?**

We will collect and store information about you in ways that will not reveal who you are. This means you cannot be identified in any type of publication from this study.

We will keep your information for 5 years after the project is completed. After this time, we will destroy all of your data.

We will collect, store and destroy your data in accordance with La Trobe Universities Research Data Management Policy which can be viewed online using the following link: <https://policies.latrobe.edu.au/document/view.php?id=106/>.

The information you provide is personal information for the purposes of the Information Privacy Act 2000 (Vic). You have the right to access personal information held about you by the University, the right to request correction and amendment of it, and the right to make a complaint about a breach of the Information Protection Principles as contained in the Information Privacy Act.

**8. Will I hear about the results of the study?**

We will let you know about the results of the study by providing you with the overall group results upon request.

**9. What if I change my mind?**

At any time you can choose to no longer be part of the study. You can let us know by:

1. Completing the 'Withdrawal of Consent Form' (provided at the end of this document);
2. Calling us;
3. Emailing us

Your decision to withdraw at any point will **not** affect your relationship with La Trobe University or Lawnton State School.

When you withdraw we will stop asking you for information. Any identifiable information about you will be withdrawn from the research study. However, once the results have been analysed we can only withdraw information, such as your name and contact details. If results haven't been analysed you can choose if we use those results or not.

**10. Who can I contact for questions or want more information?**

If you would like to speak to us, please use the contact details below:

Name/Organisation	Position	Telephone	Email
Professor Jo Lampert LaTrobe University	Chief Investigator	(03) 94796367	<a href="mailto:j.lampert@latrobe.edu.au">j.lampert@latrobe.edu.au</a>

**11. What if I have a complaint?**

If you have a complaint about any part of this study, please contact:

Ethics Reference Number	Position	Telephone	Email
2000001037	Senior Research Ethics Officer	+61 3 9479 1443	<a href="mailto:humanethics@latrobe.edu.au">humanethics@latrobe.edu.au</a>



**Consent Form – Declaration by Participant**

I (the participant) have read (or, where appropriate, have had read to me) and understood the participant information statement, and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in the study, I know I can withdraw at any time. I agree information provided by me or with my permission during the project may be included in a thesis, presentation and published in journals on the condition that I cannot be identified.

I would like my information collected for this research study to be:

- ☐ Only used for this specific study;  
☐ Used for future related studies;  
☐ Used for any future studies

☐ I agree to have my interview audio and/or video recorded

☐ I would like to receive a copy of the results via email or post. I have provided my details below and ask that they only be used for this purpose and not stored with my information or for future contact.

Name	Email (optional)	Postal address (optional)

**Participant Signature**

☐ I have received a signed copy of the Participant Information Statement and Consent Form to keep

Participant's printed name	
Participant's signature	
Date	

**Declaration by Researcher**

- ☐ I have given a verbal explanation of the study, what it involves, and the risks and I believe the participant has understood;  
☐ I am a person qualified to explain the study, the risks and answer questions

Researcher's printed name	Karen Crilly
Researcher's signature	
Date	

\* All parties must sign and date their own signature



#### Withdrawal of Consent

I wish to withdraw my consent to participate in this study. I understand withdrawal will not affect my relationship with La Trobe University or any other organisation or professionals listed in the Participant Information Statement. I understand the researchers cannot withdraw my information once it has been analysed, and/or collected as part of a focus group.

**I understand my information will be withdrawn as outlined below:**

- ✓ Any identifiable information about me will be withdrawn from the study
- ✓ The researchers will withdraw my contact details so I cannot be contacted by them in the future studies unless I have given separate consent for my details to be kept in a participant registry.
- ✓ The researchers cannot withdraw my information once it has been analysed, and/or collected as part of a focus group

*\*\*if you have consented for your contact details to be included in a participant registry you will need to contact the registry staff directly to withdraw your details.*

I would like my already collected and unanalysed data

- ☐ Destroyed and not used for any analysis  
☐ Used for analysis

#### Participant Signature

Participant's printed name	
Participant's signature	
Date	

#### Please forward this form to:

CI Name	Professor Jo Lampert
Email	j.lampert@latrobe.edu.au
Phone	(03) 94796367
Postal Address	School of Education College of Arts, Social Sciences and Commerce (ASSC) La Trobe University, Victoria 3086

## Appendix C: Survey Questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this online survey. Unless you provide your name at the end, it is completely anonymous. Your answers will be used to gather information for my research and will not be given to anyone other than my university supervisors. There are no right or wrong answers, so please answer honestly. All beliefs are valuable to the research.

1. Gender
  - Male
  - Female
  - Other
2. Age
  - 20-30
  - 30-40
  - Over 40
3. Years of teaching experience
  - Less than 5 years
  - 5-10 years
  - 10-15 years
  - Over 15 years
4. Current Sector
  - P-2
  - 3-6
  - Non-teaching staff
5. Level of education
  - Bachelor Degree
  - Graduate Diploma
  - Master's Degree

What year did you graduate? \_\_\_\_\_
6. What was your pathway to teaching? (E.G. directly from school, previous career)  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. My university studies addressed how to build relationships with students
  - Not at all
  - To some extent
  - Yes thoroughly
  - Don't remember
8. My university studies addressed how to build relationships with families and communities
  - Not at all
  - To some extent
  - Yes thoroughly
  - Don't remember



9. After university, have you participated in professional learning within your school context around building relationships with families and the community? Select as many as apply to you.
- Induction/mentoring at previous schools
  - Professional development at previous schools
  - Induction/mentoring at this school
  - Professional development at this school
  - Other. Provide details \_\_\_\_\_
10. Which of the following do you believe are significant outcomes from building strong relationships with students? Select as many as apply to you.
- Leads to improvement of academic achievement
  - Builds relationships with students
  - Building positive school community
  - Obligations under AITSL Standards
  - Other. Provide details \_\_\_\_\_
11. Which of the following do you believe are important outcomes of building strong relationships with families and the community? Select as many as apply to you.
- The impact of relationships on student academic outcomes
- Positive effects on classroom climate  
Positive effects on behaviour  
Building positive school community  
Obligations under AITSL Standards  
Other. Provide details \_\_\_\_\_
12. In general, do you feel successful in building relationships with families and the community?
- Not at all
  - To some extent
  - Yes thoroughly
  - Unsure
13. How have you developed your skills in building relationships with families and the community?
- Professional development from organisations outside of school
  - Workplace learning provided by school
  - Immersion in practise
  - Formal learning such as professional reading or further studies
  - Other. Provide details \_\_\_\_\_
14. Which of these strategies do you most often use to build relationships with families?
- Phone calls
  - Email
  - Informal conversations
  - Parent teacher meeting
  - Other. Provide details \_\_\_\_\_
15. Which of the following influences your decisions to build relationships with families and community?
- Expectation of school leadership
  - Personal beliefs

- Planning for learning
- Better relationships with students
- Other. Provide details \_\_\_\_\_

16. Do you believe that building relationships with families and communities can influence students' attendance at school?

- Not at all
- To some extent
- Yes thoroughly
- Unsure

17. How often do you communicate with families of at-risk students? ("At-risk" in this case refers to students with poor attendance and/or academic performance)

- Less than once a week
- More than once a week
- Once a month
- Only in emergencies
- Never

Further comments  
\_\_\_\_\_

18. I would be prepared to be interviewed about building relationships with families and the community.

- Yes My name \_\_\_\_\_
- No
- I am not prepared to be interviewed, but would like to provide further written comments \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you participating in this survey. Its purpose is to identify possible participants for the next phase of the research and to help shape interview questions. I am looking for a spectrum of staff members and teachers from beginning to experienced, from the upper and lower school. Please note providing your name does not obligate you to participate in an interview and you are able to withdraw at any time.

## Appendix D: Interview Questions

1. In the online survey, you indicated that your university studies did/did not address how to build relationships with students. Can you elaborate on that?
2. In the online survey, you indicated that your university studies did/did not address how to build relationships with families and communities. Can you elaborate on that?
3. In your experience, what are the main causes of student absenteeism?
4. What professional learning have you participated in within your school context to build relationships with families and the community?
5. What do you believe are the significant outcomes from building strong relationships with students?
6. What do you believe are the important outcomes of building strong relationships with families and the community?
7. In general, do you feel successful in building relationships with families and the community? Can you describe some of the strategies you have employed to build successful relationships?
  - a. Which have been successful? Why do you think that is?
  - b. Which have been unsuccessful? Why?
8. Describe how you developed your skills in building relationships with families and the community.
9. Which of these strategies do you most often use to build relationships with families? Why do you favour these? Which do you believe are the most successful?
10. Do you believe that building relationships with families and communities can influence students' attendance at school? Why?
11. How often do you communicate with families of at-risk students? ("At-risk" in this case refers to students with poor attendance and/or academic performance)
12. In your experience, has communicating with families of at-risk students, had an impact on student attendance?

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