SPOTLIGHT ON PARENT ENGAGEMENT: PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

Using Science inquiry to engage parents in student language and literacy learning

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In this article we reflect on an ongoing research project over the past four years which explores how to engage parents/carers in inquiry curriculum using social media (see Exley, Willis, & McCosker, 2017; Exley & Willis, 2016; Willis & Exley, 2018). The EPIC – Engaging Parents in Inquiry Curriculum – project uses a contemporary understanding of parent *engagement* as a cumulative process that can be represented on a continuum where traditional forms of *involvement* such as parents helping in the tuckshop are at one end and parents playing active roles in their child's learning are at the other. This understanding of parent engagement requires schools and teachers to reimagine existing practices as well as imagine new ways to bring parents closer to their child's learning (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). This view of parent engagement rests on the international literature (e.g., Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development [OECD], 2017) which has consistently shown over the last half century that students whose parents are engaged in their child's learning experience increased motivation, wellbeing, achievement and success at school. Although parent involvement is often an essential precursor to engagement, it is parent engagement that gets the *gold star* when it comes to improving student learning and wellbeing.

One EPIC teacher, Louise (pseudonym), who taught Year 3 in a large disadvantaged school where parents/carers were considered largely disengaged from their child's school learning embraced this new understanding of parent engagement using inquiry to teach Science. Over six months she implemented two different Science units: What causes day and night? and Where's the heat? In both units she used email to invite parents to participate in their child's learning by visiting the classroom. In the second unit she let parents know their child could draw or take photographs of different heat sources around the home to share with the class. She found that email proved to be an effective form of communication with parents however, achieved more success in parent engagement in the second than the first unit. In this unit she started every morning with a small group language interaction in which children talked about what they did at home with their parents to find sources of heat, what they saw, and what they brought in to share. When asked in an interview at the end of the project to describe how she understood parent engagement in their child's learning was happening, Louise commented,

> **Because the photos were taken, and the photos were printed. And, to me, that was a really good indication that there had been parental engagement. So, a lot of children just brought in drawings, but a lot of children brought in photos that someone had gone to the trouble of taking and printing and cutting and sending in.**

She concluded that she 'had some wonderful responses from parents in terms of helping their children and sending the work in' and that she was 'sure that there was some pretty healthy, intellectual dialogue happening at home around heat sources'.

Louise's use of inquiry saw her use new technology in the classroom in the form of Microsoft Teams. Her ultimate aim was to include parents on the class Teams site however, she reflected at the end of the project that the parents did not seem *ready* to take this step. What she found though was that her own understanding of inquiry as being more open-ended combined with the use of an online platform significantly expanded and enhanced possibilities for language and literacy learning among her students. In the first inquiry unit on Day and Night she recalled how she,

> **… immersed the children in lots of learning physically. So we went outside and we explored shadows, we looked at shadow sticks at various times of day, we got out toys, our little model Moana, and we followed her shadow, we measured her shadow, we used chalk lines, we used our compasses …. [The students subsequently] did a lot of drawing. So, they had plenty of opportunities to verbalise their thinking. We would think, we would draw, we would write, and then we would revisit our drawings later**

> on to make sure that our new understandings fit, or didn't fit, with our earlier drawings as well. If not, Why not? What's changed? So the students had a chance to revisit earlier misconceptions as well.

Louise described how she set up a discussion board on Microsoft Teams, so that she and the students,

> … could talk about our ideas in Science, we could ask questions, we could answer questions, the students could have discussions with each other, they could confirm each other's beliefs, they could argue against each other's beliefs. It was a wonderful opportunity for my students who often don't speak, to have a voice in the class.

The importance of all students having a voice was strongly illustrated by a student in her class who had selective mutism. Louise elaborated,

> So he has never spoken at school. He doesn't speak at school, but he interacted with his peers on the discussion board and he interacted with me on the discussion board. And it was incredibly rewarding to be able to have that kind of language interaction that the online platform afforded the group.

She explained that the online platform provided an alternative, non-threatening forum 'for a child to express themselves in ways that they might find impossible in a normal classroom when everyone's together, or even in a small group and you've got to speak up and use your voice'. Louise also said the online platform proved valuable because it enabled her to scaffold oral and written language for students in her class for whom English was not their first language. She noted this was because it gave her 'an opportunity to reiterate a question or a statement using correct language structures'.

Louise continually shared what the students learnt during both Science units with parents using email and personally with those who visited the classroom. This included the parent of the child with selective mutism. She said, this parent 'was absolutely delighted with the communication, with the adjustment, the wonderful adjustment that this was for [this student's] learning'.

What this snapshot shows is that parent engagement may require teachers to develop new pedagogies in their classrooms such as combining inquiry curriculum approaches and the use of online platforms. These pedagogies emphasise the value and importance of substantive conversations among students and between teachers and students while simultaneously the need to create opportunities for these conversations to continue between parents/carers and their child at home and in turn to flow back into the classroom. What this snapshot also shows is that enacting a contemporary understanding of parent engagement is a journey of many steps over time however, that the potential increased benefits for student language and literacy learning of an EPIC approach are worth embracing.

References

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