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## Anecdotes, Experience, and 'Learning By Osmosis': The Role of Professional Cultures in Preparing Teachers for Parent-School Engagement

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## **Anecdotes, Experience, and ‘Learning By Osmosis’: The Role of Professional Cultures in Preparing Teachers for Parent-School Engagement**

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*Abstract: Initial teacher education and experiences of the professional cultures of teaching contribute to teachers’ understandings about how to engage with parents. Drawing on qualitative research data, and informed by Michel de Certeau’s theory of culture and everyday life, this paper explores how everyday beliefs and professional practices that shape relationships between teachers and parents can remain relatively stable despite changing expectations of policy-makers and communities. The paper argues that equipping pre-service, beginning and experienced teachers and school leaders with research-based understandings about these cultural dynamics is crucial to informing professional practices that support meaningful and effective parent-school engagement.*

### **Introduction: Parent-School Engagement in the Australian Education Context**

Parent-school engagement has come to occupy a significant place in contemporary educational discourse, with widespread acknowledgement among policy makers, educators and parent organisations that schools and parents share responsibility for children’s education (Epstein 2010; Millar, 2010; Evans, 2013; de Bruïne, 2014; Daniel, 2015). Policy makers eager to see quantifiable improvements to educational outcomes have endeavoured to harness parental choice and voice as a means of driving student attainment and schooling excellence (Vincent, 2017; Mascini & Braster 2017), which has in turn shaped changes in the expectations and practices both of schools and of parents. However, the connection between parental engagement and schooling success, as well as the function and purposes of parent engagement, continue to be debated (Fennimore, 2016, 2017; Kainz & Aikens, 2007). This paper seeks to engage with these issues through the lens of everyday discourses of parent engagement that operate both in teacher preparation and professional practice, in order to consider how ongoing challenges in the relationships between parents and schools might be better understood.

The rationale for policy mandates that oblige parent-school engagement rests in no small measure on claims that student outcomes can be improved when parents are actively involved in children’s learning, support school policies and programs, work in partnership with schools to support student achievement, and maintain high expectations of teacher quality and school outcomes. Such claims have been critiqued by sociological and cultural studies of education, with scholars raising concerns about the ways that parent-engagement

discourse sits within a broader context of neoliberal education reforms that ‘formalise[s] relations between parents and schools, resulting in new modes of governing the child, the family and education’ (Blackmore & Hutchinson, 2010, p. 500). In Australia, as in other Anglophone nations, researchers have pointed out that policy mandates that oblige parent-school engagement (Blackmore & Hutchinson, 2010; Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014; Saltmarsh, Barr, & Chapman,

2015) have brought about an institutionalisation of family/school relationships, in which ‘parents and teachers are treated as passive objects, assumed to be uncritically receptive to programmes that seek to improve student learning’ (Blackmore & Hutchinson, 2010, p. 499). Some have raised concerns about the ways that parent engagement has become a means through which parents are pedagogicalised into discursive norms of governmentality (Kainz & Aikens, 2008), while others have highlighted the racialized, gendered and social class assumptions that underpin notions of parent engagement, and that create barriers to engagement for some parents. These scholars contend that forms of engagement, opportunities for engagement, and schools’ responses to engagement are unequal, and disproportionately favour some parents and families over others (Vincent, 2017; Fennimore, 2016, 2017). Parents from cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds that differ from those of socially dominant groups, for example, have been shown to be at significant disadvantage in their dealings with schools by comparison to parents from non-dominant social groups (Vincent, 2017; Fennimore 2016, 2017; Quinn & Han, 2014; Yoder & Lopez, 2013; Auerbach, 2007).

Thus despite policy rhetoric and initiatives aimed at forging stronger links between home and school, these disjunctions contribute to ongoing concerns about the extent to which the policy ideal of parent engagement is able to be achieved at the school level (Epstein, 2001; Bingham & Abernathy, 2007; Saltmarsh, Barr, & Chapman, 2014). In addition, questions have been raised about the ways in which this policy milieu has given rise to changes both in the professional cultures of teaching, as well as in cultures of parenting that have emerged in response to social and policy expectations that parents take a more active role in engaging with their children’s education (Landeros, 2011; Saltmarsh, 2015a, 2015b). As noted above, there is evidence to suggest that the ways in which parents have taken up the policy invitation to engage in their children’s education vary widely according to familial, cultural, and socioeconomic circumstance, and do not necessarily take place in ways that policy makers envisage, or that schools recognize and value (Fennimore 2016, 2017; Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014).

These policy and sociocultural contexts raise important questions for initial teacher education (ITE), located as it is at the nexus of education policy, expectations of parents and communities, preparation of new teachers, and professional practice of teachers. While preparing pre-service teachers to work effectively with parents is an important – and now mandated – component of initial teacher education programs, a recent Australian study found that:

*...while teacher education prepares beginning teachers for parent engagement in a variety of ways, more could be done to ensure continuity across programmes and in the tertiary sector more broadly to ensure that all beginning teachers enter the profession sufficiently equipped for this complex and important aspect of teachers’ work. (Saltmarsh, Barr, & Chapman, 2014, p. 2)*

Just as preparation of the teaching profession is critical to parent-school engagement cultures in schools, there is also evidence to suggest that school leadership plays a significant role in setting the tone of welcome for parents and families, influencing professional practices pertaining to working effectively with parents, and leading school cultures that value and support the contribution of parents (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014).

In this paper, we draw on funded qualitative research studies conducted by the authors, in order to explore three issues that continue to present challenges for teacher professional practice regarding engaging effectively with parents. Our research has included studies with academics working in initial teacher education<sup>1</sup>, beginning teachers<sup>2</sup>, parents<sup>3</sup> and school principals<sup>4</sup>, and each of these studies found that parent engagement occupies a complex place in the landscape of professional practice. While many educators interviewed in these studies acknowledge the importance of working with parents, a common and recurring theme amongst participants has been a lack of clarity that occurs at the intersection of what is expected of them when dealing with parents, what to expect from parents, and what can or should to be done to improve professional knowledge and practice in this area.

### **Conceptual Framework: Parent-School Engagement in Policy, Practice and Culture**

The conceptual framework for this paper is premised on three interrelated understandings: first, that parent engagement in its current form derives from neoliberal policy agendas that see parents as key policy levers for improving the quality of education (OECD, 2012); second, that parent-school engagement policies can be understood in terms of cultural policies that seek to shape the ways that societies interact and function in an ongoing way (Saltmarsh, 2015a, 2015b, 2017). Looked at in this way, policy is considered to be productive of cultures via the ‘the multiple meanings that policies engender, through the myriad interpretations of policy makers, policy implementers, policy target populations and policy analysts’ (Stein, 2004, p. 6); and third, that the everyday practices and logics of teaching are productive of professional cultures with well-established – if contested – approaches to understanding and managing relationships between parents and schools (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014; Saltmarsh, 2015a). These approaches, we argue, are heavily reliant on discourses of everyday practice as a valorised form of knowledge, that in turn permeate the dialogues between the teaching profession and teacher education.

With respect to the construction of parents as policy levers, it is worth noting that in the current political climate, parents have been positioned as critical to children’s educational success. Indeed, there has been widespread recognition that ‘if pupils are to maximise their potential from schooling they will need the full support of their parents’ (Desforges, 2003, p. 7). This acknowledgement has seen parent engagement become enshrined in policies that simultaneously promote greater parent participation in schools and, through elements of National Professional Standards for teachers and principals, mandate competencies for reporting to and involving parents in the educative process (Saltmarsh, Barr & Chapman, 2014). These national professional standards have incorporated expectations that teachers and principals will be able to demonstrate the ability to engage effectively with parents and to provide leadership in this regard. The standards are accompanied by an intensification of high-stakes testing, comparative school rankings and teacher accountabilities that constitute parents as stakeholders and consumers of education, with parental ‘choice’ and ‘voice’

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee, approval number N2011 – 36.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee, N2013-184N.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee, approval number Q2010-49.

<sup>4</sup> University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee, approval number H16REA254

(Vincent & Martin, 2002; Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997) seen by policy makers as key levers in positioning Australian education advantageously within the global knowledge economy.

Regarding the issue of parent engagement as a dimension of policy cultures, this paper draws on cultural approaches to policy analysis (Stein, 2004) concerned with reciprocal relationships between policy domains and everyday life (Saltmarsh, 2015a, 2015b, 2017). Moving beyond the notion of policy as formed, implemented, and producing outcomes and effects, cultural policy analysis is concerned with the everyday practices that shape policy discourse, as well as ‘the multiple meanings that policies engender, through the myriad interpretations of policy makers, policy implementers, policy target populations and policy analysts’ (Stein, 2004, p. 6). While taking the interpretation and translation of policy in educational contexts in what Maguire, Ball and others have termed ‘policy enactments’ (Maguire & Ball, 1994; Maguire, Ball & Braun, 2010) as a helpful insight, cultural policy analysis is also interested in the ways that such enactments are co-implicated in the production of cultural practices.

Following on from this theorisation of policy cultures, the third premise of this paper contends that everyday practices are also co-implicated in the formation of professional cultures that operate alongside – although not necessarily in concert with – policy and parenting cultures. This perspective is informed by the work of Michel de Certeau (1984, 1986, 1997), for whom the practices of everyday life are productive of cultures that are in a continual process of reworking and reformulation through the activities of consumers. While an extended discussion of Certeau’s contribution to policy studies is not possible here, his work offers valuable insights into the ways that the ‘often unmarked practices of everyday life both produce and open up spaces for change within cultural logics, relational networks, and institutions and operational systems’ (Saltmarsh, 2015b, p. 28). For Certeau, these processes are dynamic and subject to continual change, despite the residual nature of practices that become sedimented into institutional and cultural logics. Certeau’s policy work shows how the introduction of new policy agendas leaves behind cultural ‘remainders’ (1997a) – residual beliefs, expressions, meanings and practices that operate in dialogue with that which seeks to replace them. Again, the dynamic nature of these processes leaves room for even seemingly fixed ways of knowing and doing to be reconfigured, albeit at times slowly and amid contestation.

Together these premises enable a consideration of the interrelated ways that parent engagement is positioned within the current policy context, as well as the ways that it encounters professional teaching, school leadership and teacher education cultures. Elsewhere these conceptual tools have been employed to analyse how policy works on everyday cultures, shaping ‘the everyday practices of parents and teachers as they negotiate the complex terrain of parent engagement policy’ (Saltmarsh, 2015a, p. 39). Following a brief discussion of the four Australian studies from which this paper is drawn, then, we seek to extend that previous work by turning attention toward the discursive power of ‘practice’ in teacher education, practices of ‘un/knowning’ in which professional knowledges and frames of reference are compartmentalized and reformulated through formal training, mentoring, sharing of practical experiences, and the exercise of leadership. The paper argues that these professional cultural practices and ways of un/knowning have important implications for the ways that parent engagement is understood and practiced in teacher education and the teaching profession.

## Methods: Notes About the Four Studies

This paper draws on interview data from four qualitative studies conducted in Australia between 2011-2018. These studies focused on: 1) perspectives and school engagement experiences of parents in the Australian state of New South Wales; 2) ways in which parent-school engagement is incorporated in Australian university-based teacher education programs; 3) professional experiences of beginning teachers in their first three years of teaching; and 4) perspectives of school principals on professional development needs of principals and teachers in order to effectively address issues pertaining to parent-school engagement.

The first study conducted 22 focus group interviews with parents in urban, suburban, outer metropolitan and regional centres in NSW, with a total of 174 participants. The study explored parents' experiences of engaging with schools in a variety of ways, their levels and types of involvement, and the kinds of factors they see as impacting on their engagement with schools over time. The semi-structured nature of these focus group interviews included making space for parents to raise additional issues and concerns. The focus groups were organised around key themes, including how parents of NSW school children experience their relationships with their child's school, what parents see as key issues for ongoing success in managing and maintaining those relationships, factors parents' see as impacting on their relationships with schools, and what parents see as important for schools and teachers to do in order to encourage, enhance and sustain parent engagement. Focus groups were also asked to comment on what teacher professional development and pre-service teacher education programs might need to do in order to prepare teachers for this critical aspect of their work.

The second study conducted semi-structured individual interviews with 35 university lecturers and program coordinators in 15 participating Australian universities, in NSW, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland. Interview data were considered alongside documentary information collated from 38 Australian university handbooks and websites about programmes and units of study. This documentary information provided a broad overview of the range and types of courses that deal specifically with issues directly relevant to parent-school engagement. This study sought to establish an evidentiary basis for identifying the different ways in which Australian teacher education prepares undergraduate pre-service teachers for engaging with parents.

The third study conducted 50 semi-structured, individual interviews with beginning teachers working in Catholic primary and secondary schools in Sydney, Australia. Participants were classified as either conditionally or professionally accredited, under the most recent iteration of the teacher accreditation process established by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). Australian Professional Teacher Standards, in place since 2011, require graduate teachers to prepare an accreditation report in which 'new scheme' teachers collate evidence that they meet the relevant criteria (which include engaging effectively with parents), before they can progress to the next stage of 'proficient professional'. Participants were interviewed about the process of what the study team termed 'becoming professional'. The study sought to explore how personal, professional and political contexts shape and inform teachers' understanding of themselves as professional educators in the beginning years of teaching. While this study did not focus on parent engagement *per se*, interviewees offered interesting insights into the ways that professional cultures shape their views and practices in relation to parents.

The fourth study conducted surveys and interviews concerning the experiences and perspectives of primary and secondary school principals on the issue of parent-school engagement. The survey was completed by 192 school principals from Catholic, independent

and government sector schools (131 from primary schools and 61 from secondary schools) in all Australian states and territories, and 38 principals (21 from primary schools and 17 from secondary schools) participated in follow-up semi-structured interviews. The study also conducted individual and focus group interviews with a total of 47 parents of primary and secondary school children in Australian Catholic, independent and government sector schools. The interviews and focus groups with parents concerned parents' experiences of engaging with their children's schooling, and interviews with principals and parents asked participants to reflect on what they saw as factors that impact on parent engagement, examples of barriers to and enablers of effective parent-school engagement, what principals saw as necessary areas for professional development for educators.

### **You Wouldn't Believe What Happened on Prac': Teacher Education and 'Learning by Osmosis' Within Professional Cultures**

As noted above, parent engagement has typically occupied a tenuous space in Australia's Initial Teacher Education (ITE) curricula, with several studies noting that there has often been minimal or ad hoc attention given to parent engagement in ITE programs (Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2002; Daniel, 2011; Brown, Harris, Jacobson & Trotti, 2014; Saltmarsh, Barr, & Chapman, 2014). These studies observe that while there are some notable exceptions, and despite ITE accreditation requirements that engagement with parents (like other Australian Professional Standards for Teachers) be given attention at various points in degree programs, extended coverage and theorising of this topic in ITE curricula is nonetheless limited. This is potentially compounded by pre-service teachers typically having only minimal opportunities to interact with parents during professional experience (also referred to in Australia as practicum) placements and internships. In addition, variations in Australian ITE curricula and programs have led some researchers to argue that more needs to be done 'to ensure that all beginning teachers enter the profession sufficiently equipped for this complex and important aspect of teachers' work' (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014, p. 47).

In this context, the learning that takes place during professional experience can be particularly significant. Indeed, professional experience is widely recognised as a crucial aspect of ITE, and is often considered by pre-service teachers to be 'the most important and relevant aspect of their program' (Mena, Hennisen & Loughran, 2017, p. 47). This is not without its complexities, however, and some have noted the multiple ways that forms of professional learning and knowing are entangled in cultures of practice.

*First, we face the "apprenticeship of observation" and the fact that students come into teacher education with extensive exposure to the surface, performative dimensions of teaching yet with little or no understanding of the complexity underlying the practice. Second, we grapple with the problem of enactment and the difficulty of moving from knowledge "of," or knowing "what," into knowing "how." Third, we confront the problem of complexity, already noted above, and the challenges arising from the fact that teaching is a dynamic practice that is never predictable or routine. (Clarke & Sheridan, 2016, p. 195)*

This complexity speaks to the centrality of cultural knowledge and practice to the challenges that relatively recent shifts in policy and social practice often present for teacher education and the teaching profession. Such complexities can have repercussions for teacher preparation and effectiveness in areas such as parent engagement, and elsewhere we have noted that there can be considerable dissonance between what pre-service teachers learn during their university programs and what they encounter when on practicum (also referred to

as professional experience) placements or internships in schools (Saltmarsh, Barr, & Chapman, 2014). This can present considerable challenges for pre-service teachers when encountering contradictions between tertiary and practical learning experiences. When pre-service teachers *do* have the opportunity to interact with parents during professional placement, they may find their existing views challenged. Teacher educators interviewed in our second study observed that student expectations and attitudes toward engaging with parents were often influenced as a result of practicum and internship experiences:

*...often they [pre-service teachers] go in on their placements, and there are already parents coming in and doing reading, and so they begin to pick up the different ways to engage, whereas secondary students very rarely see a parent – unless there's an issue.*

*Well a lot of the time some of the parents that come into school – if they come in especially in the upper grades, when there's an issue or when there's a problem so, I think that what our students witness on practicum has a lot do with their negative views of parents.*

Encounters with parents in this formative stage of a teaching career can make a significant impact – sometimes positive, sometimes less so – on pre-service teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward parent engagement. However, teacher educators in our research point out that the perspectives and practices of more experienced teachers are also an important part of the equation:

*...a lot of their [pre-service teachers'] views are formed through their combination of their experiences at university but also their practicum. So if they witness their mentor teachers, I guess maintaining partnerships, and working with parents in partnership then they're more open to the suggestion. But a lot of them are quite negative, I find in relation to partnerships so I guess they view partnership/parents as peripheral support rather than partners. You get that reported back to you whenever these topics come back in class, 'On prac you wouldn't believe what my teacher said or my teacher did', or, 'You wouldn't believe this parent when I was on prac kept calling the staff dah, dah'.*

These teacher educators' descriptions of pre-service teachers' professional placement experiences are indicative of ways that everyday professional cultures of teaching are observed, experienced, emulated and potentially contested. Importantly, teacher education research highlights the influential nature of experiences during professional placement, including the influence of mentor or supervising teachers (Mena, Hennissen & Loughran, 2017). Teacher educators we interviewed frequently commented on what they saw as a tendency for students to emulate the perspectives and practices of the mentors to whom they had been assigned during practicum placements and internships. This can have significant implications for the perceptions of parent engagement that pre-service teachers bring with them when entering the teaching profession. As one teacher educator put it:

*...they mirror themselves off their associate when they're there. So if the associate is a bit, at a ... not prepared to have parents around, well that's the example they're seeing.*

This is not to imply a simple 'cause and effect' explanation of pre-service teachers' learning, but rather to acknowledge that the beginning years of teaching are significant in laying the foundations of teachers' professional practice (Mockler, 2005, 2011). As beginning teachers in these formative years begin to navigate complex and at times challenging issues, they are reliant both on their educational preparation *and* on the guidance and example of more experienced teachers (Mena et al., 2017). As teacher educators we interviewed observe, however, some programs rely on students being able to learn about parent engagement through chance encounters:



*...when I hear students talking about their fear of parents and their lack of confidence at actually approaching parents or their lack of skill at actually knowing how to go about it, you know the gap becomes more obvious to me that we just assume that they will learn it by osmosis.*

*...it's [parent engagement] been something that we've assumed students will get by, by being out there and connecting, and it's not been given the same value as teaching them the things about how to teach... perhaps we focus so much on can they teach that we've not necessarily thought about those surrounding things that are skilled.*

In each of the above quotes, participants note the problematic assumption that students will, simply through exposure to parents, be able to absorb the knowledge and skills necessary for dealing with parents effectively. This is exemplified in the use of the term 'osmosis', which in scientific terms refers to the movement of liquid substances through a barrier such as a permeable or semipermeable membrane, with no learning or effort required on the part of the barrier in order for the solvent to be absorbed. Such a metaphor highlights precisely the dilemma of expecting that pre-service teachers might acquire skills by virtue of proximity, in the absence of learned knowledge or guidance. These teacher educators' observations concur with observations of Patricia Edwards (2018), based on her own experience of ITE, in which no training or guidance was received with regard to families of students in diverse schooling contexts. As Edwards contends:

*Perhaps my undergraduate professors assumed that I would discover how to work with families based on 'gut reaction' or 'instinct' or that what I needed to know I would be able to infer easily... However, these assumptions have serious limitations and, in fact, further complicate helping teachers to understand the families of their students. (Edwards, 2018, p. 64)*

Where there are gaps in pre-service teachers' learning in ITE about issues such as parent engagement, it is important to note that the voice of experienced teachers has a powerful place in the discourse and cultures of professional practice in ITE settings. Just as mentor teachers and other teachers encountered during practicum placements play an important role in inducting pre-service teachers into cultures of professional practice, so also do teacher educators whose approach to addressing such topics places emphasis on anecdotal advice from their days as classroom teachers. As other teacher educators interviewed explained:

*I do a lot of discussing of anecdotal type of stuff from my own experience with the idea of trying to equip the students with some ideas on how to approach relationships with parents and a lot of that is about giving advice on sort of things like acting early, making contact with parents very early in the piece. A lot of the lecturers here have experience as classroom teachers and I think that they're bringing that in in their own ad hoc way in a sense, not built directly into my units, we always do something on resourcing in the different units and I always introduce it [parent engagement] as part of the resources that are available to us.*

Utilising personal experience as a pedagogic strategy provides an interesting example of the ways in which professional cultures are practiced, formed and re-formed across a variety of sites and contexts. Teachers, pre-service teachers and teacher educators all play a part in producing and maintaining professional cultures of teaching. In Certeau's terms, current cultural practices of professional engagement with parents operate in dialogue with 'cultural remainders' that are part of teacher educators' prior teaching experience. This is not intended to de-value the sharing of anecdotal teaching experiences in tertiary classrooms, nor is it to privilege theoretical knowledge over practical skills. Rather, we would suggest that

neither on its own provides sufficient basis for understanding the complexities of parent-school engagement. As recent research in the USA contends, in order for pre-service teachers to be best prepared for engaging effectively with parents, all aspects of their preparation for the profession need to be in dialogue:

*...in addition to a culturally responsive component to all coursework, preservice teachers should also be guided through applying this lens to their relationships with parents and families. Administrators, mentor teachers, and other members of the school staff would also need to partner with universities to continue that work at the school level. (Fenton, Ocasio-Stoutenburg, & Henry, 2017, p. 222)*

We concur with this view, and contend that pre-service teachers are best served when both ITE curriculum and professional experience are informed by the growing body of research evidence concerned with factors that both facilitate and act as potential barriers to parent engagement.

### **‘Like Do I Shake Hands?’: Tacit Un/Knowing and Cultures of Experience and Practice**

Teacher professional learning continues well after the shift from ITE into the teaching workforce has taken place. Indeed, ‘Learning to teach is now broadly recognized as an ongoing process involving pre-service teacher preparation, induction and mentoring of beginning teachers, workplace learning and ongoing professional learning’ (Mayer, Mitchell, Macdonald, & Bell, 2005, p. 161). The beginning years of teaching are generally recognised as the most challenging career phase for teachers, with induction and mentoring programs seen as important strategies through which teachers can be initially supported in navigating the multiple demands of professional practice (Hudson, Beutel, & Hudson, 2009; Martinez, 2004; Li & Zhang, 2015). In this section of the paper, we consider some of the issues at play as beginning teachers learn to grapple with their professional responsibilities with regard to parents.

It is worth noting that our interviews with beginning teachers in the third study echo tensions, beliefs and practices commented on by teacher educators in the second study. These facets of professional cultures coalesce around ideas of knowledge and knowing, and the importance participants place on experience and practice, which they tended to see as the most legitimate means by which professional knowledges are obtained. For example, when asked about the transition to professional life, one beginning teacher reported:

*I think one of the biggest challenges is I found that a lot of the things in a sense that we learnt from uni went out the window, once I started teaching.*

When asked to elaborate on the sorts of things that ‘went out the window’, she replied:

*Just classroom management ideas... Like how to deal with certain students, especially with behavioural issues. I know they’ve [the university] got a program called diversity in the classroom, I think that needs to be done more... I know they’ve [the university] got a thing like transition, you know, how to go for interviews and more of that. So what do we do when we go to an interview, how do we, you know, if there’s a conflict in the staffroom, what do we do? More things like that of what happens on every day, you know, how to dress. I know a few of my friends who are grad, are like so how do we go? How do we dress when we go to work? Well dress appropriately. So just more things for work, which we didn’t really get when we were at uni.*

Interestingly, despite this teacher’s claim that knowledge from her university studies had in some way been discarded once she entered the profession, much of her explanation

focuses on topics she had studied and found useful, and on knowledges to which she wishes she had had more exposure. While pre-service teachers may think of these primarily as practical aspects of teaching, issues such as managing diversity and student behaviour are critical facets of teachers' interface with parents, and are mandated core components of all ITE programs throughout Australia. What stands out here though, is that this teacher considers herself to have largely discarded the very knowledges that she now sees herself as needing.

Similarly, most of the beginning teachers interviewed commented on feeling inadequately equipped for everyday encounters with parents, often in even the most mundane of ways such as greeting parents at school or answering questions about reports they had written. For a number of these teachers, a mentoring or induction program in their schools had been viewed favourably, and as having equipped them with skills they didn't believe they had previously. For example:

*Here they run like a [beginning] teachers thing where they, you know, before parent teacher interviews, they showed us how to do the interview, whereas that's not something that we've learnt at university, and it's unfortunate, like with other schools, you didn't have that, you kind of went to the interview and you didn't know, like do I shake hands, how do I approach them?*

Perhaps understandably, new teachers can find interacting with parents or communicating unwelcome news about a child's academic performance or behaviour to be particularly challenging. Indeed, even some parents who participated in the first and fourth studies acknowledged that parents can be difficult to deal with, especially when concerned about a child's progress or frustrated at perceived inaction on behalf of a child for whom they have requested support (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014). However, everyday cultural practices such as whether to shake hands or how to approach a parent informally become part of a professional un/knowing that requires, for some beginning teachers, direct instruction from someone perceived as having acquired that cultural knowledge solely through professional experience. Of particular note in this instance, the teacher cited above who considered these kinds of relational practices with parents to be something about which she knew little or nothing was herself a parent of school age children.

These findings are consistent with those of other studies indicating that new teachers often experience anxieties about everyday classroom practice, collegial relationships and the emotional labour of teaching (Biesta, 2010; O'Connor, 2008; Johnson, Down, Le Cornu, Peters, Sullivan, Pearce, & Hunter, 2010; Martinez, 2004; White, Bloomfield, & Le Cornu, 2010). Yet they also point to an interesting disjunction around which professional identities are in part being constructed, in which one's knowledge of everyday practice is simultaneously valourised as essential *and* disavowed as absent until officially imparted by others through direct instruction. This can have significant repercussions for the ways in which teachers engage with parents – impacting on the effectiveness with which teachers communicate important information about children's progress and activities, on the confidence and appropriateness with which they conduct interactions with parents, and on the kinds of collectively shared professional knowledges about engaging with parents that they will in turn share with others during their careers.

For some, relational and cultural un/knowings are accompanied by an emphasis on procedural matters through which a measure of professional confidence is gained. A number of teachers interviewed spoke positively about the experience of feeling both formally prepared through induction programs and supported through individual mentoring to become familiar with everyday procedural matters:

*The school held I think weekly little meetings just to get us into the swing of things, teaching us what needs to be done in terms of reports, parent/teacher interviews, little things, where to get resources from.*

*Things like I need to call some parents, have a discussion about it before you go and do it so that when you go and do it you feel confident that you're in the right mind set about it, so things like that were really good.*

For others, value was placed on both formal training and informal learning through experience:

*There's definitely training around parent teacher interviews before they happen, so not straight away obviously, like maybe a week or two before, and you get a list of things you might cover and how to talk to parents and that sort of stuff.*

*But again it's something you learn, you've got to do it, you've got to stuff up an interview and you've got to experience what it's like to have a parent in front of you who doesn't speak English and so you're like, yeah ....*

Interestingly, this teacher relates the experience of developing confidence in dealing with parents primarily to either explicit training within the school context or to practical understandings gained through trial and error. There is no mention of knowledge gained during pre-service preparation, nor is there a sense of the ordinariness of talking with parents about their children, or (in multicultural Sydney) of encountering and communicating with someone whose English is limited. Such thinking places significant limitations on the kinds of both relational and procedural knowledges that teachers may consider as part of their own personal and professional repertoires.

Cultures of un/knowning are also reflected in the views of school leaders surveyed and interviewed in the fourth study. Principals in that study were asked to comment on ways in which they challenge teachers in relation to their practices and beliefs in relation to parent engagement. Interestingly, they typically referred to procedural matters, approaches that involved providing instruction or modelling of desired practices, or a combination of these. As one primary school principal put it,

*I am often communicating to teachers about how best to engage the parents of their students. I offer practical advice, encouragement and I role model effective methods.*

Some principals also considered that teachers in their schools would benefit from professional learning as means of enhancing their knowledge and skills in engaging with parents, with improving communication and avoiding conflict seen as areas of particular need. However, although the majority (85 per cent) of principals we surveyed believe that parent engagement in their school is a developing practice in their school, rather than either fully implemented or just beginning, only 5 per cent of these principals reported having limited knowledge of parent engagement and therefore needing professional development themselves in that aspect of their work. Instead, the vast majority rated themselves as either reasonably or strongly knowledgeable about parent engagement. Whereas teachers in the earlier studies indicated a notable lack of confidence and knowledge around both formal and informal interactions with parents, school principals in the fourth study largely reported being satisfied with their own knowledge of how best to engage with parents.

## Conclusion

Findings from our four Australian studies underscore the need for better understandings of the connections between cultural beliefs and professional practices of educators, and relationships between parents and schools. Despite Australian ITE curricula placing substantive emphasis on issues of direct relevance to pre-service teachers' preparedness for engaging effectively with parents, there remain expectations that they will learn some of these crucial skills by osmosis. This expectation, combined with the valourisation of the 'voice of experience' shared through anecdotes from peers, teacher educators with teaching backgrounds, and teachers encountered whilst on practicum placement, contributes to disjunctions between what is known about engaging with parents and what is embedded in the everyday practices of professional cultures.

Importantly, too, it is worth noting that of the fifty participants interviewed in the third study, not one referred to ways of learning about professional activities of relevance to engaging with parents that fell outside the parameters of explicit instruction, mentoring, or informal/collegial sharing of practical experiences. None mentioned, for example, scholarly or professional reading, familiarizing themselves with policy frameworks or political debates, or accessing information from professional associations. Instead, they saw knowledges as compartmentalized within institutional and everyday frames of reference, such that even seemingly mundane cultural knowledges (how to dress for work, whether to shake hands when greeting someone) could be set aside at the school gate in much the same way as the learning that took place at university could be 'thrown out the window'.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, parents in studies cited here spoke frequently about their perceptions of teachers as being ill-prepared for engaging with parents in meaningful ways. A consistent view amongst parents from all walks of life, across Independent, Catholic and government school sectors, was that teachers in Australia are mostly lacking in knowledge about how to deal with parents – as individual people, as community members, as responsible guardians and advocates for their children, and as loving parents. This raises important questions about the ways that pre-service teacher education introduces and extends student knowledges regarding engaging with parents, and the ways that teacher education participates in dialogues with the teaching profession to which it contributes and from which it also recruits teacher educators.

As a nationally mandated professional standard for Australian teachers and principals, engagement with parents merits more consistent inclusion within and across initial teacher education programs. While recently introduced accreditation processes now ensure that there are a minimum of two 'touch points' within each accredited teacher education program where universities must demonstrate that each professional standard (including parent engagement) is taught, practiced and assessed, there is nonetheless a need for further research that considers what the relevant curriculum and pedagogies entail. On the basis of our findings, we contend that there is a strong case for ensuring that pre-service teacher learning about parent engagement involves research-based curriculum and pedagogy, including development of communicative and other relevant skills, assessment of pre-service teachers' knowledge and demonstrated ability to engage effectively with parents, and clearer articulations of these in ways that enable pre-service teachers to value and critically reflect on the full range of theoretical and practical knowledges they need for this important aspect of their work.

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