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Equipping parents to support their children's higher education aspirations: a design and evaluation tool

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature on best practices to engage parents in order to equip them to support their children's higher education aspirations. Parents from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds, in common with other parents, report that they want "the best" for their children's future. Getting a good education is a part of the aspiration of most parents, regardless of SES. However, unlike parents from mid and high SES backgrounds who usually have "educational cultural capital" to support their children's educational aspiration, parents from low SES backgrounds often are unable to confidently access information they need about possible education pathways within and beyond school. Additionally, they need to know where to find out about financial and other support resources available to facilitate access to higher education. Higher education participation by students from non-traditional backgrounds could be improved by outreach that promotes parents' social capital and "educational cultural" capital. This project has built upon University of Tasmania and University of Wollongong's combined experience, international literature and workshops with parent engagement practitioners to identify features of parent engagement programmes and resources that are efficient and effective in engaging parents from low SES backgrounds to support their children's higher education aspirations. From this, the higher education Design and Evaluation Matrix for Outreach was modified to develop a tool to plan, design, modify and evaluate parent engagement programmes.

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Introduction

Parents from low SES backgrounds, in common with other parents, report that they want "the best" for their children's future. Getting a good education is a part of the aspiration of most parents, regardless of SES status (Bok 2010; Craven 2005). Parents from mid and high SES backgrounds usually have "educational cultural capital", after Bourdieu's finding that children of middle class parents are advantaged in attaining educational qualifications (Sullivan 2001). These parents use their educational cultural capital to support their children's educational aspiration, including mediation of their children's higher educational aspirations.

While all parents generally want to assist their children to do well and realise their educational aspirations, unlike low SES parents, parents of mid and high SES status can confidently access information they need about possible education pathways within and beyond school, and know where to find out about financial and other support resources available to facilitate access to higher education. Institutions interested in widening participation of students from non-traditional backgrounds should therefore be interested in outreach efforts that can further promote parents' social capital and "educational cultural capital" (Sullivan 2001).

This paper identifies features of parent engagement programmes and resources that are efficient and effective in engaging parents from low SES backgrounds to support their children's higher education aspirations. The Australian Government describes relative socio-economic status (SES) comprehensively in terms of people's access to material and social resources, and their ability to participate in society, with low SES referring to the lowest quarter of geographical areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004). The authors adopt a similar understanding of SES as a multifaceted concept, comprised of a number of factors, including parental education, income and occupation, as well as material and social resources and cultural possessions such as art and literature in the home. The focus of this paper is on the impact of all these dimensions of low SES on higher education aspirations and participation, and given these impacts, the best way to engage parents to support their children's higher education aspirations.

There is a strong theoretical basis for the effectiveness of early outreach to primary and early secondary school age children and families, particularly if sustained over several years and if outreach targets all students and parents, as discussed for example by Naylor, Baik, and James (2013) in a comprehensive review of programmes for low SES school children that are effective in increasing higher education aspiration and participation. However, while there is literature that considers barriers to parental engagement as outlined below, evidence as to the nature and features of programmes and resources that are most effective in engaging low SES parents, carers and families (hereafter referred to simply as parents) in building and realizing their children's educational aspirations, particularly towards higher education, is limited. Evidence is especially lacking for programmes delivered by higher education providers and not-for-profit organisations, either themselves or in partnership with schools. This project addresses that evidence gap.

The project builds on a substantial body of research from the University of Tasmania (e.g. Kilpatrick and Abbott-Chapman 2002) and elsewhere (e.g. Bok 2010; James 2002; Gemici et al. 2014) that has established the key role of family and parents in particular in shaping the career and educational aspirations of children and young people in low SES communities. Longitudinal research has established a strong relationship between education and career aspiration by the age of 15 and completion of Year 12 in Australia (Khoo and Ainley 2005). Parents in low SES communities want to assist their children, but are less likely to be aware of the full range of career and educational options available for their children, and supports available to assist them achieve these aspirations (Craven 2005; James and Devlin 2006; James et al. 2008; Bok 2010). Interventions that target the attitudes and aspirations of these parents are likely to have a positive influence on the educational aspirations and subsequent participation in post compulsory education of children from low SES families (Gemici et al. 2014).

Australian higher education and equity policy framework

To understand the current state of thought surrounding best practices for low SES parent engagement, it is necessary to understand the policy framework under which decisions are being made about when and how to engage parents in an educational context. Over the last two decades, Australia has put forward numerous policy documents that recognise the importance of increasing low SES student enrolments in universities. While none of these documents has a direct focus on parent engagement, the documents do indicate government support for increasing low SES student enrolments and more recently, begin to incorporate parents into action planning.

In 1988, a white paper entitled *Higher Education: A Policy Statement* was released by the Minister for Employment, Education, and Training. This document set forward national equity goals and provided funding for programmes aimed at increasing equity. The government reiterates its commitment to developing a more equitable higher education system and states that it believes that higher education should be acknowledged as a legitimate aspiration for those who can demonstrate capacity (Dawkins 1988).

Following that, in 1990, a discussion paper, *A Fair Chance for All: Higher Education that's Within Everyone's Reach*, was published by the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) that once again confirmed the government's support for higher education and, this time, identified six specific equity groups of interest, including people from low socioeconomic backgrounds (low SES). In 1996, the progress towards the equity objectives outlined in *A Fair Chance for All* were assessed in the National Board of Employment, Education and Training Higher Education Council's report *Equality, Diversity and Excellence: Advancing the National Higher Education Equity Framework*. This report found that while the situation had improved for a number of equity groups, people from low SES backgrounds were still under-represented in higher education. This report set out 26 recommendations and identified people from low SES backgrounds and rural and isolated students as two priority areas for action, with \$4 million in additional funding recommended, addressing the needs of these two groups. Because of a change of government, implementation of these recommendations was impacted. While the report never became formal policy, it did influence institutional planning and programmes (Gale and Tranter 2011).

Next, *Backing Australia's Future* (Nelson 2003), which introduced higher educational reforms and a range of new funding streams and programmes, shifted focus from the two priority equity groups identified previously to indigenous and disability equity groups. In this report, parents, whom the academic literature widely identifies as key in students' success, are mentioned just twice. First, the government recognises the financial stress that can be caused to parents by higher education in its proposal of the Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarships and next in its recommendation for enhancements to the Graduate Destination Survey and Course Experience Questionnaire. In this case, the government mentions that along with students, parents will likely be wanting information about institutional and course performance. In 2004, the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau, an organisation dedicated to greater parental engagement and community involvement in schools, was created and funded by the Australian government and following that in 2008, the Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations released the Australian National Action Framework for Family-School Partnerships. This indicates a shift

in thinking and recognition that parent engagement is a key to success in higher education.

More recently, the *Review of Australian Higher Education Discussion Paper* (Bradley et al. 2008), or “Bradley Review”, was released in 2008. The purpose of this review was to examine the future directions for the higher education sector, determine its capacity for meeting the needs of Australians and suggest options for future reforms. The Bradley Review acknowledged the level of participation in higher education for people from low SES backgrounds had remained virtually unchanged for the past two decades and that there were a number of factors, including costs and geographic locations, which were possibly contributing to this. It was also pointed out that this was the case not just in Australia, but in the United States and the United Kingdom, as well. In the 2009 budget, the Australian government responded comprehensively to the Bradley Review with \$5.4 billion and released *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System*, which set a target for 20% of higher education enrolments at the undergraduate level to be comprised of people from low SES backgrounds by 2020. The next Liberal coalition government, however, did not adopt these targets and instead created a scholarship scheme. Noonan (2015) points out that “the extent to which that [scholarship scheme] would change the socioeconomic composition of the universities with the most significant scholarship programmes is questionable” (p. 35).

Despite equity policies being in place, low SES students are still “significantly and persistently underrepresented in Australian higher education” (James et al. 2008; Gale and Parker 2013). One quarter of the Australian population lives in low SES postcodes, yet year after year students from low SES backgrounds comprise only approximately 15% of the domestic student population in Australian universities (James et al. 2008).

Simultaneously over these two decades there has been an abundance of research focused on understanding why, despite government support and funding, people from low SES backgrounds continue to be under-represented and how this can be changed. One body of research examines the barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education. Various factors have been examined in great detail, however, two studies from the early 1980s summarise barriers to higher education quite succinctly and describe four conditions that must be met for a student to enter university (Anderson et al. 1980; Anderson and Versoon 1983). These studies explain that an adequate number of places must be available, the institution must be accessible to the student, both geographically and financially, the student must have the necessary preparation and capability to succeed and the student must want to enter. Although all four conditions are closely interrelated and must be met for a student to succeed at university, as noted above, there is already a body of literature on having adequate places available, geographic and financial accessibility and student preparation, including through parent-school engagement. The focus of this literature review therefore will be on the fourth condition, student aspirations and specifically, parent engagement and support for their student’s higher educational aspirations. In particular, we aim to take the debate beyond parental school engagement to consider how higher education and not-for-profit organisations working with disadvantaged families and communities to raise educational outcomes can engage parents and families to inform and support their children’s higher education aspiration.

Definition and terminology

In the literature, two phrases are often used to describe the partnerships between parents and others that constitute their participation in the academic realm of their children's lives: parent engagement and parent involvement. The definitions of the two are quite similar and are often used interchangeably, but more recently there appears to be a shift from parent involvement to parent engagement because engagement implies a broader conception of the role of parents in learning. Drawing on several diverse lines of theory and research, Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) defined parents' involvement in children's schooling as parents' commitment of resources to the academic arena of children's lives. Expanding on this, Emerson et al. (2012) state that "parental engagement consists of partnerships between families, schools and communities, raising parental awareness of the benefits of engaging in their children's education, and providing them with the skills to do so" (p.7).

Importance

The importance of parent involvement or engagement in relation to educational aspirations is widely understood. Bergensen (2009) explains that parental involvement, across all race/ethnicities and socioeconomic groups, is a better predictor of students' education expectations than parents' educational level and student academic achievement, and Muller (2009) states in Emerson et al. (2012): "Family-school and community partnerships are re-defining the boundaries and functions of education. They enlarge parental and community capacity; they create conditions in which children learn more effectively. In these ways they take education beyond the school gates (p. 7)".

Bordua (1960) was one of the first to investigate the impact of various factors that influence students to attend college and reconfirmed that gender, religious affiliation and socioeconomic status were related to the decision. He also found for the first time that parental emphasis on college also played a role. This opened the door for expanded research on the topic of the influence of parent engagement on the children's higher education aspirations.

Moving forward to more recent times, in the past two decades, researchers have repeatedly confirmed the link between parent engagement and students' higher education aspirations. There is widespread acknowledgement of the benefits of parental involvement for effective education (Grolnick and Slowiaczek 1994; Ceja 2004; Hong and Ho 2005; Jeynes 2005, 2007; Bakker and Denessen 2007; Auerbach 2007; Charles, Roscigno, and Torres 2007; Cunningham et al. 2007; Gonida and Urdan 2007; Fann, McClafferty Jarsky, and McDonough 2009; Hill and Tyson 2009; Cheung and Pomerantz 2011; Kirk et al. 2011; Martinez and Ulanoff 2013; Gerard and Zoller Booth 2015; Education Endowment Foundation 2016). Many of these studies report barriers and enhancers to parent-school partnerships. Barriers and enhancers are summarised in Jeynes' (2005) meta-analysis and discussed further below. Finally, most recently, in addition to the academic literature highlighting the importance of engaging parents in their children's education, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an international organisation of 34 countries, released a report in 2016, *Teaching Excellence through Professional Learning and Policy Reform: Lessons from Around the World* that emphasised the importance of parental engagement. This report indicates that in order for students to be able to achieve, parents need to be engaged and in order

for parents to be engaged, teachers need to be ably trained to know how and when to communicate with parents. The report also states that schools should specifically reach out to immigrant parents because “students do better when their parents understand the importance of schooling, how the school system works, and how best to support their child’s progress through school” (Schleicher 2016, 30).

Broad issues influencing parent engagement

The research reviewed above strongly suggests that, in order to increase the representation of students from low SES background in higher education, it is advantageous to increase the engagement of their parents. Several researchers have identified factors influencing the engagement of parents from low SES backgrounds. Hornby and Lafaele (2011) present a model developed to help clarify and elaborate on the wide spectrum of barriers to parental engagement. They divide the barriers into four areas: individual parent and family, child, parent–teacher, and societal. Individual parent and family factors focus on parents’ beliefs about parent involvement, perceptions of invitations for parent involvement, current life contexts and class, ethnicity and gender. Child factors focus on age, learning difficulties and disabilities, gifts and talents and behavioural problems. Parent–teacher factors include differing goals and agendas, differing attitudes and differing language used, and societal factors focus on historical and demographic, political and economic aspects. For each factor an example is given to clarify, but solutions are not discussed. The authors suggest that the model will provide insight for teachers and offer ideas for areas of future research.

In contrast to providing an overview as did Hornby and Lafaele (2011), other studies examine one specific factor that can negatively impact parent involvement. Ludicke and Kortman (2012) examined the parent–teacher relationship for children with learning barriers. They found that there were often tensions in the home–school partnership, and disagreements or differences in perceptions about solutions to overcoming learning barriers and communications. Likewise, Hill and Wang (2015) examined another specific factor, parenting practices. In a longitudinal study they examined how “practices related to the emotional (monitoring and warmth) and cognitive (autonomy support and warmth) engagement” (p. 224) for African American and European American parents of children in 7th grade affect success and aspirations of those children in the following years through enrolment in higher education.

Types of parent engagement

A wide range of types of parent engagement with their children’s education is described in the literature. However, three models are often used when describing the various types of parent involvement or engagement (Table 1): Epstein’s six types (Epstein 2002), the Australian Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations “Family-school partnerships framework” (2008) and Emerson et al.’s (2012) “Parental engagement in learning and schooling: Lessons from research.” The seven dimension Family–school partnerships framework was prepared collaboratively by the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO), the Australian Parents Council (APC), the Australian Government, and other key stakeholders including State and territory government and non-government school authorities, and school principals’ associations. Emerson et al. (2012) in a report for the Australian Research

Table 1. Three models of parental involvement and their descriptions proposed by Epstein (2002), Australian Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations Government (2008) and Emerson et al. (2012).

Author (Year)	Typology
Epstein (2002)	Parenting, Communication, Volunteering, Learning at home, Decision-making, Collaborating with the community
Australian Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (2008)	Communicating, Connecting learning at home and at school, Building community and identity, Recognising the role of the family, Consultative decision-making, Collaborating beyond the school, Participating
Emerson et al. (2012)	School-based involvement, Home-based Involvement, Academic socialisation

Alliance for Children & Youth for the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau, proposed a matrix that shows the various types of parent involvement that make up each of home-based involvement, school-based involvement and academic socialisation and illustrates the difference between each type. The matrix draws on Epstein's six parenting types and the seven dimensions of the Family-school partnerships framework. Emerson et al. (2012) is particularly relevant to this paper, as not only does it incorporate the two earlier models, but also matches our focus, being not solely about school-based engagement.

Emerson et al. (2012) provide a comprehensive overview of the literature on parental engagement which identifies strategies for promoting parental engagement. Their typology is based on an analysis of these: including communication strategies such as parent-teacher meetings, internet/new media, community liaison officers, homework centres and ongoing work to support learning. Strategies are also broken out by intervention focus including parents and families, teachers, whole of community and school plans, processes and reforms. Strategies for early childhood, primary school and high school are also described. The last group of strategies explained are for different cultural groups including culturally and linguistically diverse families, parents of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and refugee groups.

Strategies for engaging parents

Best practices for engaging parents in their children's education have been widely studied with numerous peer-reviewed papers as well as handbooks and guides published on the topic. In the last decade, several literature reviews of best practices and meta-analysis of suites of parent engagement programmes have been released. Rather than duplicating these meta-analyses, we summarise key findings here. A consistent theme is that general parent involvement in their children's lives, or "good parenting" makes a difference to academic achievement. Overall these large studies find that best practice includes a focus on incorporating culture into strategies, academic socialisation as a key characteristic of parental engagement for academic success, and a need to evaluate parent engagement programmes to build the evidence base. These are expanded upon below, followed by good practice features for parent engagement strategies suggested by evaluations of higher education outreach programmes for students.

General parent involvement and academic achievement

In 2003, Deforges and Abouchaar conducted a literature review for the United Kingdom's Department for Education and Skills that examined spontaneous involvement, which they describe as self-motivated and self-sustained versus induced parent involvement, which are intervention programmes, initiated by a non-parental source and usually aimed at increasing parent involvement. Consistent with other studies (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003, p. 10; Jeynes 2005; Hill and Tyson 2009) they found "that a form of parental involvement, specifically 'at-home' good parenting, has a major impact on school outcomes even after all other forces (e.g. the effect of prior attainment or of social class) have been factored out". Jeynes (2007) also found that programmes designed to increase parent involvement are positively related to urban students' academic achievement.

Culture and parent engagement

While different ethnic groups express their support in different ways, parent involvement consistently has a positive relationship with academic achievement across ethnic groups (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003). A meta-analysis conducted by Jeynes (2005) used 41 studies to examine the relationship between parent involvement and urban elementary school students' achievement. Their research found that parent involvement is indeed positively related to academic achievement regardless of race, gender or urban setting.

In addition to the large meta-analysis studies and literature reviews, researchers have conducted various studies to examine strategies for engaging the parents in a specific cultural group and note ethnic variations in parent involvement patterns and strategies. For example, Kim (2014) explains how despite lower parental involvement of Korean and Chinese parents in the American school system, Korean American and Chinese American students are still likely to attend highly selective universities and colleges. Kim attributes this to parental aspirations consistent with homeland cultural values and practices. Raihani and Gurr (2010) describe the strategies an Islamic Australian school has used to engage parents in their children's education. This study found that although important aspects of Muslim culture were present at the school, parent involvement was limited at the school studied with most communication flowing in one direction, from the school to the parents. Smith (2008) seeks to understand the involvement of low SES African American parents in their children's college choice and found that parental aspirations were for a completion of high school and academic socialisation focused on a narrative of struggle. A study based in the Netherlands by Smit et al. (2007) compared Dutch parents' involvement to minority parent involvement. It also identified specific types of parents and proposed strategies for schools to use to engage each type of parent. The study found that at minority schools, parents did not perceive themselves as qualified to be involved in their students' education. Finally, Alfaro, O'Reilly-Diaz, and Lopez (2014, p. 11) emphasise that educational institutions "must acknowledge and value the positive influence that Latino parental involvement has on Latino students throughout the P20 educational pipeline".

Gorinski and Fraser (2006) published a literature review focused on the effective engagement of Pasifika parents and communities in education in New Zealand. The review included not only literature specific to Pasifika communities, but also relevant international literature from 1985 to 2005 about engaging parents from low SES backgrounds. Overall, the authors

found the literature to be lacking in studies with a micro-political perspective, or studies that look at how power influences relationships between people. This aligns with notions of (limited) educational cultural capital of parents from low SES backgrounds (Sullivan 2001). Gorinski and Fraser (2006) found that most research was conducted in a “deficit-theorising” paradigm, which placed the blame for lack of achievement on parents’ lack of interest or involvement rather than on schools’ attempts to engage parents. They discussed culture-related barriers to parent involvement that should be addressed in designing strategies for parent engagement, including “barriers associated with notions of culture and acculturation; language needs and deficiencies; strained economic resources (both those of families and those of government); parents’ uncertainties, and schools’ preconceptions” (p. 2). In addition, and similar to other reviews, Gorinski and Fraser (2006) identified effective commonly used parental engagement strategies such as the use of parents as tutors, workshops for parents to learn new skills and information, literacy programmes both for children and families, collaborative projects between the school and families, reporting to parents about academic and social aspects of their children’s education and other communication and support strategies such as bilingual community support liaisons.

Schools, higher education and others aiming to engage parents to support their children’s educational aspiration must be mindful of cultural differences between the world of education and home/community when designing programmes, and provide genuine opportunities that value parents’ strengths and align with their cultural characteristics. Macfarlane (2008) examined Queensland parental engagement policies for schools and questions the true intentions of those policies. Parents are seemingly invited to engage, but it is pointed out that this invitation is often qualified and restricted. McFarlane adds that if parents do not engage “properly”, they may be “chastised” and future opportunities for engaging in their children’s education may be limited.

More recently, a Canadian study (Leithwood and Patrician 2015) evaluated several tools used to: foster high expectations among parents for their children’s success at school; create effective communication between parents and their children in the home; and build families’ social and intellectual capital related to schooling. They found that while parent engagement has a positive impact on children’s educational aspirations, some interventions work better than others. Among lessons learned from this study are, regardless of intervention method, engaging parents can be difficult; trust must be built between school staff and parents; if meetings are used to engage parents, ample time should be allowed during meetings for trust building, a handful of meetings is not likely to have much impact; effective implementation strategies are likely to be dynamic; engaging secondary school parents is different to engaging elementary school parents; First Nation parents may be from low SES backgrounds, but are highly motivated to increase social and intellectual capital in order to improve their children’s academic success; communications between parents and schools are key to parent engagement, but no one form works well in all circumstances with all parents. Leithwood and Patrician’s (2015), findings closely align with Yosso’s (2005) model of community cultural wealth. In addition to social and intellectual capital, Yosso’s model describes the importance of navigational capital which involves “skills of manoeuvring through social institutions”. (Yosso 2005, p. 81). The importance of navigational capital, can be seen in the successful programmes discussed later in this paper.

In any case, it is important that parents have explicit opportunities and reasons to engage. Other key factors for success identified by Dotterer and Wehrspann (2016) include

developing policy that instead of vaguely encouraging parent involvement, clearly justifies the importance of parental engagement as well as identifying specific pathways for engaging parents. They suggest that programmes aimed at increasing parent involvement communicate the results to the parents, thus developing a deeper understanding for the parents of how their efforts impact their children.

Academic socialisation

Emerson et al. (2012) emphasise the effectiveness of the parent engagement type “academic socialisation” (Table 1). Hill and Tyson (2009) synthesised the results of 50 studies published between 1985 and 2006 and found that parent academic socialisation was the most important factor affecting student achievement. Their meta-analysis identified “academic socialization” as including “communicating parental expectations for education and its value or utility, linking schoolwork to current events, fostering educational and occupational aspirations, discussing learning strategies with children, and making preparations and plans for the future”. This was the type of parent involvement that has the strongest positive relation with achievement in middle school. Hill and Tyson (2009) found that the type of parent involvement with the second strongest positive relation with achievement was school-based parent involvement and that home-based parent involvement had mixed results, with some forms not consistently associated with achievement, while other forms of involvement were positively related to achievement.

Jeynes (2005) examined the level of effectiveness of several common parent engagement strategies including general parent involvement, specific parent involvement, communication between parents and their children about school activities, checking homework prior to it being turned in, parents holding high expectations for their students’ academic achievement, parents regularly reading to their children, and whether and how often parents attend and participate in school functions and finally, whether there was a loving and supportive parenting style. Echoing the findings of Hill and Tyson (2009) and Emerson et al. (2012) that parent academic socialisation is the most important factor affecting student achievement, Jeynes (2005, 262) found that general parent support “may create an educationally oriented ambience, which establishes an understanding of a certain level of support and standards in the child’s mind” and the individual strategies such as attending school functions and checking homework are less important.

Evaluation

Both Agronick et al. (2009) and Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) found that evaluation of parent involvement/engagement programmes is often ignored, or not sufficiently robust. As a result, there is a gap in the literature regarding “many academic and learning related outcomes, and on many of the specific activities schools and services should undertake in pursuit of the general features of an effective parental engagement strategy” (Goodall and Vorhaus 2011, p. 9).

Goodall and Vorhaus (2011) were commissioned by the UK Department of Education to review over 50 studies of interventions involving parents from 2000 to 2010, along with a few earlier, frequently cited studies. This report found that evidence of the impact of interventions to support home-school links and trainings for parents to support their children’s

learning was robust. However, there is not yet enough evidence to evaluate the effectiveness of the various interventions for different key stages of children's development. Despite this, the authors point out that much of the literature is in agreement on what is effective. Key features of successful parent engagement programmes include planning, leadership, collaboration and engagement, and sustained improvement and support (Goodall and Vorhaus 2011).

In addition to mentioning successful tools and methods for engaging parents as a part of a larger study, some researchers look specifically at a single tool or method or a suite of tools and methods and attempt to determine their effectiveness. For example, Lewin and Luckin (2010) investigated how technology can support parent engagement efforts. They found that there are benefits to using technology to support parent engagement, but projects that do so must be flexible in order to accommodate parents' needs, which are complex. This study also looked at whether or not transporting technology between the school and home would have a positive impact on parent engagement and found that overall, it did not.

Lessons from outreach programmes focused on students

Evaluations of higher education outreach programmes focused on students suggest some features that are effective in engaging parents to supporting their children's higher education aspirations.

Hooker and Brand (2009) examined 23 programmes that work to prepare middle and high school students for college/university and had quality programme evaluations available. The study looked at Programmatic Elements of Success such as rigour and academic support, relationships, college knowledge and access, relevance, youth-centred programmes and effective instruction, as well as structural elements of success such as partnerships and cross-systems collaboration, strategic use of time, leadership and autonomy and effective assessment and use of data. While the focus of these programmes was not parent engagement, the programmes that were successful often rated high on "relationships", which included parent involvement.

Gale et al. (2010) reviewed Australian and international literature to examine interventions early in school as a means to improve higher education outcomes for disadvantaged (particularly low SES) students. While not looking specifically at the role parent involvement plays in improving higher education outcomes for disadvantaged students, parent involvement is mentioned as a key aspect in many of the studies reviewed. Overall, the successful programmes are collaborative, start early and are long-term and sustained, people-rich, cohort-based, use a variety communication and information sharing methods, including digital media, provide familiarisation/site experiences, recognise and value differences, enhance academic curriculum, and provide financial supports and/or incentives. These features align with findings of effective features of programmes for parents from the meta-analyses and literature summarised above.

Successful programmes

This section provides examples of particular programmes that incorporate some of the features and characteristics of successful, effective programmes discussed above.

While many programmes exist that successfully engage parents from low SES backgrounds with the goal of creating a “college culture” or increasing higher education enrolment for their children, only a few are described in the academic literature. These programmes, described below, are often aimed at very specific groups of parents, but the methods and key features may be transferrable to programmes aimed at different groups of parents in different locations. The four programmes described here are all parent engagement programmes specifically aimed at increasing enrolment of students with low SES backgrounds in colleges and universities.

School, College and University Partnership’s Parent and Student Success (PASS) programme

Gilbert (1996) describes the School, College and University Partnership (SCUP) programme at Northern Arizona University, a programme that successfully promoted academic success for Hopi and Navajo students. The programme targeted seven rural high schools on or near Navajo and Hopi reservations. Many of the students in the programme came from low SES backgrounds. The SCUP programme was made up of several smaller components, each with its own goal. The goals of PASS were threefold: 1. To help parents feel confident and effective about helping with their students’ academic performance and success; 2. To facilitate communication between community members, “specifically regarding educational goals and school administration” (Gilbert 1996, 12); and 3. To encourage communication between parents and their students about “academic performance, homework, school-related attitudes, discipline and family issues” (Gilbert 1996, 12). Based on evaluations, the most successful of these components was the bilingual and culturally relevant parent involvement programme, Parent and Student Success (PASS) programme. Communication was key to this programme, with bilingual letters, flyers and workshops used. In addition to this, success is attributed to adapting the model the programme was based on to fit the needs of the Native American parents’ culture. This gave the parents a better understanding of how the American education system is similar to, for example, the Navajo Philosophy.

UCLA’s Futures and Families programme

Auerbach (2004) shows how the Futures and Families (F&F) programme, a bilingual outreach programme at a large, diverse high school that was part of a small, experimental college access programme that was part of an ongoing University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)-school partnership, successfully created a “college-going” culture. This programme started with parents of year 10 students and focused on “building parents’ basic knowledge in general, college planning and specific colleges” (p.131) and creating opportunities and a safe space for marginalised parents to dialogue with educators and engage around educational issues (Auerbach 2004). The method of parent engagement used included 25 monthly bilingual meetings organised largely around parent concerns and college planning deadlines formed the core of the programme. These meetings combined guest speakers of colour with small group discussions (in a choice of language), handouts, panel discussions and hands-on workshop activities. The meetings were held at the high school’s Parent Center and were facilitated by a respected Latina who could provide a cultural and linguistic bridge among the students, staff and parents. In this case, many of the parents wanted to be supportive of

their students, but lacked access to information that would allow them to be supportive in a system that was new to them. In addition to building college knowledge, F&F successfully built social capital by facilitating three types of relationships that support college pathways: between parents and educators, between parents and fellow parents and between parents and their children. This, in turn, resulted in the construction of critical capital (and advocacy for some parents, creating strong allies for the students. By acknowledging the barriers to college access that their students face, parents were able to develop strategies for overcoming them and build social capital in the process (Auerbach 2004). It should be noted that a similar programme for the students was run simultaneously.

The Puente Project

The Puente Project, started in 1981 and co-sponsored by the University of California and the California Community College Chancellor's Office, works with students who are struggling in high school and community colleges throughout California and their parents. While not all of these students are from low SES backgrounds, many of them are. The aim of this programme is to "increase [the] number of students who enroll in four-year colleges and universities, earn college degrees, and can then serve as mentors and leaders within the community" (Agronick et al. 2009, p. 42). The highly successful Puente Project has been described by several researchers (Cooper 2002; Gandara 2002; Gandara and Moreno 2002; Grubb, Lara, and Valdez 2002). In the Puente programme, parents sign contracts agreeing to participate in the programme and provide support to their students, the teachers and the programme counsellors. Parents also participate in workshops to learn about the college admissions process and attend activities such as campus visits. Gandara (2002) found Puente students reported going on to four-year colleges at nearly double the rate of non-Puente students with the same grades and test scores. Grubb, Lara, and Valdez (2002) also found the programme to be successful and highlight the returning of participants as mentors as a key to success. Moreno (2002) reports that Puente students have higher levels of college preparation, college persistence, and college preparedness than non-Puente students. Cooper (2002) identifies parent involvement as one of the key "bridges" in the Puente programme. Finally, Grubb, Lara, and Valdez (2002) examine the role counsellors play in the Puente programme. It is their job not only to help the parents understand the college admissions process, but also "to change parental attitudes toward their children's leaving home for college, getting them to let go of their children – especially their daughters" (p. 560). Because of its successes, in 1998 the Puente programme won the Innovations in American Government Award.

Latino Parents-Learning About College (LaP-LAC) programme

Another successful programme is focused on Latino parents, The Latino Parents-Learning About College (LaP-LAC) programme is described by Villalba et al. (2014, 47) as "a psycho-educational group work experience wherein Latina/o parents with high school-aged children learn to understand the high school curriculum and become more familiar with post-secondary options (including financial aid), in an effort to empower themselves and their family." Unlike the other programmes described here, this programme has not been implemented formally in the field. Instead, it was developed/planned and a shorter, modified version was successfully trialled. The programme proposed suggests offering six closed weekly sessions

to Latino parents that both provide information about navigating the pathway to college as well as psychological support for dealing with frustration and anxiety regarding tasks required to provide support for their students and processing the information provided. The sessions focus on parents identifying their students' values, skills and aptitudes to help set goals and plans, how to get the most out of their students' high school experience, understand post-secondary options, how to prepare and help their students with the college application and admission process, financial aid options and how to plan for the transition into college life. As in other previous studies, it was found that sessions should be offered in the preferred language of participants and more "personal" and "informal" sessions were preferred.

Key factors contributing to successful programmes

The four programmes reflect what is described in the literature as key factors that contribute to successful engagement for parents from low SES backgrounds in informing and supporting their children's higher educational aspiration.

- Start early
- Present information in a variety of culturally appropriate ways, including multiple languages
- Adapt to be culturally relevant and address specialised/personal information needs (safety, loans, visa status)
- Facilitate social capital building
- Build critical capital to empower parents by encouraging them to learn about educational inequality and take action to rectify
- Provide explicit reasons for parents to engage, and specific opportunities for them to do so.

Framework for design and evaluation of parental engagement efforts

Using information collected through literature review and workshops with parent engagement experts, a matrix was developed to assist with the planning, modification and evaluation of parent engagement efforts. The matrix is based on the Design and Evaluation Matrix for Outreach (DEMO) (Gale et al. 2010). DEMO was originally used to assess the likely effectiveness of university outreach programmes using the developed matrix of programme strategies and characteristics. To increase the likely effectiveness an outreach programme would need to have a spread of characteristics across the four strategies (Gale et al. 2010). The matrix (Table 2) has been modified based on our research to facilitate reflection and evaluation/modification of parent engagement programmes aimed at low SES families. To use this matrix, a programme manager should rate each characteristic 1 (not addressed), 2 (present/developing) or 3 (present/well-addressed) for their programme. Like the original DEMO, programmes should strive to have breadth and depth, striving to rate highly in both characteristics and strategies. For any characteristics that did not receive a score of 3, an opportunity for reflection and modification is presented.

Starting with Gale et al.'s (2010) original characteristic definitions, using the key themes listed above from the literature review and particularly Emerson et al. (2012), the definitions

Table 2. Characteristics and strategies for successful parent engagement programmes: A design and evaluation tool for higher education outreach programmes.

		Strategies			
		Assembling Resources	Engaging Parents	Working Together	Building Confidence
Characteristics	People-rich		Recognition of difference	Collaboration	Communication and information
	Financial support		Enhanced academic curriculum	Cohort based	Familiarisation/ site experiences for parents
	Early, long-term and sustained		Research-driven interventions		Familiarisation/site experiences for parents and students

Modified from Gale et al. (2010).

below were developed. These definitions were validated through two workshops, which were intended to test the tool with potential users; that is people who are delivering higher education parental engagement projects. Workshops introduced the tool to 20 parent engagement experts from schools, education systems, not-for-profit organisations working in education, and the Universities of Tasmania and Wollongong. They were asked to apply the tool to one of their existing higher education programmes that included parents. Input received was therefore directly related to the workshop participants' experience of current and recent projects that aimed to engage parents in their children's higher education aspirations and future participation. Definitions were then modified to reflect input received. Workshop participants were surveyed 6 months following the workshops to ascertain whether and how the twenty parent engagement experts had used the tool.

Definition of terms in design and evaluation tool

Assembling resources

- *People-rich*: an approach that requires the development of ongoing relationships between parents, their children and those in a position to offer them ongoing guidance which relates to their situation and capacities (James 2002; James et al. 2008; Bok 2010; Gemici et al. 2014) and provides a clear reason to engage. Parent peer networks are included (Cooper 2002; Auerbach 2004; Agronick et al. 2009).
- *Financial support and/or incentives*: addressed to particular economic constraints of different cohorts of parents and their students, and which combine with other support strategies (Anderson et al. 1980; Anderson and Versoon 1983).
- *Early, long-term, sustained*: an approach to intervention that is designed to work with parents of students in earlier phases of schooling, ideally the primary years, and to continue as their students make the transition through the middle years into senior secondary schooling (Gale et al. 2010; Naylor, Baik, and James 2013).

Engaging Parents

- *Recognition of difference*: premised on the perspective that parents of disadvantaged students bring a range of knowledge and learning capacities to supporting their children in formal education that should be recognised and valued as assets. Some have high aspiration but lack relevant contextual experience (Auerbach 2004; Craven 2005;

R James and Devlin 2006; R James et al. 2008; Bok 2010) while others have limited relevant assets (Auerbach 2004; Gorinski and Fraser 2006). Ensure messages and approaches are culturally appropriate (Gilbert 1996; Auerbach 2004).

- *Enhanced academic curriculum*: develop parents' understanding of the schooling required to prepare students for further or higher education and developing a culture of academic socialisation (Emerson et al. 2012)
- *Research-driven interventions*: that engage the research capacities of the university to inform programme design, implementation and evaluation, and to support the production and dissemination of knowledge about effective intervention strategies.

Working together

- *Collaboration*: between stakeholders across different sectors and agencies, including industry and government, at all stages of programme development and enactment (Emerson et al. 2012).
- *Cohort-based*: an approach that engages with cohorts of parents within a school, workplace, community or region, to create "college-going" cultures (Auerbach 2004) as well as supporting individuals (Gilbert 1996; Agronick et al. 2009; Emerson et al. 2012).

Building confidence

- *Communication and information*: about university life and how to get there, using a variety of digital media technologies as well as more traditional means such as parent information sessions, brochures or school visits for parents and their children (Agronick et al. 2009).
- *Familiarisation/site experiences for parents*: through a schedule of university visits designed to both inspire and familiarise parents with higher education and what it means to be a student in that context (Gale et al. 2010).
- *Familiarisation/site experiences*: for parents and their children through a schedule of university visits designed to both inspire and familiarise parents and their children with higher education and what it means to be a student in that context (Gale et al. 2010).

Parent engagement expert use of design and evaluation tool

In order to determine the applicability and value of the evaluation tool, workshop participants surveyed 6 months following the workshops were asked if they had shared the tool with colleagues and if they had, or planned to modify their parental engagement programmes based on the use of the design and evaluation tool. If they had, or planned to make changes, they were then asked to describe the changes. Eight completed surveys were received (53%) and all but one participant reported that they shared their reflections with their colleagues or partners. Participants shared two main messages from the workshop: "The structured framework and how easily it was incorporated into our current offering" [participant 1] and "information about ways to promote parent engagement and the outcome of this" [participant 2]. Half of the respondents have implemented changes to their programmes and all but one participant indicated that they will continue to make changes in the future as a direct result of the learning about and utilising the design and evaluation tool. Responses indicated that the design and evaluation tool was practical and gave a "more

holistic and consistent approach” [participant 3] and “greatly improved and informed my design processes” [participant 4] to planning and evaluating parental engagement activities. Another participant said, “having a far greater understanding of the DEMO framework and how it can be effectively applied will most certainly inform future planning, design and delivery of programs” [participant 4]. The responses clearly indicate that the design and evaluation tool tried at the workshop could be operationalised by key stakeholders to improve the design, delivery and evaluation of parental engagement efforts in a meaningful way.

Conclusion

Parent engagement is a key factor in supporting children’s higher education aspirations. While this is widely recognised in the literature and there is a multitude of programmes that have been developed to engage parents, there was a lack of research on design of effective parent engagement programmes and their evaluation. This research developed and trialled a parent engagement design and evaluation tool for higher education outreach programmes to address that gap. The tool promotes parents’ social capital and educational cultural capital. It is likely that the tool will also have utility for parent engagement programmes in other education sectors.

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