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Principal Leadership for Parent Engagement in Disadvantaged Schools

What Qualities and Strategies Distinguish Effective Principals?

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Preface

School principals play a critical role in engaging parents and their communities to enhance student learning and wellbeing yet, the qualities and strategies of leadership to encourage and sustain engagement are little researched. This book is the culmination of the initial work of four researchers—we, the authors, Linda-Dianne (Linda) Willis, Jenny Povey, Julie Hodges, and Annemaree Carroll—brought together serendipitously one day in 2015 when we met at a symposium in Brisbane, Australia, which had been convened to hear Dr. Debbie Pushor from Canada speak about her life's work in parent engagement. The four of us had been variously researching aspects of parent engagement and student wellbeing and, although aware of one another's work and interests at The University of Queensland where we worked in various departments, had never before been together in the same room. Soon after the symposium, the Queensland (Australian state) government announced a major release of funding for educational researchers—the Education Horizon Research grant scheme—totalling one million dollars. These funds were available for researchers to apply in line with the government's then education priorities. Early career researchers were particularly encouraged to apply. This sequence of events saw the birth of the *Principal Leadership for Parent-School-Community Engagement in Disadvantaged Schools* (shortened in this book to *Principal Leadership for Parent Engagement*) project which was supported throughout 2016–2017 following a successful application to the Education Horizon Research grant scheme (see Department of Education, 2016). An extension of this project was made possible by a second round of funding through the same grant scheme which has seen the initial phase of the project supported until 2020 (see Department of Education, 2017). (The findings of phase two of the project will be reported on in future publications as they are beyond the scope of this book.)

In writing about phase one of the project in this our first book, *Principal Leadership for Parent Engagement in Disadvantaged Schools: What Qualities and Strategies Distinguish Effective Principals?*, we present design-based research used to select principals of four disadvantaged schools in Queensland who appeared to demonstrate effective parent engagement. Essentially, we sought to respond to the provocation, What gives some principals the *edge* on parent engagement? To achieve our aim, data were initially gathered from principal interviews and teacher, parent,

and student focus groups together with survey data collected at each school. These data were subsequently analysed using a framework drawn from Schwab's (1973) notion of *commonplaces* in the planning of curriculum which comprises four coordinated equally important spheres of influence—students, teachers, curriculum (subject matter), and milieus—where milieus consist of schools, classrooms, parents, communities, and an additional milieu arising from our research, digital technologies. Apart from drawing on Schwab's framework to develop a unique analytic tool, this book extends the literature on principal leadership for parent engagement by combining Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) chordal triad view of agency—which comprises iterational (past), projective (future), and practical-evaluative (present) dimensions—with Biesta and Tedder's (2007) notion of *agency as achievement* to examine the findings. This approach to theorising the findings has deepened our understanding about what and how the qualities and strategies of the principals involved enhanced parent engagement. We show how the principals' agentic orientations to agency shifted from the past to the future to influence their choices and actions for achieving agency in parent engagement in their present environments. Recognising the cultural aspects of their particular contexts and settings appeared to assist principals as parent engagement leaders while material and structural aspects such as available resources and government policies variously hindered the possible agency they could achieve. We close the book by drawing conclusions about principal leadership for parent engagement and exploring implications for practice and research for schools, public policymakers, employers, and higher education stakeholders.

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We also gratefully acknowledge the three international reviewers who read an earlier version of this manuscript. We are thankful for their generosity of time and expertise in providing feedback, suggestions and comments which encouraged us to improve our work to benefit future readers and researchers. Finally, we sincerely thank Don Willis for proofreading multiple drafts of this manuscript and for offering ideas and suggestions to improve its clarity and message.

Disclaimer This book is not a statement of Queensland Government policy. The findings in this book were based on interviews, focus groups, survey data, and school documents collected in good faith from the individuals and schools involved. No responsibility is accepted by the Queensland Department of Education or the researchers for any errors or omissions contained within this publication. No liability will be accepted for loss or damage arising from reliance upon any information contained herein.

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