# Transcript

**Podcast episode 7 – Dr Debbie Pushor champions family stories in schools**

Duration: 39:50 minutes

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**ANGELA SCAFFIDI:**

Welcome to the Bastow podcast – conversations with big thinkers about the big questions in education and leadership today. I’m [Angela Scaffidi](https://senateshj.com/our-people/angela-scaffidi/).

[Dr Debbie Pushor](https://education.usask.ca/profiles/pushor.php) is a Professor in the Department of Curriculum Studies at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada. Debbie has worked as a teacher, principal, consultant, author and researcher. She’s also, importantly, a parent and it is her experience as a parent of school-aged children that first inspired her work in her chosen field. She’s a passionate advocate for authentic parent engagement and for family-centric schools. Her research investigates parent knowledge, engagement, leadership and the position of parents in the school landscape.

So, Debbie, you were working in schools long before your first child started kindergarten so you had the educator experience of school before you had parent experience. How did your perspective change?

**DR DEBBIE PUSHOR:**

It’s so interesting for me because you’re right I’d been a teacher, principal consultant for 15 years before I took my oldest son, Cohen, to kindergarten. And I loved school and I’d had all these 15 years of wonderful experience in school and always looked forward to the first day. It was such an exciting, energy charged day. And I remember holding the hand of my little five-year-old. I had two twin babies in this double-wide stroller and we made our way to school and it was – Cohen was welcomed warmly into his kindergarten classroom and we were basically pushed out the door. There was no place for us.

And so, as a mother, it was that awakening moment for me, that schools are about children and teachers and they’re not about parents. And so, for me, that was the very first moment of awakening to the lack of place and voice of parents in our schools and on our school landscapes. As we move from that first day of school to meet-the-teacher night, to the first parent–teacher conference, it just continued to grow for me, this sense of marginalisation of parents in their children’s schooling. And that’s what prompted me to do this work.

**ANGELA**:

So why is the role of parents in education something that we should be focusing on?

**DEBBIE:**

There is extensive research in this field. Karen Mapp from Harvard Graduate School talks about having 50 years of research evidence that demonstrates really conclusively that when parents are engaged in their children’s teaching and learning, their growth and development, kids do better in school, they like school more, they stay in school longer. Like, those are the big things that we’re all working toward – and how do we ignore 50 year of research evidence?

The Global Family Network says that parent engagement is the strongest predictor of kids’ success, not just in school, but in life. And so how do we not make that central in the work that we do in schools? It’s so critical. So, I think, we have the evidence, we know what it is, we know what we need to do and now, it’s to enact it, to put in place in our practice so that we realise the possibility.

**ANGELA:**

Are there common assumptions that educators make about parents, how to engage parents, et cetera?

**DEBBIE:**

I think that we all feel like we know families, or we know parents. We carry ‘stories of family’, ‘stories of parents’. So maybe you’re a white, middle-class teacher working in a low socioeconomic area, you make judgements, make assumptions, you carry biases about the families, the way they live, who they are. And, I think, the really critical piece is for us to listen to ‘family stories’, so differentiating between a story *of* a family, where I think I know you, or the opportunity for me to hear you tell your family story to me, so I have that insider perspective of who you are, what you believe, why you do what you do.

And I think it’s only when we move from ‘stories of families’ to ‘family stories’ that we disrupt assumptions, beliefs, judgements. We don’t walk in their shoes and we don’t know. And so I think it takes those experiences of listening to, learning from, walking alongside, to really disrupt those assumptions. So moving from thinking we know to truly knowing our families, and that’s when, I think, we begin to do our really good work with them.

**ANGELA:**

What are some of the common assumptions that you think educators might make?

**DEBBIE:**

We hear often parents don’t care, or that parents aren’t engaged in their children’s learning. And again, I think, it comes from a sense of not understanding or not knowing. So if I have a family who’s working really hard to make a living – maybe that parent is working three jobs – they’re not coming to school not because they don’t care but because they just don’t have the time. Other times, it’s because we haven’t really welcomed them. They don’t feel welcome, they don’t feel safe, they don’t feel valued on our school landscapes and so they’re choosing to stay away.

So we make a judgement about them rather than really understanding what the context is. Again, that’s why I think we need to move to that place of family stories.

**ANGELA:**

And it’s even understanding when parents don’t feel welcome or when they might bring their own experiences of school to their current experience so it’s about exploring and understanding, isn’t it?

**DEBBIE:**

And I think it’s just moving from a place of standing in judgement to a place of being a learner, and just asking, ‘Tell me your story. Help me understand who you are.’

And that shifts so many things. The Parent Teacher Home Visits program in the United States is really quite a large program and they’ve been promoting home visits across the country. And research on that program’s been done by Dr Steven Sheldon from Johns Hopkins University. And the research is showing how much relationships with families disrupt bias, disrupt judgement and assumption. And so the only way that we can really be in relationship is by spending time together.

**ANGELA:**

So you’ve often spoken about parent knowledge and you’ve written widely about parent knowledge. Can you explain what you mean by that.

**DEBBIE:**

There’s a large body of literature in the field on teacher knowledge. It’s been an area that’s been really well researched. If you googled it, you’d get thousands of hits. And when I googled ‘parent knowledge’, right, really very few hits and mainly, anything that came up was related to parents’ knowledge of special needs kids and that kind of thing. And so it’s interesting, to me, that we have this huge attention to teacher knowledge but then we act as if parents aren’t holders of knowledge of children and of teaching and learning.

So I wanted to pursue that. I was starting to use the term ‘parent knowledge’ and people were saying to me, “Well, what is that?” So I did a study. It was a narrative enquiry alongside three families and I spent time with them for a couple of years, really looking at the questions: what is parent knowledge? How is it held and used? And as I spent time with each of them, just really trying to foreground, to pull forward what they knew about their children and how they knew it, how they used that knowledge. And, I guess, what comes out really strongly is the sense of experiential knowing, that relational knowing that parents have of a child that no other person in the world can have.

Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez, in the United States, did some really important foundational work on what’s called ‘funds of knowledge’. And their work was done to kind of demonstrate that often, again, teachers, white middle-class teachers working with diverse communities saw them as being unknowing. So the idea of their work was to understand the cultural knowledge, the household knowledge, the family knowledge that existed – because once they saw it, they saw the families no longer as being deficit but as having a different form of knowing.

So I took that work on funds of knowledge and tried to push that further – understanding parent knowledge as a fund of knowledge. So only a parent can hold parent knowledge, and that’s knowledge that arises out of experience, out of the context in which they’re working, their relationship with their children. So some of the characteristics, I think, of parent knowledge, it’s relational knowledge. The only way I have parent knowledge is because I have a baby. And whether that’s a baby I gave birth to, a baby I adopted, a baby I’m fostering – it doesn’t matter where or how that baby came into my life, I develop that knowledge in relationship.

It’s intimate knowledge. And, again, because of the context of a family, it’s often knowledge that’s bodied and embodied. So with our children at home, we rock them, we hold them, we cuddle them, we bathe them. We’re in this really sensory sort of relationship and because of both the bodied nature of that and the intimacy of that, we develop a knowledge of kids that only, as I said earlier, only a parent can hold.

When I contrast that to teacher knowledge, for example, teachers first learn about kids in university classrooms with no kids present, by reading articles, by reading books, by listening to a lecture by a professor. They develop knowledge of kids and teaching and learning out of relationship. So you see the difference in those two things.

Teachers are told not to touch kids, not to be in those kind of close contacts with children so, again, they know them differently. Parents have a history. They’ve been with their kids for years in multiple contexts. And so, as a mother, there’ll be times when I see a look cross my child’s face and I know he’s anxious or uncomfortable. You, seeing that same look, might not know that.

And so how do we bring what we know as parents and set it alongside teacher knowledge? We’re not trying to replace it. We want the best educated, most skilled teachers in our classrooms as possible. But how, with my knowledge alongside their own, could they do a better job of educating my son: more particular, more attentive to who he is and how he’s learning, maybe more attentive to his identity, to his culture, to his context. And that’s that rich piece. We have all of this untapped knowledge, untapped resources surrounding a teacher, surrounding a classroom, and we’re not making use of it. So how do we begin to pull those ways of knowing in?

**ANGELA:**

So it’s about balancing. Is it about balancing the teacher knowledge and the parent knowledge and bringing them together?

**DEBBIE:**

That’s exactly it. So I often talk about a pedagogy of ‘walking alongside’. So how do we take what we know, surround it with other knowledge, enrich it with other knowledge and use that in the work that we do?

**ANGELA:**

So in your work you differentiate between parent involvement and parent engagement. How are those things different?

**DEBBIE:**

They’re hugely different conceptualisations to me. If we look at ‘involvement’, it tends to be things like asking parents to be an aid, to be an organiser of an event or something at school, to be a fundraiser, to be a spectator, an audience member at an event their children are performing in. All of those things reflect the school’s agenda, the teacher’s agenda. ‘We’ve decided what we need done but we need you to help. So, I’m going to take my children on a field trip but could I have three parents to help me so we can put them in smaller groups and kind of shepherd them through this experience together?’ So it maintains the hierarchy in the school, with the teachers, the educators being the knowers, being the deciders, the decision-makers, the planners – still in charge of everything that’s happening and all they need are warm bodies to help them realise that agenda.

When we move to ‘engagement’, we’re talking about what I mentioned earlier, that use of parent knowledge alongside teacher knowledge, threading those two together. So whereas anybody can be involved, only a parent can be engaged by sharing their parent knowledge. So two of the variables that are different with engagement are the fact that it’s always about teaching and learning, and it’s always using parent knowledge.

I remember one time, my oldest son, Cohen, came home. He was in high school. They were just starting a new semester, a new term, and his English class had gotten the course outline. And you have to remember our context, where I work in a university and we have grad students in our home quite a lot. The teacher presented the reading list and Cohen said, “That’s a pretty white, Eurocentric reading list, don’t you think?” Just what every teacher wants to hear!

But the teacher stood quietly, according to my son, for a minute and said, “Yeah. I guess it is.” And then just moved on. Wouldn’t that have been a beautiful moment for the teacher to pick up the phone, to write an email and say to me, “OK, so tell me about your son. Where would these concepts come from? What is he thinking about? What do you talk about in your home? What books has he read already? What books is he interested in reading?” What a perfect opportunity for me to share our context, who we are, what we value – all of those things – and thread that together. But instead, he just sort of treated my son as a bit of a smart alec, probably, and ignored it – never called me.

Right? How could we have enriched that English class experience for my son had, had I been asked to talk a little bit about who we are as a family and what we read and what we believe in, and so on. And how easy would it be to add books to that reading list, that maybe challenged Cohen, that reflected what he had to say and what he wanted to read, enriched his interest in that class and his feeling of voice. That’s a possibility that we missed in that moment.

**ANGELA:**

So, Debbie, what are some of the things that are getting in the way of true parent engagement, as you describe it?

**DEBBIE:**

I think there’s actually a lot of things that are getting in the way. One is teachers don’t know how to engage parents. We’ve never talked about in teacher education courses. We’ve never prepared them for this work. Really hard for them to do what they don’t know, to do what they don’t understand. And so, I think, that’s a really critical piece, is how do we, right from the very beginning, prepare our teachers to work with parents?

And it’s interesting for me because when I work with teachers, they’re afraid of parents, when I work with parents, they’re afraid of teachers. So what is it that’s created this fear, or this sense of distrust among us.

And I think, again, teacher education will help with that and I think, again, just coming together. Time and contact build trust and relationships. So we need to figure out time and that comes up all the time as well: ‘I have a heavy curriculum, I have exams that we have to be prepared for. My schedule is full. My day is full. Where am I going to get the time to engage parents?’

And so I’ll say to people, ‘Imagine saying, gosh, my schedule is so full. There’s so much I need to do. I’m not going to teach math. There just isn’t time.’ That would be completely unacceptable to everyone. But it’s ok, it’s acceptable to say, I don’t have time to work with parents, even though we have this 50 years of research evidence that say it’s critical. So time is certainly something we have to figure out. How do we give teachers the knowledge and then create in the schedule opportunities for them to have the time to engage.

And then, I think, the last piece is there’s lots that’s taken for granted about schools. We’ve always had a meet-the-teacher night, we’ve always done parent–teacher conferences, those sausage sizzles, et cetera, et cetera. And so we keep doing what we’ve always done. It’s comfortable. We know how, and we can just keep doing those same kinds of things. And so what it interrupts our thinking? What challenges us to think in new ways?

So I think, really, again, understanding that difference between involvement and engagement. I guess, why that’s so important is because involvement does not impact our kids’ outcomes in any way. So when we’re involving our parents, maybe it makes the school a better place, it gives us the opportunity to do things we couldn’t do otherwise. But unless we get to the place of engagement, there’s no significant impact on how well our kids do, academically, behaviourally, socially, et cetera, so it becomes a really critical line to cross in order to enhance our school system.

**ANGELA:**

So I think what you are saying is this isn’t work that’s optional, a nice to have. This is mission-critical for a school and a school system. Is that right?

**DEBBIE:**

And I think the state of Victoria knows that. There are four state-wide priorities and one of them is community engagement. I think the critical work, now it’s been identified that it’s important, now we have to show people what does it look like and how to do it. And again, shifting an attitude in order for them to see the importance of it.

**ANGELA:**

What are some of the ways in which we can better engage with who we describe as ‘disengaged parents’? What are ways in which we can be more involved with them?

**DEBBIE:**

First of all, we have to understand why they’re disengaged and, I think, the only way to do that is to go to them. Lots of people don’t like my answer on that but that’s it. So if we have families not connecting with the school, not responding to our emails or our invitations, then I think the responsibility is on us to reach out to them. We know many folks have had less than positive school experiences and they’re hesitant to come to us. We know that some of our newcomer families don’t understand our school system. And so what can we do to reach out? We’ve been doing a lot of work with home visits and I know that is not happening in Australia but I’m going to push that one.

I think it’s that sense of creating a relationship in a safe place, telling a family ‘You’re so important to me that I’d come to you, to see you, to meet you, to say: tell me about your family, tell me about your child, tell me about your hopes and dreams, tell me what you do when he or she isn’t in school. Tell me your expectations of me. Right? To go and have those conversations and build that relationship early. We can do it through phone calls and other things as well but, I think, they’re not going to come if they don’t trust us so what are we going to do to build that trust?

It’s important that we look inward at ourselves rather than looking outward at the family. I think we often, again, coming back to those assumptions and beliefs – this family doesn’t care, this family isn’t engaged. And yet, I think, instead, if we look at what are we doing that’s causing them to feel disinvited or what obstacles might be in the way of them coming, then we can take charge. We can put the onus of responsibility on ourselves. The only people we can change are ourselves, so how do we take responsibility for that? And then, I think, we can see lots of possibilities for things we can do.

**ANGELA:**

So what does a family-centric school look like? There might be examples from your work of actual schools. What do they look like when they’re really working well?

**DEBBIE:**

I think a family-centric school has family embedded in everything. So one school that I’ve been working with in some research I’ve been doing in Canada, we’ve been developing a prototype for systematic parent engagement. And from many parent forums, from canvassing in the community, from doing surveys with parents, we’ve created a bit of a prototype model and we have a Pillar One, a Pillar Two and a Pillar Three, in that Pillar One is looking at parent engagement on the school landscape. What are the many ways we can bring parents into the school in authentic and meaningful ways?

So an example of that might be we have a parent mentor program where parents come to the school. They volunteer. They come for about a week. We do some initial PD with them. We talk to them about their goals, why they want to be a parent mentor, what are they going to get out of it, so that we ensure there’s reciprocity in the relationship. They spend, then, two hours a day in the classroom, four days a week. And on that fifth day, we come back together, debrief their experiences, talk about what they’re learning, talk about their growth toward their goals, what they want to know more about, and so on. So really trying to have them play a meaningful role in the school.

Another example of that Pillar One might be working to turn the school library into a family library – having baby and toddler books, having youth and adult books as well as the books for the kids who are enrolled, so that anybody can access the library any time. Everyone having a family library card. That would be another example.

In Pillar Two, we’re looking at parent engagement off the school landscape, or in out-of-school times and places. When we look at the hours kids are in school, it only adds up to about 20 per cent of a year so if we only are working to have parent engagement in that 20 per cent, think about the opportunities we’re losing. So we’re looking at ways to enhance parents’ engagement in their children’s teaching and learning out of school. So we’ve been running a family library program at night or on a Sunday.

We’ve been doing things like, with diverse communities, something we’ve called ‘Cooking For Cohesion’ – which is actually an idea that I learnt here at Emmaus College in Rockhampton when I was visiting Queensland – having a family cook a meal, so let’s say all our Syrian families. And they cook for us, they talk about the foods they eat, the ways they cook them, the spices, and we touch them and taste them and smell them. And once the meal’s cooked, we sit together and they talk to us about their journey, what brought them to Canada, what the challenges have been, what the excitement has been, what they miss about their home country, how they’re adjusting and so on. And the intent is for all the other cultures, including our majority Canadian culture, to learn from them so that we can find a place for them in the circle of community. We’ve been doing those kinds of things in out-of-school times and places.

The third pillar, then, is looking at parents’ engagement in their own learning and development, because the research really shows us the more literate the parent, the better the child does in school or the more stable the home, in terms of employment, the better the child does in school. So we’re working to enhance kids’ outcomes not just through the children but also through the families. So we have an English language class for adults so they can come to school, there’s some of their children going to the classes who are school-aged. We have childminding for the babies and toddlers. And the parents can learn English right with us at the school during the school day.

We created a couple of positions, one called a ‘parent connector’ and one called a ‘parent pathfinder’. So the parent connector is another parent in the school who just reaches out, makes contact and visits with the families, finds out who they are, how many kids they have, learns their context so that she can bring that information to the school. The parent pathfinder then finds out what are the kinds of things parents need to grow and develop themselves. So, our parent connector might find out, ‘Oh, this dad wants to get his long-distance truck driving licence.’ So then she takes that to the parent pathfinder, the parent pathfinder says, “OK. Here’s the language level you need, here’s the training you need.” And she supports that other piece.

So, working in those three ways – on the landscape, off the landscape, and with parent growth and development – to me, that’s a family-centric school. Parents educate their kids from birth to forever. But schools work in this very small gap and for 20 per cent of the year. What if we could take that school building, extend the possibility to as much as 100 per cent, as close as we could get and for everybody in the family, offer some kind of learning opportunity, not just this one group that’s school-aged. That, to me, is a family-centric school.

**ANGELA:**

What would the school leaders’ role be in improving parent engagement and particularly elevating it so it’s a priority for the school?

**DEBBIE:**

I mean, it’s wonderful that it’s named here in Victoria, because it gives the leader the licence to go ahead and do this work and then, what does that mean? When I think about parent engagement, I talk about it as a philosophy and a pedagogy. It isn’t an event and it isn’t a practice, it isn’t a strategy. All of those things make it an add-on and, again, we’re going to have people say, ‘Well, we don’t have time for that.’ So, what we’re really working to do is have them understand parent engagement in such a way as it’s integral to everything, it’s embedded and threaded in every single thing. So, if we believe that, we see parent engagement as a belief system, as a philosophy. We believe that we will do a better job with kids and schooling if we do it with families than if we do it apart.

And then, that shapes our pedagogy. That shapes everything we do, in terms of how we structure our schools, who has a voice in decisions, who’s included in planning, who’s included in policy making, who’s included in the school improvement plan and having a real voice in how that unfolds.

And right now, we have a school-centric world view: ‘Drop your child, here are the walls of the school. It’s the educators and the students who are inside. Please come back and get them at the end of the day.’ And so switching to that family-centric world view that we talked about – it’s really going to take, I think, first of all, the school leader to understand that world view and then, that school leader’s ability to develop, to instil, to have that world view unfold in all of the ways that they work with their teachers and other staff.

**ANGELA:**

Could there ever be a case of too much parent engagement, given your thinking and your work and what you’ve seen?

**DEBBIE:**

Well, if we go back to what Karen Mapp’s research says, that parent engagement causes kids to like school more, stay in school longer and do better, then can there be too much of that? So I think the difference is what people call a ‘helicopter parent’ or those kinds of things, where they say a parent is hovering, is interfering, is asking too many questions and then, I think, I would go back to the idea of saying, ‘Look inward first. Why would a parent feel a need to hover? Why would a parent feel a need to interfere?’ And I would say I think it’s because their needs aren’t being met. And so if we can figure out what their needs are and how to meet those needs, I don’t think they’ll be over-engaged, right, because they’ll trust us. But there’s obviously something out of place right now that is causing them to feel that they have to step in, in that significant a way, in order to take care of their kids.

**ANGELA:**

So, if you were a new leader in a school or a network today, where would you start with this important work, with this practice?

**DEBBIE:**

I think we need a lot of teacher development, a lot of professional development and it comes back to what I said earlier – we can’t do what we don’t know and we can’t support what we don’t believe in or what we don’t understand.
And so, I think, it’s really ensuring that teachers know the difference between involvement and engagement, understand it deeply – and then see strategies and possibilities for enacting it in their practice. So it’s that educational role that I think is so critical to all of this work.

**ANGELA:**

So, this is obviously very important work. Who has inspired your thinking over the years?

**DEBBIE:**

Well, I would start by saying my own children. You know, they prompted this journey. That five-year-old is now coming 29! So, this is how long that journey has been and we’ve had many experiences as they’ve moved from kinder through the secondary school system. So, they’ve constantly been a motivator for me.

I’ve had the privilege of working with many undergraduate and graduate students and they amaze me always. When they have the opportunity to engage with this subject area and they see possibilities. So many of the examples that I share are ones that they generated, not ones I did. I think, ‘Wow, Brett. That was brilliant, what you’ve done with that parent–teen book club’ or ‘…those cultural math bins, Kirsten’. So, I mean, I think I learn a lot from the very people I have the privilege of walking with every day.

In terms of the field, I really love Karen Mapp’s work. Philosophically, I think it has so much to offer. She works a lot with Anne Henderson. They’ve put out some really good, really helpful work, both for teachers and leaders. Steven Constantino is a large name in the United States as well, talking about parent efficacy and I think that that concept is a really important one for us to look at.

I mean, there’s list of people I think that I could say I learned from and learn from every day. So it’s great. And each time I come here, I steal a new idea and take it home. So, we’re doing Cooking for Cohesion and Learning Walks and Community Conversations that I gained when I visited here, so I think it’s a synergistic field where we all pick up on ideas from others and then make them contextual for ourselves.

**ANGELA:**

Because you’re doing the very thing you’re talking about: you’re listening, you’re hearing stories, you’re learning all the time.

**DEBBIE:**

I truly think there’s so much to gain from the stories. They speak to our intellect but they speak to our hearts as well and I think this is work you have to passionately believe in with your heart.

**ANGELA:**

So one of the questions that sometimes comes up is this idea about parent engagement at the primary level and then, at the secondary level, and whether or not it looks different.

**DEBBIE:**

I think we carry a lot of myths about our adolescent kids and we often hear people say teenagers don’t want their parents engaged and we accept that as a reality. And I know when my boys were in high school, the three of them were engaged in a lot of different sports and they always said to me, ‘Mum, are you going to be at my game?’ I don’t think they want me to be absent. And so, I think we’ve created a culture where we’ve told kids they shouldn’t need their parents or want them. And I think, we’ve created a culture where teachers have come to believe this is the time for kids to be responsible, they need to step away from their parents and take more ownership for themselves. And when I think about that, I think as kids move into adolescence, the risks increase in their lives. That’s the time when they may be exposed to drugs or alcohol, to sexual activity, to all kinds of forces and I’ll tell you, as a mum, that’s not the time I want to step away. That’s the time I want to stay close. And so how does that look?

I mentioned Brett a minute ago, who’s one of the teachers who’s doing these amazing parent-teen book clubs. He decided, as parent engagement he could do a parent–teen book club instead. And he introduced it to his class and to their parents. He gave them three opportunities during the term of five months to do the parent–teen book club voluntarily. They could or they didn’t have to. He had a class, at that time, a smaller class of about 17 kids. In the first round, seven kids chose to do the parent–teen book club. They chose to do it with their parent rather than apart from. By the second round, it was always up to over 70 per cent and as kids were seeing the fun the parents and kids were having and the kinds of things that they were doing, that number just kept going up. Right?

So I think it’s about thinking about how we do it. So, in the parent–teen book club, the parent and the teen were reading the book together at home. They were doing really neat check-ins and things at home. The parent wasn’t sitting in the classroom with them.

Another high school teacher that I know did a daily email to all the parents that he worked with. So, for each class he taught, sent a daily email to them. In his daily email, he’d say, ‘This is the concept we talked about in class today. Here’s something interesting that came up in our conversation. Here’s something you could chat about tonight with your son or daughter at home.’

And so he had these families so engaged because they knew the daily email was coming. Where we live, we live on treaty land. So we’ve signed treaties with our First Nations people. And so we have a statement in Saskatchewan that says we’re all treaty people. So an example of an email was saying to the parents that day, for that class: ‘Today we’re talking about the statement ‘we’re all treaty people’. It was really interesting because some students thought they were treaty people and others said, ‘Well, I’m not a treaty person’. Talk with your sons or daughters tonight. What did he or she think and why.’ And so huge engagement going on over the dinner table, as they drive to sports or dance, or whatever. Again, not having to come into the school but highly engaged.

I think there’s a lot of things to unpack in relation to how we work with our secondary kids and parents but I think the possibilities are huge.

**ANGELA:**

So it’s about addressing the myths, really, isn’t it, to say the parents don’t want to be engaged and the young people don’t want to be engaged and the both of those things may well be very wrong.

**DEBBIE:**

Yeah. I think we really need to challenge them. With a school I’m working with, a secondary school; highly indigenous population, very low socioeconomic, lots of challenges in that community. The principal, the vice principal and I did focus groups with the grade 9s, 10s, 11s and 12s and asked them ‘Do you want your parents to be engaged?’ And even in those complex circumstances, they all said yes. And it just looked different for different things but they all wanted their parents to be there, to be cheering them on, to know what they were doing, to be part of that successful pathway. And so I think, again, myths to bust in that one.

**ANGELA:**

So you’ve shared some of the examples, some of the things that worked well in Australia that you’re thinking about but are there other creative ideas that you’ve heard or seen or read about or experienced that would help us in the parent engagement space?

**DEBBIE:**

What the research is showing us is that the things we typically do that are large scale, whole-school, potlucks, celebrations are giving us low impact–so we’re putting a lot of time and energy in things that don’t get us anywhere. So, I think what we want to give up some of those and take on these new ideas. And I know, when I work here in Australia, people say, ‘Don’t talk about home visits! We don’t do home visits.’ But I’m always going to talk about home visits because it’s a high-impact activity and there’s such good research on what could come of that. So I would say pursue that. Explore it. There’s lots of possibility there.

I think we have to stop keeping parents on the fringes and get them engaged right in the core work, right in the core curriculum. I mentioned Kirsten and she does these cultural math bins with her Grade ones. She uses this math idea, this big idea ‘math lives everywhere’. So, she says to her Grade ones, “Where does math live in your home? Where does math live in your culture?” And then she asks them to go home and look for math, and then she asks the parents to do that same thing – so she talks to the parents about it. And the kids bring all these items in: my patterned shirt from Nigeria, my game that we play at home, this recipe book that has math in it, et cetera. They bring all of these things to school and then the children sort them into bins: these are things about pattern, these are things about number. And then, they use those items to pursue those learning outcomes around pattern, around number, and so on. So the lives of the kids become the curriculum.

There’s just so many opportunities – the books you choose, the focus of your unit on celebrations, so many things that can all come from our families. And then, as teachers, we can be responsible for the outcomes, the instructional strategies, the assessment – but the actual fabric of the lives become the rich part of our curriculum.

**ANGELA:**

Debbie, it’s been a real pleasure speaking to you today. Thank you very much for your time.

**DEBBIE:**

Thank you so much for inviting me. It’s always wonderful to have another opportunity to speak about parent engagement.

**ANGELA:**

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