## Guidelines for Implementing the Engaging Parents in Career Conversations (EPiCC) Framework with Families from Low Socio-Economic Status (Low SES) Communities

These Guidelines are provided as a guide to support teachers, trainers and careers practitioners working with families from low socio-economic status (low SES) communities. It is expected that the EPiCC Framework will be customised/contextualised to meet the needs of participants and be highly interactive.

When using the EPiCC Framework with families or carers of students from low SES communities, the role of the family on career choices and decision making needs to be understood and acknowledged.

Low SES is often seen in terms of challenges such as poverty, unemployment, or lack of opportunities. These are very valid indicators but it is important not to turn these into self-fulfilling prophecies of failure. People can be more than their backgrounds and circumstances. An alternative way to look at students from low SES families is to see them as people with possibilities that may be potentially invisible because of a seeming lack of resources. It is important then not just to focus on their seeming lack of resources but also to make their potential visible to teachers, families, communities, and ultimately to students themselves.

Disengagement may not just be a challenge for students and families. Disengagement has two sides; it takes at least two to be engaged: students, families, and communities on the one side; teachers and world of education and work on the other. Disengagement may be evident not only in parents and students but also in teachers and the school system. It is important to be aware of the issues that may make it difficult for either of these two sides to engage with the other meaningfully.

Both sides must be engaged. If there is a lack of engagement, the question is who will take the first steps to engagement. Ideally both sides will. Teachers must be sensitive to attempts by students, parents, or community to engage because they may not come in the form one expects. If students, parents, or community do not appear to be engaged, it is important that teachers take the initiative to find a way to engage with them. Teachers may need to cultivate **adaptive capacity** in order to be effective at adapting the EPiCC Framework to the diversity of situations they may face.

The EPiCC Framework is a tool and a tool is often only as effective as the person who wields it. In particular because of the wide diversity of issues involved in parent engagement in different contexts, a one-size-fits-all approach is not an option.

Four key concepts in particular are helpful when cultivating adaptive capacity:

* **Active learning**

Active lifelong learning is essential in today’s changing world, no more so than in the world of education.In order to be effective in facilitating parent engagement, teachers may need to expand their understanding of the teacher/school role and engage in appropriate professional development. Parental engagement in no mere distraction for the teacher; working with parents as key allies in students’ education is a core part of teaching. Such parental engagement must be systemic, integrated, and sustained throughout the education system.

* **Reflective practice**

Reflective practice is an essential aspect of personal and professional growth. When disconnection and disengagement is present, it is easy just to view this as a student or family issue. But teachers also need to examine their own assumptions and conventions, attitudes and practices and make adjustments to them when necessary. This takes honest mindful reflection that seeks to be aware of how practice is actually impacting those they are working with. Such reflective practice models meaningful self-reflection for students and families.

* **Flexible approach**

The very fact that the EPiCC Framework is being developed suggests that efforts to encourage greater parent engagement have not always been as effective as desired.

Some parents may be very engaged while others are not engaged at all. If parent engagement is to be improved, than flexible approaches will need to be developed, so that both teachers and parents will have relevant tools and processes. This may require being flexible enough to find alternative forms of engagement that work for parents and their life situations.

* **Creative backswing**

*The Possible's slow fuse is lit by the Imagination* (Emily Dickinson)

Creative backswing is essential to adaptive capacity. It is essential to find where students and families are engaged in life and build from there by creatively interacting with them and equipping them for even greater engagement.

An effective starting point is to cultivate a collaborative relationship that is supported by mutual understanding and respect. This involves getting to know parents, their hopes, and their fears. Each family has a story which must be heard. If possible, take the time to hear stories of the parents’ journeys and their vision for their children’s journeys. Such a collaborative relationship also implies that the teacher will be open to developing with parents more open-ended engagement options that parents can relate to.

As you listen to parents’ stories, you may hear many different expressions of parent engagement such as, engaged or not engaged; cooperative or “tiger Mums”; no idea or already decided; praise junkies or abusive; active or passive; responsible or don’t care; hopeful or hopeless.

Parental engagement is about hope; hope that enables parents to believe that they can make a difference in the lives of their children. But hope may be a difficult concept for people who have experienced prolonged helplessness and hopelessness. As you hear the stories of students and families, listen especially for any signs of hopelessness and helplessness that they may be experiencing because of their circumstances. There may be many interrelated reasons for such hopelessness that can help us understand why families from low SES communities are not engaged in the world of education and career.

Some students and families don’t engage well with mainstream education and work simply because they come from a very different world. Sensitive exploration is required to understand each student individually rather than just label him/her. Students from low SES backgrounds may vary greatly because each has his/her unique combinations of life and family circumstances, some negative, others positive.

Multiple perspectives are a key concept in creativity, and diversity certainly necessitates looking from multiple perspectives. Different perspectives can give a more holistic picture of what is happening and of possible creative approaches.

Such diversity is a reflection of the very different contexts any family may face. The following are some of the issues to explore when seeking to understand the diversity of students and parents:

* **Culture/socio-economic**

Low socio-economic status may be the result of a number of interrelated factors; some may be very evident; others less so.

Families with low socio-economic status may also be members of one or more of the other three groups highlighted in the EPiCC Framework (Koorie, EAL, families with disability issues). Therefore, it would be important to read and integrate the practical guidelines that have been set forth for adapting EPiCC to these three other groups.

Families may be struggling with generational issues such as generational unemployment or welfare.

Families may have been going through difficult times because of health issues which have prevented the income earners in the family from working or whose expenses have drained family resources.

Families may be facing broader issues beyond their control, such as an economically depressed area because of isolation and/or a weak local job market.

Families may be facing social inequalities such as prejudice, poverty, lack of opportunity and resources, or lack of role models.

* **Past experiences**

Don’t make assumptions about the causes of family struggles or their responses to them. Until you understand the journey that has brought people to where they are, it is difficult to fully understand their responses. Parents’ responses to their own life journeys may help or hinder engagement. For example some may feel threatened by the potential growth of their child and resist it. Others may dream of their children finding different paths than they have followed, dream of their having more than they were ever able to have.

* **Assumptions and conventions**

It is also important to look beyond people’s words and actions to the assumptions and conventions that frame them. This is another aspect of hearing people’s stories.

This is especially challenging since at times both parents and teachers may not be aware of their own assumptions and conventions.

Unrecognised assumptions and conventions cannot be challenged. But once they are brought to light, their validity and their impact can be examined and appropriate adjustments made.

* **Understanding of the system**

Sometimes when people come from diverse backgrounds, they may just not understand the system or how it works. If people have no positive experience with the system, or if the system expresses itself in an inappropriate manner, parents may avoid engagement just to avoid a high level of discomfort.

* **Language**

Language may be a major barrier to engagement. Remember that much of the language used within the world of education and work is very technical and may be unknown to some. Taking the time to get to know parents better will assist teachers to find appropriate language to make engagement accessible to them.

* **Time and resources**

As you consider opportunities for parental engagement, consider the time and resources which may be involved. Would the families you are working with have the time or resources? If these are unrealistic expectations, what alternatives may be found that will work for everyone involved?

* **Level of personal confidence**

Some parents may not engage simply because they do not feel the personal confidence in their ability to help. As you get to know parents, you will need to emphasise that they can make a positive contribution to their child’s education and life. You may then need to help them discover and value the unique contributions they can make. Keep a list of the diverse ways parents can engage. There may be things parents may not be able to do but what can they do.

As noted earlier, disengagement may result from issues not only with parents but also with teachers and the system. As you learn to be sensitive to such issues, remember also to be sensitive to how such issues influence consciously or unconsciously your own life and teaching practice. How is your experience different from those of parents you work with? How might your different life journey impact how you approach parent engagement?

As you better understand your students, their families, and yourself, you will be better able both to equip them and yourself for more effective engagement.

When trying to cultivate a hope-filled engagement environment with people from diverse backgrounds, it can be immensely practical and effective to develop a simple screen through which to pass activities or resources. Such a practice would be helpful when looking at the various resources in the EPiCC Framework and deciding how they may need to be adapted to be relevant to families from low SES communities.

One suggestion for such a screen is to have one axis list of what you would like people to learn or understand or accept, such as knowledge, tools, skills, and hope. The other axis would include all of the stakeholders involved in the student’s life.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Student | Parent | School | Teacher | Other |
| Knowledge |  |  |  |  |  |
| Tools |  |  |  |  |  |
| Skills |  |  |  |  |  |
| Hope |  |  |  |  |  |

For each piece of information, handout, activity, presentation, etc, ask some basic questions, such as the following:

* Who are all the stakeholders?
* What am I trying to accomplish with respect to each group?
* How might each of the stakeholders understand this knowledge? What tools do they have to help them? What tools would they need to acquire? What skills are present or need to be developed? What is their level of hope? If it is low, how may it be lifted?
* How are their perspectives different?

Knowing the types of challenges that families from low SES backgrounds face, you would also need to ask specific questions, such as:

* How accessible is it to people from low SES backgrounds?
* Which of the challenges faced by low SES families may need to be taken into consideration when evaluating and adapting resources or activities?
* What are the potential points of engagement between their world and the world of education and employment?
* How might you make it more accessible? What might need to be adapted to make this more accessible to those involved? For example, does language need to be revised for different people? Are the activities suggested something that is possible for everyone to do? What additional resources may be needed?

Some further criteria that could be applied are:

* Is this activity short and simple and understandable in the everyday language of the people I’m working with?
* Does this engage people at a point at which they can be engaged?
* Am I encouraging discovery in a way that encourages curiosity and ongoing engagement?
* Does this cultivate hope? Will people walk away from this with a greater sense of hope or of hopelessness? How would I evaluate this?

## Additional Resources

The following are suggested areas for personal development. Each can contribute to teacher effectiveness in parent engagement. An example or two has been given for each area; research (even a simple Google search) into each of these areas will produce many more examples. Many of these do not directly refer to parental engagement but they do present ideas that can be applied to parental engagement.

**Parental Engagement**

* Parental Engagement Research

<http://www.partners4learning.edu.au/_uploads/_ckpg/files/Attachment%207_Parental%20Engagement%20research_FINAL.pdf>

* “Telling their stories” School case studies in parental engagement

[http://www.partners4learning.edu.au/\_uploads/\_ckpg/files/Attachment 3\_Telling their Stories - Case Studies Full Version\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.partners4learning.edu.au/_uploads/_ckpg/files/Attachment%203_Telling%20their%20Stories%20-%20Case%20Studies%20Full%20Version_FINAL.pdf)

* Parental engagement in schooling

<http://smarterschools.gov.au/parental-engagement-schooling>

**Adaptive Capacity**

* “Designing Lessons for Diverse Learners” by Natalie Olinghouse

<http://education.msu.edu/te/elementary/pdf/Designing-Lessons-for-Diverse-Learners.pdf>

* “Develop Your Capacity As An Adaptive Leader” by Beatrice Benne

<http://soma-integral.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Adapt-Lead-Engagement-Brochure.pdf>

* “Nine Types of Curriculum Adaptations” by Diana Browning Wright

<http://www.snipsf.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/NineTypes.pdf>

**Hope-Filled Engagement**

* Poehnell, G. & Amundson, N. E. (2011). *Hope-filled engagement: creating new possibilities in life/career counselling*. Richmond, BC: Ergon Communications.
* [Seligman](http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=ntt_athr_dp_sr_1?_encoding=UTF8&field-author=Martin%20E.%20Seligman&search-alias=books&sort=relevancerank), M. E. (2011). *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life*. New York: Vintage.
* Gruwell, E. and the Freedom Writers (1999). *The Freedom Writers diary: how a teacher and 150 teens used writing to change themselves and the world around them*. New York: Random House.

**DEECD Career Resources for Young People from Low-SES Communities**

* Victorian Careers Curriculum Framework – Additional Support for Targeted Groups

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/careers/carframe/Pages/support.aspx>