The Role of School Leaders in Promoting Successful Home–School Partnerships in Singapore's Special Education Schools

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Abstract

Effective home–school partnerships are deemed highly important for the academic success and well-being of students with disabilities (Beveridge, 2005; Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Shelden et al., 2010). Findings of a qualitative case study of parents' perspectives about the relationship between the home and Singapore's special education (SPED) schools revealed that school leadership is a key contributor to positive and productive partnerships. Specifically, participants focused on the importance of leaders being welcoming and approachable, practicing strong communication skills and strategies, and having positive perceptions about parents and their role in the school. These findings suggest that school leaders who trust parents and can foster trust in their leadership can be key players in promoting positive relationships for successful home–school partnerships. While the study was conducted in Singapore, the findings are transferable to any K-12 education context, as they offer school leaders insights on how to foster a successful collaboration with the families.

Keywords: trust, school leaders, leadership practices, special education schools, home–school partnerships

Parental Perspectives of School Leaders in Promoting Successful Home–School Partnerships in Special Education Schools: Lessons from Singapore

Introduction

Home–school partnership is a well-documented topic. There is an abundance of literature in this area, and consistently, research studies have shown the many benefits when the home and school work together (Cox-Petersen, 2011; Epstein, 1995, 2010, 2011; Kinkead-Clark, 2017; Patrikakou et al., 2005; Stringer & Hourani, 2013). These benefits include the following: increased attendance (Cox-Petersen, 2011; Gordon & Louis, 2012; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002), improved

behaviour (Gordon & Louis, 2012; Harris & Goodhall, 2008), better social skills (Gordon & Louis, 2012; Kinkead-Clark, 2017), improved school discipline (Cox-Petersen, 2011; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002), better two-way communication between the home and school (Cox-Petersen, 2011), and high student achievement (Cox-Petersen, 2011; Fan & Chen, 2001; Gordon & Louis, 2012; Kinkead-Clark, 2017; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2012). Other benefits include enhanced "student learning and emotion/psychological well-being" (Stringer & Hourani, 2013, p. 170), increased parental knowledge about the school curriculum and pedagogical approaches to support student learning (Stringer & Hourani, 2013) and increased school understanding of home circumstances that affect a child's learning (Stringer & Hourani, 2013). Specifically for students with disabilities, strong home–school relationships have significant effects on students' development and learning (Beveridge, 2005).

Literature has also highlighted many barriers or inhibitors to home–school partnership (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Dobbins & Abott, 2010; Johnson et al. 2004; Lake & Billingsley, 2002; Ludicke & Kortman, 2012; Soodak & Ewin, 2000). Whether related to differences between the culture, beliefs, values, or approaches to communication of the school leader and other professionals and those of the parents or family, these factors can impact the effectiveness of home–school partnerships (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Ludicke & Kortman, 2012). The result is a disconnect between the rhetoric of partnership and how it is practiced (Epstein, 1992). Thus, home–school relationships may be viewed as "problematic" (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2008, p. 637). It is for this reason that home–school partnership "remains an important area of inquiry" (p. 637) that warrants further research.

The key problem—the disconnect between the rhetoric of partnership and the actual practice of partnership—is not exclusive to North America and, as the recent doctoral research of

the first author of this paper (Ang, 2020) revealed, this tension also occurs in Singapore. While Singapore's Ministry of Education (MOE) has acknowledged the importance of partnership as one of the six areas that contribute to SPED student learning outcomes, Poon et al. (2013) have observed that while parents of children with disabilities have been considered as "crucial … [they are] still unequal partners in the support process with special education being largely child and school centric" (p. 63). In light of this, the purpose of this study upon which this article is based was to explore and understand the SPED parents' perceptions and experiences regarding home–school partnerships in Singapore.

A case study approach was used to yield insights into the disconnect between the rhetoric of partnership and the actual practice of partnership. The research addressed the following questions: What are special education parents' views about what contributes to a positive home–school partnership? What do special education parents identify as barriers to or inhibitors of a positive home–school partnership? What do special education parents suggest to improve home–school partnerships? For the purposes of this article, we focus only on the role of school leaders in home–school partnerships. Specifically, we explore leadership attributes, communication practices, and the perceptions about leaders of parents. It is hoped that this work will offer current and future school leaders evidence-informed approaches that will help them to foster a successful collaboration between the home and school. The insights obtained from this study may also help MOE to consider working with the National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore's national teacher education institute that prepares pre-service teachers and provides development programmes for school leaders, and the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), to help build the professional capacity of SPED school leaders so that they may successfully develop and sustain productive home–school partnerships. This article begins with the research context and the study's

conceptual framework. It then describes the study methodology before presenting findings about school leaders as facilitators and barriers to positive home–school partnership and suggestions for improving this collaboration between the home and school. It concludes with implications for research and practice.

Special Education: The Singapore Context

Singapore is located in Southeast Asia. An island city-state lying at the southern tip of peninsula Malaysia, the country has over 5.6 million people (Department of Statistics, 2018). Considered as the third most densely populated (Bhavsar, 2017) and highly urbanized countries in the world, Singapore has limited natural resources. Despite this limitation, Singapore has successfully transformed itself from a third-world nation to a first-world nation (Vaish, 2006). Today, Singapore is notable for many things. One of them is her high performing education system in the world (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012).

A nation with a strong educational system, Singapore maintains a dual system of education, where one is mainstream, and the other comprises special education schools (Lim & Sang, 2000; Poon et al., 2013; Walker & Musti-Rao, 2016). As the Singapore education system is responsive to both local and international changes and recognises that students have different abilities, learning interests, and passions, it has therefore provided diverse pathways to cater to the different learning profiles of mainstream school students.

In general, mainstream students complete their elementary or primary education within six years before moving to four to five years of secondary school education. Upon completing their secondary education, mainstream students choose between a vocational pathway through the Polytechnic route or the academic pathway through the Junior Colleges. Either route provides students with the opportunity to pursue a university education at the end of their K-12 study.

Admission to the local universities is dependent upon their obtaining good academic grades and career choices made.

In contrast, the SPED schools in Singapore, except for three schools, do not offer mainstream education to their students. Rather, they offer diverse curriculum and programs to meet the various needs of the SPED students. Similar to mainstream students, SPED students go through six and four years of primary and secondary education. At the end of their secondary education, SPED students are prepared for entry into the workforce. While the more abled SPED students do a vocational certification course, all others are placed on the School-to-Work (SW2) Transition Program that begins when they are in their final year at school and extends for another year following their graduation. Under this program, SG Enable, an agency committed to enabling persons with disabilities, works closely with the SPED schools and families to help match work-capable students with its pool of employers to suitable post-school job training positions. Students in this program continue to receive another year of support following their graduation from SG Enable job coaches. The support given is aimed at enabling SPED students to eventually gain employment.

There are also significant differences between the mainstream and SPED schools. Unlike the mainstream schools that come under the jurisdiction of the Singapore Ministry of Education, SPED schools are managed social service organizations (SSOs), as the Singapore government believes that SSOs are the "best agencies to run the schools, as they [have] a strong sense of mission, and their autonomy [allows] them greater flexibility to respond quickly to new needs and demands" (Tan, 2016, para. 15). Unlike the mainstream schools that stress the importance of academic excellence, the SPED schools place a greater emphasis on the teaching of life skills. In comparison to the mainstream schools, the class size in the SPED school is significantly smaller,

thus allowing the SPED teachers to provide more attention and support needed by each SPED student. Also, SPED schools are differently resourced with material and equipment to support their students. For example, some SPED schools may have specialized facilities, such as hydrotherapy pools, while others may have assistive technology such as Braille machines (Poon et al., 2013). Finally, unlike mainstream schools receiving funding from the Singapore MOE, the SPED schools have joint administration and funding from the National Council of Social Services (NCSS) and MOE.

Conceptual Framework

Bronfenbrenner (1977) argues that the "understanding of human development ... requires examination of multi-person systems of interaction ... and must take into account aspects of the environment beyond the immediate situation containing the subject" (p. 541). In his socio-ecological model, Bronfenbrenner (1986) identified five nested systems that shape the child—the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Each system, represented as a set of concentric circles, surrounds the child; each system is also interrelated, and there are interactions between and amongst the systems. According to Bronfenbrenner (1986), these interactions influence how the child develops and grows.

Adapted for use in home–school partnership literature (Beveridge, 2005), the model provides a clear explanation for why the home and school and the relationship between them are so important for children's development (Beveridge, 2005). In the special education context, Bronfenbrenner's model suggests that the success or failure in establishing a strong connection between the home and school impacts a child's ability to adapt to the learning demands and their feelings of being supported (Beveridge, 2005). In this inquiry of this article, an adaptation was made to Bronfenbrenner's (1977) socio-ecological model to help frame this study for Singapore's

context. Instead of five, three nested systems were identified to shape home–school partnerships in Singapore: the home, the school, and the external environment. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework for this study.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework on Home-School Partnership
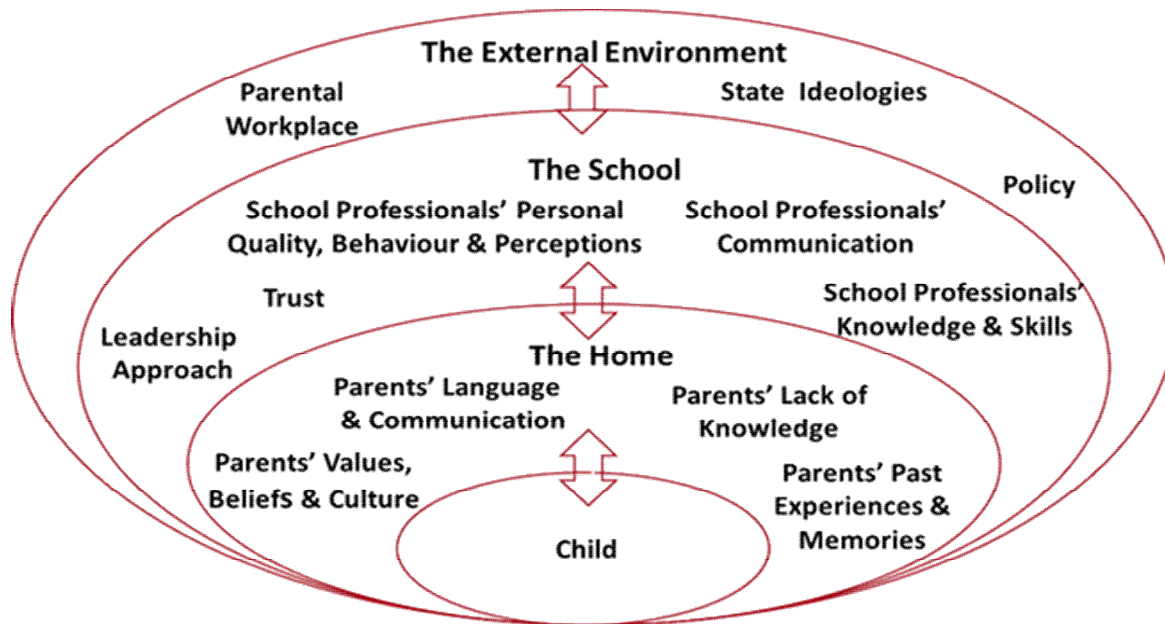
This article focuses on the school component. Specifically, it looks at the findings related to the school leader.

Methodology

This study draws on data from a qualitative case study (Merriam, 1998, 2009) of five special education schools that are managed by one out of the 19 SSOs in Singapore. Then known as voluntary welfare organizations (VWOs), the schools managed by this SSO provide special education to students with mild intellectual disabilities (MID) or mild autism. Students can enter the schools at any age and depending on their age group; they are placed in the primary, secondary, or post-secondary school. Like all SPED schools in Singapore, each school under the SSO customizes its curriculum and program to deliver quality and holistic education to its students. The

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customized curriculum is based on the Singapore MOE SPED curriculum framework: "Living, Learning and Working in the 21ˢᵗ Century" (MOE, 2018).

The main data source was 11 semi-structured interviews of about 120 minutes each with nine parents with special needs children who had different disabilities. A snowball technique (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was used with SPED parents to locate participants that met the two criteria established for participation in the study. The first criterion was being a Singaporean; the second was engaging in home–school partnership in Singapore SPED schools for more than seven years. In this study, an exception was made for one of the participants who did not meet the criteria. Holding a permanent residency status and living for more than 30 years in Singapore, this participant was deemed an information-rich resource; his length of residency made him familiar with the special education context in Singapore.

Additionally, a set of four short biographic questions about demographic information and their child's disability type was administered. The information provided insight into what may shape a participant's perceptions and into the similarities and differences in perceptions amongst the participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Besides this, artifacts shared by the participants, such as student's communication booklet that contained the school's vision, mission, and strategic goals and online public documents that included the MOE's SPED curriculum framework and the SSO's school curriculum framework were reviewed. As field notes were made during the interviews and a reflective journal was maintained throughout the research process, these too, were utilized as sources of data. Taken altogether, the various data allowed for multiple perspectives to be presented. At the same time, they enabled us to see where the data converged and diverged and ensured the trustworthiness of the study that encompassed credibility, dependability,

confirmability, and transferability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Once all interviews were transcribed verbatim, they were sent to the participants for review and clarifications.

To analyse and synthesize the data that was collected from the semi-structured interviews, biographic questionnaires, artifacts, field notes, and researcher's journal, this study utilized Miles et al.'s work (2104). Using their two cycles of coding, the data was coded, grouped, and regrouped as patterns emerged. These patterns of codes then formed categories (Miles et al., 2014) or themes or findings that answered the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The themes were layered, and this was done by creating smaller categories called sub-nodes or sub-themes that helped to organize the data into more specific sub-groups (Saldaña, 2016). To reconfirm the themes and sub-themes, Miles et al. (2014) coding process was repeated. This repeat cycle allowed for the further reduction of codes (Saldaña, 2016) and the sharpening of categories or themes that best explained the participants' perspectives and answered the research questions.

Findings

The School Leader

The school leader was one of the major themes that arose from the data. Except for one participant who had interacted with two school leaders, all other participants had interacted with at least three school leaders from three different schools that their child had attended. Interactions between the participants and school leaders often took place when they were attending school events, doing volunteer work in the school, and waiting to fetch their child home at school dismissal. As the participants had numerous encounters with the school leaders, they identified what they perceived to be critical factors that fostered positive and productive home–school partnerships: school leader's attributes, communication practices, and perceptions of parents.

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These factors or sub-categories overlapped. In what follows, pseudonyms are used for names of people and places to protect the identity of participants.

School Leaders' Attributes

The participants identified three leadership attributes. The first attribute was welcoming. Generally, participants perceived most school leaders to be welcoming of parents as the latter always greeted them when they entered the school grounds and thanked them for participating in school activities. Some school leaders also expressed their gratitude to parents for giving their time to do volunteer work for the school. Specifically for Lynn, the expression of such heartfelt gratitude made her feel appreciated, recognized, and welcomed in the school. In one school, the school leader extended personal invitations to the parents by asking them to come into her office for a chat. Recognizing how busy the school leader was, made Coco especially value the time given to her, as illustrated in her comment: "You could see she had a lot of things on her table. But she could always spare the time for us." Coco added that she and other parents were also made to feel welcomed whenever they popped into the school leader's office to see her. As a result of these welcoming gestures, Coco expressed how difficult it was to part from the school when her daughter had to move on to another school: "I could feel the warmth in the school. The warmth was there. The welcome was there … The warmth just made you want to stay on than leave the school."

Not all participants, however, described the school leader as welcoming. For example, in one school, Lynn recounted an unpleasant experience where the school leader chased her and some parent volunteers away when they enthusiastically came to support and offer their help for a school event. Lyn shared how she and the parent volunteers felt: "We were very upset," as well as shocked by the school leader's "rude" and "unprofessional" behaviour. Such unprofessional behaviour indicated to Lynn that the school leader was unwelcoming of Parent Support Group (PSG)

members. In another school, Helen spoke of how the school leader's busy work schedule prevented the latter from welcoming or interacting with PSG members who came to do voluntary work. As a result, Helen viewed the school environment to lack warmth for parental involvement activities. As the participants appreciated being welcomed into the school community, they suggested that when school leaders are welcoming and friendly, parents "open up and share more with the school." This fosters a closer working relationship between the school leader and parents

Another attribute that contributed to a positive home–school partnership experience was approachability. A close analysis of the data revealed that the word "approachable" was synonymously used with "accessible," "available," being easily "reached," "being present," and being visible. Defined in terms of a school leader's behaviour and actions, the participants highlighted numerous ways good school leaders demonstrated this trait. Specifically in school C, the school leader made herself accessible and visible to the parents in various ways: going on school "outings" with the parents, students, and staff, attending family bonding activities, dropping in to attend the PSG meeting, mingling with the parents during a school luncheon, and maintaining an open-door policy. The latter specifically pleased Coco considerably as she perceived this policy to signify the school leader's welcoming attitude towards the parents and her willingness to "always" make time even though she had a busy schedule. Coco also shared that the vice-principal in this school demonstrated approachability. For example, the vice-principal participated in projects where both staff and parents were also involved, such as the Purple Parade, "a unifying national platform to promote awareness and celebrate abilities of persons with special needs" (The Purple Parade Limited, 2013, para. 1). Mary stated that the same school leader also capitalized on the use of email to make herself available and accessible to the parents. This enabled Mary to approach the school leader and have her son placed with students of similar abilities. In another

school, the leader adopted other ways to make herself approachable. For example, she made herself visible during school dismissal time to simultaneously be with the children and greet the parents who had come to take their children home. Additionally, she made attempts to participate with her students in school events such as Racial Harmony Day. These gestures and efforts pleased Helen, who remarked: "Of course, I felt good. Otherwise, I would not tell you (laughs)." As Helen maintained a serious disposition throughout the interview, this sudden burst of laughter signified her approval of the school leader's approachable behaviour and revealed what she deeply felt that a school leader ought to demonstrate—care for her students. In a different school, Mary reported that the school leader made an attempt to reach out to her. This act signified the school leader's willingness to Mary to spend some time to talk to her about her son and answer her queries. She also recalled seeing another school leader making herself visible and available by attending the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings.

Unfortunately, participants also recalled instances when school leaders were unapproachable. Their unapproachability was demonstrated by their lack of visibility on the school premises. Articulating this view was Helen, who emphatically said: "We hardly saw the principal … [except at] a big event like graduation day." In her view, the school leader should not be only seen at school events. Such behaviour only "puts [her] off" from developing a relationship with the school leader. Moreover, the participants linked the school leader's unapproachability with inaccessibility. Two factors contributed to this. The first was the school leader's busyness, which was demonstrated in several ways: attending school meetings, the failure to stop and talk to a parent, always rushing, engaging only in brief conversations with parents, and failure to return parent's numerous phone calls. The latter was observed to be most annoying for a couple of parents. Articulating this view was Snowy, who sarcastically remarked: "Not a partnership, right?"

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The second factor was attributed to the school leader's prideful behaviour. Demonstrated by stressing her professional knowledge, this behaviour irked and deterred Lynn from collaborating with the school leader. In Lynn's view, being humble and unassuming would encourage parents to partner with the school more. Other participants suggested that greater visibility would signify that the school leader was approachable and welcoming.

Caring was another attribute that participants valued highly and was exemplified in various ways. For example, one school leader was described by Coco as being very "motherly". While Coco gave no specific examples, she explained that care was shown to the children and extended to the parents whenever the school leader went on an outing with them. Coco added that the school leader also had an intimate knowledge of her child's accomplishments, for example, when sharing comments such as: "Hey, your girl is doing well, you know. Congratulations!" and "Wow! She could travel independently by herself." Coco stated that these affirmations helped to boost both her and her daughter's morale. Speaking along similar lines, both Jay and Ling spoke highly of another school leader they deemed as "outstanding" because of her ability to recognize who their daughter was, even though many students were in school. Jay explained what such action meant to him:

> Knowing my daughter's name showed that the principal cared and made the effort to know all the students. Therefore, she was a caring person who was not just interested in leading the school, but was also in building a personal relationship. So, this made me want to participate more with the school by extension.

Surprisingly, a couple of participants described some school leaders to be uncaring. This was explained in the absence of interaction with parents who came to the school to do volunteer

work. Airing her disappointment was Helen, who emphatically explained the importance of interaction:

> You felt that the principal was around to care. To care. *Ya lah*. (Pause). And was concerned. That was important … [The] school leader should make an effort like the church pastor. After the service, the pastor would come up to greet his congregation. If the principal did … [likewise], you feel that the principal was concerned. That was what I wanted to see.

Another way uncaring was perceived was through the failure of some school leaders to care for their students' well-being. Several participants were very concerned about the safety and well-being of students in some schools. Amongst them was Ling. Her comments reflected what was upon the hearts of several concerned participants:

> At the end of the day, it was safety we were looking at. We need to know whether our kid was … safe in their hands. If that school … did not give us this [feeling of safety], I would not think that I would want to participate much.

Communication Practices

All participants appreciated when school leaders practiced active listening. In their view, active listening entailed both listening and a follow-up of the participant's feedback or request. When school leaders actively listened, a positive perception of them was nurtured and, in turn, helped to strengthen their relationship with the parents. This was exemplified in Mary's account when she shared how the school leader's active listening resulted in a series of actions—an investigation, an apology on behalf of her teacher who had written inappropriate remarks in Mary's son report card, and a change of teacher for her son's class. All these actions led Mary to perceive the school leader to be a very concerned person who had cared enough to act on the situation. As for another participant, Lynn, the school leader's active listening resulted in her son being placed

in a class where he could learn at a slower pace. The school leader's action led Lynn to view the school leader as respectful, as the latter had respected her wish.

Not all school leaders had good communication practices. Some were perceived to have poor communication practices that hindered positive home–school partnerships. These practices included the failure to listen and follow through with parents' opinions, ideas, feedback; and responding in the form of stock replies, such as "Oh, we will do something about it," "I will look into it," and "Wait, let us check, and we will see what we can do about it." These practices did not only frustrate the participants, but they also instilled a sense of hopelessness, as articulated by Helen: "Nothing more I could do, you see. I was like a small fry, you see. I couldn't do anything." Equally unwelcoming was the unidirectional communication practice that was commonly used during mass meetings. Used to expedite communication, this approach was intensely disliked by Ling. In her view, this form of practice was both unidirectional and non-interactive as the school leader "was just telling us what was in her head. She was not picking from the parents what was in the parents' heads." Ling advocated for the use of a more interactive communication approach.

Perceptions of Parents

The school leader's positive perception of parents also contributed to positive home- school partnerships. Coco explained that this was because the school leader "really believed in the parents." Hence, the school welcomed parents as "very good partners … strong working partners with the school." This, in turn, encouraged Coco to "help the school more and be more involved with the school." Mary felt that the school leader's willingness to listen and respond to all her feedback about school improvement made her feel like a partner. These parents clearly appreciated being treated as partners to the school.

Conversely, the participants also gave instances of school leaders having negative perceptions of parents. Such perceptions included being viewed as mere resources for supporting school projects. As a result, participants like Snowyz felt used by the school. Similar to John and Lynn, others spoke of being viewed as "troublemakers." John was openly asked by the school leader not to raise many questions with the board members during the meeting, as that would cause trouble for the school leader. Lynn said that both she and other parents chose to communicate less with the school leader lest they be viewed as troublemakers for the school. Whether they were viewed as resources or troublemakers, the negative perceptions of the school leaders incurred the displeasure of the participants and impacted their working relationship with the school leaders.

Discussions

The study qualitatively explored SPED parents' perceptions and experiences regarding home–school partnerships in Singapore. Our findings indicated that school leaders mattered greatly, as they contribute to positive and productive home–school partnerships. This suggests that they play an essential role in developing healthy partnerships with the parents (Broomhead, 2018). On the basis of this finding, it is essential that school leaders are aware of key factors that foster successful home–school partnerships.

The results of our study confirm the literature on school leaders demonstrating positive attributes to facilitate constructive home–school partnership (Barr & Saltmarsh, 2014; Broomhead, 2018; Francis, Blue-Banning, Haines et al., 2016; Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull et al., 2016; Shelden et al., 2010; Siegal et al., 2019). The parents in this study identified three attributes that effective school leaders demonstrated to promote collaboration. The first was welcoming—a gesture that the parents greatly appreciated. Whether it was greeting them, thanking them for their commitment to doing voluntary work for the school, or taking the time to interact with them, these

practices made parents feel genuinely welcomed in the school community. They also contributed to the warm and inviting climate for parental involvement, which fostered a strong sense of belonging for parents like Coco who confessed her reluctance to leave the school although her daughter had completed her study there. This finding supports the assertion of several researchers that school leader plays a critical role in developing, supporting, and maintaining a welcoming school climate conducive to parental involvement (Angell et al., 2009; Broomhead, 2018; Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull et al., 2016; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Povey et al., 2016; Siegal et al., 2019). It also confirms the importance of developing a warm and inviting culture as this enables a trusting home–school partnership to flourish in schools (Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull et al., 2016).

The parents of our study also discussed the importance of school leaders' approachability, which is an attribute also identified in the literature in terms of availability, accessibility, visibility, or presence (Broomhead, 2018; Francis, Blue-Banning, Haines et al., 2016; Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull et al., 2016; Shelden et al., 2010; Siegal et al., 2019). In practice, the parents found this trait demonstrated in a variety of ways that included the adoption of an open-door policy, attending PSG meetings, and being available via email. This finding reinforces the assertion concerning the crucial role that the school leader plays in creating and sustaining a positive, welcoming climate for parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005, Siegal et al., 2019). As approachability also conveyed the school leader's accessibility, parents like Coco were enabled to develop a very close working relationship with the school leader. As "partnerships are essentially about relationships" (Auerbach, 2012, pp. 35-36), the behaviors and actions of some school leaders regarding families clearly contributed to the building of relational trust that were

crucial for a successful home–school collaboration (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Tschannen-Moran, 2014).

To build a successful home–school partnership, Bull et al. (2008) found that both time and commitment are needed. Clearly, in this study, some school leaders made time for the parents. This engendered parents' trust in them. Willingness to slow down enough to really listen or to carefully correspond with parents via email conveyed an attitude of acceptance that allowed Mary to comfortably approach the school leader; she knew that her concerns about her son would be heard and attended to. A similar finding was made by Shelden et al. (2010), which led them to conclude that the school leader's approachability was the "key to a mother's connecting and developing trust in the principal" (p. 165). As was the case for Helen, the school leader's approachability was very assuring. Parents want to feel confident that the school leaders "[care] about their children's well-being and genuinely want to see them be successful in school and life beyond school" (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 190).

Reflecting Shelden et al. (2010) study, caring was the next and perhaps the most important leadership attribute that was appreciated by parents of this study. Similar to approachability, care was demonstrated in various ways. For example, in school C, Coco observed the school leader showing care by being "motherly" towards her students, and noted that "all the children were happy" to be with her. The care was perceived to be genuine had a positive influence on Coco. Not only did it increase Coco's trust in the school leader, but it encouraged her to actively participate in many school-based activities. This supports Park et al. (2001) finding about parents wanting to work with educators who consider their child with disabilities "as their own children and ... treat them accordingly" (p. 165). Besides being motherly, the leader of school C showed care by knowing the students as individuals. This was illustrated when she was able to point out students'

strengths to parents. A clear contrast to the outpouring of the usual "litany of problems" (Turnbull et al., 2015, p. 169) that most parents expected when encountering the school leader, Coco saw this strength-based approach as not just boosting her and her daughter's morale, but also encouraging her to further deepen her partnership with the school. This finding supports the literature that highlights the need to affirm both the child's and family's strengths (Turnbull et al., 2015) and suggests that a strength-based approach to communication helps to foster collaboration and build trust with the families (Tschannen-Moran, 2014) at the same time.

In another large school, the leader demonstrated her knowledge of her students by knowing all of their names. This meant a lot to parents like Jay, as it showed that the school leader did not just care for his child but also respected and valued each student as an individual with an identity. She saw "the child as a person rather than as a ... disability label" (Blue-Banning et al., 2004, p. 179). As the school leader was concerned with building a personal relationship with her students, Jay was motivated to participate in more school activities. Care and respect help to increase "families' investment in the life of the school and their desire to participate in events and activities" (Francis, Blue-Banning, Haines et al., 2016, p. 332) and are leadership attributes that are core to positive and trusting home–school partnerships.

The findings of our study support Shelden et al. (2010) definition of authentic caring: a school leader's praises and encouraging words are "genuine, voluntary, child-focused, and benefitting [the child] or the participants themselves" (p. 165). The findings also affirm what the literature says about the significance of respect in positive home–school partnerships (Blue-Banning et al., 2004, Kasahara & Turnbull, 2005; Kayama, 2010; Park et al., 2001; Soodak & Erwin, 2000; Turnbull et al., 2015). Coco, for example, shared that the school leader, in extending

care to the parents and the children, showed respect. In this sense, we would add to Shelden et al. (2010) definition of authentic caring to also include a focus on parents.

In addition to the school leader's attributes, our study underscored the importance of leaders having good communications skills. Specifically, the parents stressed the importance of active listening to promote effective collaboration. Consistent with the literature, these leaders did not just listen, but they also acted on what they had said (Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull et al., 2016). Specifically for Mary and Lynn, the leaders' ability to listen and follow-up with action did benefit their children and indicated to them that they were respected as equal partners in their child's education. This increased both Mary and Lynn's confidence and trust in them because the leaders' actions exemplified honesty, which is an important facet of family-school trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). As the leaders also respected parents as partners, this further reinforced the parents' confidence and trust in the leaders. This finding affirms the importance of respect as an important attribute and determinant for trusting and successful partnerships (Haines et al., 2015).

Literature has shown that collaboration is invited when a school leader believes that parents are allies or partners (Auerbach, 2010, 2012). This is evident in our study. Both Coco and Mary, whose children were in the same school, attributed being perceived as a "partner" to the school leader's confidence and trust in parents. Hence, this encouraged them to be engaged with the school. This finding is supported by the literature recognizing how a school leader's positive beliefs about parents can impact partnership between the school and home (Auerbach, 2010, 2012; Ho, 2008). Interestingly, literature has linked school leaders' perceptions of parents to their approach to leadership (Auerbach, 2012; Ho, 2008). As most SPED leaders are mainstream school leaders that have been seconded to SPED schools by MOE (Gan, 2007), the positive perceptions that

parents had of them strongly suggests that the leaders may have subscribed to leadership theories and practices that recognize the importance of families (Riehl, 2012).

While the school leaders' attributes, communication approaches, and positive perceptions contribute to successful home–school partnerships, our study underscored the importance of trust as a key contributor to an effective and healthy partnership. Participant narratives were shot through with strong inferences to trust as an essential element in fostering a productive partnership between the home and school. This suggested that trust was the key overarching factor in building strong relationships for effective home–school partnerships. From the positive narratives of the parents, it was clear that good school leaders recognized trust as an important element to working well with the SPED parents. Hence, this led them to intentionally cultivate trust with the parents by making time for them and by demonstrating positive attributes, communication skills, and perceptions of parents. As these factors intersected with one another, they did not just help to build and strengthen relational trust between the school leaders and parents, but the trust built ultimately bound the school leader with the parents to one another like glue (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Tschannen-Moran, 2014) to "advance the education and welfare of [SPED] students" (Bryk & Schneider, 2003, p. 45).

Implications for Practice and Recommendations

The findings in this study have implications for the school leaders, government officials, and Singapore's NIE. Specifically for the school leaders, the findings suggest that school leaders need to be aware that their direct and indirect behaviours and practices, along with their beliefs about parents, could impact home–school partnership. Hence, taking time from their busy work schedule to engage in self-reflection would be helpful as this practice enables them to challenge their "taken-for-granted assumptions" (Robinson, 2011, p. 99) that they may have about the role

of SPED parents, school leaders, and the school in home–school partnership. Moreover, as trust contributes to a successful partnership, school leaders may want to build and strengthen relational trust with the SPED parents. This could be achieved by intentionally making time for parents and adopting any practices that demonstrate approachability, visibility, accessibility, respect, and care. Furthermore, as some SPED school leaders come from mainstream schools, they may need to review their current leadership approaches to determine if these are inclusive of parents and families. The study by Ng et al. (2015) has shown that mainstream school leaders adopt instructional and transformational leadership approaches to better align with Singapore MOE's policies and initiatives. As some SPED leaders come from mainstream school, we recommend expanding their leadership repertoire to include inclusive leadership approaches to promote active engagement with the SPED families. These include collective leadership (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2012), leadership for authentic partnership (Auerbach, 2010, 2012), and communitarian leadership (Ho, 2009). In addition to reading books and articles to widen their leadership repertoire, school leaders could also actively look for relevant courses to take. To facilitate the latter, this calls for MOE, NIE, and NCSS to work in tandem to provide more in-service courses to build up the professional capacity of SPED school leaders. Other than school leadership, availing courses pertaining to the knowledge of disabilities, communication, and collaboration skills would all help contribute to a positive and fruitful partnership between the home and school.

Conclusion

The parents with children with disabilities identified the school leaders as an important element in fostering a successful home–school partnership. Specifically, they highlighted how the school leaders' positive attributes, communication practice, and perceptions impacted parents' decisions to work collaboratively with the school. From the findings and discussion, all three

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themes relate strongly to trust. As a result, school leaders who want to develop and maintain a positive and healthy collaboration with SPED parents should be knowledgeable about what it takes to cultivate trust: the establishment and maintenance of a trusting relationship are intentional; it is demonstrated via a variety of ways; it requires effort and commitment. It also needs time, but it is time that is well spent as it will foster a positive and successful collaboration—one that will be well appreciated and valued by families with special needs children because it gives their SPED child a future filled with hope.

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