



## How to establish professional partnership among school, families and communities: A case study of hilltop road public school

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### Abstract

Family, school and community are the main contexts where children grow up. Cultivating stable partnerships among them can influence children positively. This research chose Hilltop Road Public School as a case, which succeeded in constructing a professional relationship. Based on the theory of school-family-community professional partnership, this research analyzed the school's community engagement strategy, making a dialectical discussion of the effectiveness and success of the cooperation path. Meanwhile, the possible challenge and suggestion have also been put forward.

**Keywords:** professional partnership, school-family-community, children's education

### Introduction

In students' learning and growth, there are three main backgrounds: family, school and community. School, family and community activities individually or collectively affect children's learning and development. According to the theory of ecosystem development, Bronfenbrenner pointed out that educators should build a bridge between home and school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) <sup>[1]</sup>. Teachers should promote students' learning in school, parents should supervise their children's learning in the family, and schools should integrate into some activities in the community.

School-Family-Community partnership refers to mobilizing parents' potential in the home and school to benefit the parents themselves, their children, and the community where the school is located. A professional partnership between school, family and community can improve the school's educational practice activities and the school's educational atmosphere. The partnership activities enhance parents' skills and leadership in nurturing their children, strengthen the relationship between parents and other people in the school and the community. Family participation in children's learning means that all parties in the family-school-community relationship invest in professional cooperation. The family's access to resources and how resources are mainly used depends on the community and the school. The social capital created in the family and school through School-Family-Community partnership can reduce the adverse effects of family economic conditions and community environment on children's growth (Dearing, Sibley & Nguyen, 2015).

Meanwhile, Children tend to take the initiative to learn skills such as reading, writing and calculation when they feel cared from families and educators. The partnership between family and school does not guarantee students' success, but the tripartite partnership model can encourage students to achieve their success through participation. Epstein pointed out that the core reason for establishing a partnership is that it can help all students succeed in school and their future lives (Epstein *et al.*, 2002) <sup>[3]</sup>.

This study outlines the professional school-family-community relationship of Hilltop Road Public School in New South Wales, Australia. According to the theory of school-family-community professional partnership, this research analyzed the school's community engagement strategy and the reasons for the school's awards, making a dialectical discussion of the effectiveness and success of the cooperation path. Based on the current situation of the school and the results of the implementation of the partnership strategy, we will explore the challenges of future partnerships and make some recommendations.

### Material and Methods

This research is based on a case study around Hilltop Road Public School, located in Western Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. We choose this school as a case because, in the 2018-2020 annual school plan of Hilltop Road Public School, the school has formulated a detailed partnership strategy. The school regularly communicates with community members to understand their needs, interests and explore ways to help them. In Hilltop Road Public School, parents are active learners. School and community create a continuous learning environment for parents and students. The school encourages parents to participate in and understand their children's learning progress and effectively support their children's learning. Hilltop Road Public School has launched the Transition to School Program called "Ready Set Go", a school preparation program for young children and their families. Children and families going to kindergarten can participate in game-based activities organized by the school through the Ready Set Go project before joining the big school life. Children and parents can understand school rules and learn skills in the games. The most important thing is that they can experience security, tolerance and belong in the project. Meanwhile, Hilltop Road Public School has adopted a series of communication strategies and parent skill training activities to enhance the learning participation of students and families, which can promote children's learning motivation and become an

effective link to connect families and communities.

### **The process of constructing a Family-School Community partnership**

#### **School Readiness**

The ecological perspective suggests that the surrounding environment, roles and relationships in the school readiness process jointly influence the child and family (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) <sup>[1]</sup>. The focus and responsibilities of the early childhood school readiness program in schools have gradually materialized into specific responsibilities shared by professionals, teachers, parents and family members (Mashburn & Pianta, 2006).

The focus on 'child readiness' has gradually expanded to 'parent, child and school readiness', which means that family-centered school readiness is no longer simply about family readiness, but rather a collaborative family-school-community effort (Knoche *et al.*, 2010). Parents participating in the school readiness project can obtain parenting support information, improve parenting methods, and participate in community activities. Meanwhile, some disadvantaged families can alleviate the pressure of parenting through the project. In the school readiness project, children's educational outcomes are no longer the only goals and outcomes. The positive flow effect that extends to the entire family and the community is conducive to enhancing community connections and a sense of belonging (Scott *et al.*, 2005; Press *et al.*, 2006). High-quality early childhood school preparation programs can build strong communities for children (Grace *et al.*, 2014). There is a close relationship between the community's social cohesion and the pre-school enrollment rate (Lowe & Weisner, 2004) <sup>[12]</sup>.

### **“Ready Set Go” Transition Program**

#### **What is “Ready Set Go”**

"Ready Set Go" is a school preparation program of Hilltop Road Public School, which aims to introduce "big schools" to families with children and provide them with the opportunity to experience school life. Based on the early learning framework, the program introduces school life to children and families through game-based activities and develops the skills required for children to go to kindergarten. "Playgroup" is the community-based game group in the project, coordinated by the school's community liaison officer, Miss Catherine, and managed by the participating parents. "Playgroup" is open to families with children aged 0-5, which can conduct 2-2.5 hours a week. Activities include games, messy play, art and craft, stories and songs. In these activities, the teaching staff provided many enjoyable themed activities for young children, such as Discovery Time, Best Start, Letterland, Information Technology & Reading with children. Young children will experience different content, as turn-taking, listening, sharing, socializing and early literacy and numeracy. Meanwhile, Local professionals such as speech therapists, road safety officers and police officers were also invited to inform and educate parents.

#### **The effectiveness of “Ready Set Go”**

In 2012, more than 70 families in the community participated in the "Ready Set Go" Transition Program, and the school held a graduation ceremony for the children at the end of the year. The "Ready Set Go" Transition Program

won an award and was recognized for its value to school readiness. Two teachers from Hilltop Road Public School introduced the "Ready Set Go" Transition Program to the staff of early childhood institutions and elementary schools from the three regions at the Transition Forum organized by Rooty Hill RSL. At the same time, the "Playgroup" activities in the project also received government project funding support. This Transition Program has gained recognition and support from families and communities and is an effective measure.

First of all, Hilltop Road Public School considered the positive effects of effective partnerships on the continuity of children's learning and development when building the "Ready Set Go" Transition Program. When children reach kindergarten, children and their families will experience environmental migration based on different reasons. Children and their families may have to experience the transition between nursing services and school education, or they may have to adapt to a new living area and face the challenge of joining a new community (Flottman *et al.*, 2011) <sup>[7]</sup>. Therefore, this complex transition may lead to interruptions in the continuity of children's learning and development. The discontinuity between environments negatively impacts children's development, especially children's behavior, social, language, and motor skills (De Gioia, 2013) <sup>[3]</sup>. For young children and their families, this is undoubtedly a problem. Therefore, "Playgroup" activities mainly arrange literacy, reading and social games to help children and parents adapt to kindergarten learning. The core of the "Ready Set Go" Transition Program is to establish a Family-School-Community professional partnership to ensure the continuity of children's learning and experience and achieve the purpose of effective transition between environments.

Secondly, based on the multicultural community background of Hilltop Road Public School, the establishment of the "Ready Set Go" Transition Program also takes into account the significance of cultural capital to partnerships. "Culture" refers to a specific and sharable learning behavior that includes a group of people's values, attitudes and lifestyles, which also means that the responses and information obtained from interactions between people belonging to the category of culture (Fleer, 2006; Rogoff, 2003) <sup>[8]</sup>. The interaction between the natural and external environment affects children's culture (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rogoff, 2003) <sup>[1]</sup>.

Culture is the intergenerational inheritance of human beings, and family education is the early cultural learning experience of children (De Gioia, 2013) <sup>[3]</sup>. Kindergarten is the first social and cultural environment for children to leave the family cultural environment and enter. Both children and families need a transition of environmental change. The cooperation between school and family is an essential part of promoting healthy cultural flow. Therefore, the "Playgroup" activity is attended by children and parents together.

On the one hand, the companionship of parents can give children a sense of safety in adapting to the new environment and can promote communication between parents and children.

On the other hand, families participate in activities to provide children with opportunities to adapt to the "mainstream" school culture.

### Community engagement

Family involvement in children's learning is conducive to children's language and numeracy literacy skills, mathematics knowledge, attention, motivation and persistence, and other learning-related behaviors. The Family-School-Community partnership plan initiated by the school should empower parents and mobilize their initiative to participate in children's education. Studies have shown that if school educators, contact consultants, teachers and other professionals are willing to provide parents with information and suggestions to help students succeed in school learning, most parents will be willing to participate in planned and purposeful partnership projects (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004) <sup>[5]</sup>. A partnership project requires a cooperative team. This cooperative team should be a professional partnership action team composed of principals, teachers, parents, other educators, and community partners. The team can use Epstein's six participation frameworks, including parenting, communication, volunteering, home learning, decision-making, and collaboration with the community (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004) <sup>[5]</sup>. Community engagement aims to: (1) support children's learning, (2) provide educational information and skills to families, (3) promote partnerships to promote children's learning and development (Thomas *et al.*, 2015).

### Partnership measures Information Sharing

The educators of Hilltop Road Public School often organize Cafés with different themes.

- Catherine Gregory (Community Liaison Officer) organized Pop-Up Cafés with school volunteers to support community partnerships and develop a network of community partners. Parents brought hand-made snacks and sat with other members of the school community to share ideas.
- The school pastor, Kim Whale, continues to hold English Dialogue Cafés for parents of non-English speaking backgrounds. This informal gathering helps parents practice English conversation and language skills and allows them to meet new friends.
- Six-grade students and their parents hosted welcome Cafés for new kindergarten students and their families.
- Parent leaders of community courses organized R U OK Café to discuss strategies to help and change the community. The Café also provides parents and community members an opportunity to talk openly about mental health and depression.
- "Meet the Teacher Afternoons" is an activity where teachers meet and communicate with their parents. Parents visit their children's teachers during the activities, visit the classrooms, set learning goals, and obtain information about class routines and practices.

Hilltop Road Public School developed the Seesaw App. Students can use this application to create their digital diaries and achieve communication with peers. Meanwhile, Seesaw App supports real-time communication that promotes parental communication. Parents can learn about their children's school life through this application, for example, to see their children's work through a unique QR code. Besides, the application can also support home learning. 89% of parents use the Seesaw app and think it is a

very effective communication tool.

### Parent Workshop

Hilltop Road Public School organized a series of workshops for parents.

#### ▪ Literacy and Numeracy Parent Workshops

In this workshop, parents learned about ways to help children with reading comprehension, such as quick questions after reading and watching pictures, playing cards, dice, and other items to count with children. Meanwhile, parents also learned about the teaching methods of learning mathematics.

#### ▪ Education Week Parent Workshop

Parents will share their thoughts about the school in the workshop, as well as their personal experiences. They will discuss similarities and differences in ideas, practices that need to be maintained, and urgently needed changes.

#### ▪ 21st-Century Skills Parent Course

This workshop helps parents understand 21st-century skills. Families from different cultural groups in the community have participated in courses and activities. Parents discuss and learn practical strategies to support their children's learning in this workshop.

The effectiveness of Partnership measures

In the Family- School- Community partnership, communication is the first step. The creation of diverse and influential two-way communication channels between family and school is conducive to forming professional partnership models (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004) <sup>[5]</sup>. Parents can learn about the school's organization and needs and their children's school life in a cooperative relationship. In order to respond to parents' communication needs, schools should provide families with a wide range of communication options (Hornby, 2011) <sup>[10]</sup>. The Cafés event at Hilltop Road Public School creates a welcoming atmosphere, and the food and drinks in the event make the relationship between participants more relaxed and harmonious, which is more conducive to communication (Hornby, 2011) <sup>[10]</sup>.

Meanwhile, the content of Cafés activities is also determined according to the situation of the school community members. Non-English-speaking families in multicultural communities face language barriers and cultural integration difficulties, so Hilltop Road Public School has been committed to hosting English language communication Cafés. Parents can exchange ideas, build friendships and alleviate problems in such informal school activities. Successful Cafés can stabilize and expand friendly and cooperative relations. Meanwhile, Hilltop Road Public School creates opportunities for parents to communicate face-to-face and develops applications that keep pace with the times to communicate between parents and the school faster and closer.

In some partnership relationship cultures represented by Australia, some families do not regard their role as a "participant" in children's education but as a "listener" in the role of experts and teachers (Ebbeck & Glover, 2000, as cited in De Gioia, 2013) <sup>[3]</sup>. However, in the social system, the family is primarily affirmed to be an active partner in decision-making, and parents are empowered educational partners (Rouse, 2012). Some parents are passively involved in children's education because they believe that their

literacy and skills are insufficient to support their children's learning (Hornby, 2011) <sup>[10]</sup>.

Therefore, the parent education project is an important measure to encourage parents to participate in cooperation actively. Child development guidance and parent discussion is an effective parent education model. The Workshop model can help parents build confidence in participating in school education by communicating learning skills with teachers and community workers (Pugh & De'Ath, 1984, as cited in Hornby, 2011) <sup>[10]</sup>. The educational community workers of Hilltop Road Public School organized a variety of workshops for parents to provide parents with information on student learning strategies and provide parents with opportunities to learn skills.

### **The potential challenges and solutions**

#### **The potential challenges**

Hilltop Road Public School has taken many practical measures to establish, stabilize and develop professional partnerships. School educators and community professionals are committed to helping children and their families feel a sense of belonging and security in the educational community. However, although the school hopes to support the family and be responsible for the growth of each child, some objective factors may still become potential challenges for the continuation of the future partnership.

First, Hilltop Road Public School will continue to explore new cooperative projects based on the existing home-school activities. For example, in the school's 2021 development strategy report, it is mentioned that parents participate in the Project-Based Learning plan. Then, educators will face more work and challenges. The role of teachers in supporting students and families will increase as families increase their expectations for school welfare. However, teachers and other staff may feel anxious about the need to assume new roles and responsibilities that are unfamiliar (CMY, 2015) <sup>[2]</sup>. In addition, whether the allocation of resources can meet the continuous expansion and development of school projects also requires adjustment and response from school and community managers—for example, the source of project funds and the liaison and support of different community organizations.

#### **The possible solutions**

Hilltop Road Public School has an excellent education management team. School leaders need to provide support to all relevant staff and balance their workload. In Hilltop Road Public School, Miss Catherine, the school's community liaison officer, is responsible for Family-School-Community partnership building and cooperative project development. However, with the expansion of cooperative projects and the expansion of cultural groups, schools can consider setting up school counsellors and expanding the team of counsellors. The school counsellor team can assist Miss Catherine's work, which will radiate more children and families more broadly (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010) <sup>[6]</sup>.

Meanwhile, schools can absorb bilingual "multicultural assistants" for multicultural groups to provide more direct assistance to families from different language backgrounds (CMY, 2015) <sup>[2]</sup>. Hilltop Road Public School has received funding and resource support from the government and the community, but the support organization is relatively single. School leaders may consider obtaining more information and applying to more organizations to obtain funding for

sustainable development.

### **Conclusion**

Family-School-Community partnership is a two-way activity of family education, school education, and community support that promotes students' all-round development. Students are the center of activity. The partnership between family, school and community includes effective communication, parental education and parental participation. The Family-School-Community partnership is conducive to facilitating agreement on educational goals for families and schools. The school's guidance on family education can help the family and the school's educational goals maximize coordination and unity. Professional partnerships are conducive to the formation of complementary cultural and educational content. The culture and educational content of the family and the school are different. Cooperation can make the educational content of both parties complement each other to a certain extent, ensure the continuity of children's development and promote the all-round development of education.

The Family-School-Community partnership project of Hilltop Road Public School demonstrated a new cooperation model. In this school, parents are also regarded as learners. The school and the community take "community engagement" as the goal and accept various family groups through various means. Parents are no longer the outside observers of school education but a part of school learning. In the School Readiness Transition Program and various cooperative activities, parents and children learn together. Families are accepted, and they noticed that the responsibilities are based on the needs of specific communities.

This research's case analysis of Hilltop Road Public School also reveals the importance of educators in bridging the gap between theory and practice and innovation development. For the Family-School-Community partnership, different academic fields provide different perspectives. Sociology takes social capital, social stratification and mobility, and family social functions as the entry point. The theory clarifies that family and school are the two most important forces in the socialization of children, and the formation of comprehensive strength and coordination can promote the socialization of children. From the perspective of pedagogy, education is a purposeful activity to influence people, and school education cannot be separated from the family's cooperation. From a management perspective, parents' participation in supervision and decision-making can enhance parents' sense of responsibility in school management and improve education quality. From the perspective of the evolution of parents' educational rights, parents are both the legal guardians of their children and taxpayers. The performance of coordination among subsystems makes the education system continue to develop in a balanced, harmonious, and orderly state.

Therefore, when educators research the relationship between family and school, they should consider class, race, language, and other social factors and consider the relationship between various factors and advocate interaction between groups (Winton & Johnson, 2016). In addition, the experience and reflection of educators are also significant. We explore strategies in theory and rediscover problems in the implementation of strategies. Reflections based on actual operations may challenge academic

theories, but theoretical models should be constantly deformed and developed according to the teaching situation. Family-School-Community partnership requires all partners to explore, judgment and reconstruct together.

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