

PARENT-TEACHER COMMUNICATION

Laura Stafford

The Ohio State University

There has been a long standing concern about how parent-teacher cooperation affects the welfare of the child. A premise of organized education in the United States has been that "parents and teachers work toward the cooperative goal of educating children" (p. 7 ED 222 487). Another long range benefit of increased cooperation between parent and teacher is explained by Burchby (ED 223 542). She notes that while there are problems with public support for education, the public is positively disposed to a strong education system. She claims that good parent-teacher communication can lead to increased parental involvement which helps to develop public interest in schools and results in support for the schools.

Rotter and Robinson (ED 222 487) argue that there has been a loss of a common experience between the teacher and the student and his/her family due to the historical changes in society that resulted in the centralization of the schools. That is, the teacher is no longer necessarily a part of the family's community outside the school itself, no longer sharing the same neighborhoods, and attending the same social and church events. The result is that the contact between teachers and families that once happened spontaneously must now be actively planned and pursued (ED 222 487).

In spite of the presumed relationship between parent-teacher communication and student behavior, only one ERIC document since 1966 discusses this relationship. No documents in the ERIC system since 1980 discuss this relationship. However, research from other sources (e.g., Gotts, 1983; Walberg, 1984) and teachers' anecdotal evidence lead us to believe there is a relationship between parent-teacher communication and student performance.

ERIC resources concerning methods of achieving this desired state of mutual cooperation are reviewed here. A mechanized search of ERIC documents since 1980 using the key words parent-teacher communication yielded 21 documents. Six dealt with teacher communication with parents of special students, such as handicapped children (EJ 331 476, ED 221 964, EJ 267 106, ED 206 146), gifted children (EJ 248 745), and vocational education students (EJ 245 285). These will not be discussed here. The remaining documents examine parent-teacher communication from a variety of perspectives. These documents represent educators' concerns in areas such as ways to improve parent-teacher conferences from the viewpoint of the teacher (EJ 320 214, EJ 287 533, ED 223 542, ED 222 487, EJ 268 236, EJ 255 004, ED 223 542) as well as the parent (ED 222 298, EJ 268 236); discussions of modes of parent-teacher communication, such as surveys of parental preference for various modes of communication (ED 245 842, EJ 264 292) and proposals for alternative methods of parent-teacher communication, such as telephone calls,

written correspondence, news letters, and workshops (ED 245 842, ED 234 366, ED 226 863, ED 223 542, EJ 268 236, ED 211 215); and cries for reconceptualizations of the parent-teacher relationship (EJ 328 572, EJ 268 236). The articles reflect a range from traditional concerns to proposals for radical revisions in the parent-teacher communication system.

THE PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCE

The parent-teacher conference is a long standing tradition and possibly the form of parent-teacher communication that first comes to mind. Some surveys report that it is the form of communication most desired by parents (EJ 255 004). It has been suggested that parent-teacher conferences have the potential to be the single most educationally valuable occurrence for the child during the academic term (ED 222 487). Despite this potential, many roadblocks stand in the way of effective parent-teacher conferences (ED 222 487, ED 223 542), such as inappropriate procedures and lack of skills on the part of both teachers and parents. It has been suggested that a skills deficit on the part of the teachers has led teachers to view parent-teacher conferences as “monsters hovering on school calendars to prevent teachers from enjoying their week” (p. 76 EJ 320 214), and that conferences are uncomfortable events for parents and teachers alike (EJ 268 236).

The call is made for creating an atmosphere of warmth, openness, trust, willingness to listen, hopefulness, respect, and cooperation (ED 222 487, EJ 320 214, EJ 268 236). In addition to creating such an atmosphere, the teacher must display empathy and be responsive and sensitive to feelings of guilt, anger, defensiveness, or hostility on the part of the parent (ED 268 236). Although a few articles suggest ways parents can be more prepared for the parent-teacher conference (e.g., ED 268 236), the burden for creating this environment is typically, as McDaniel (ED 268 236) states, upon the teacher.

Many of the ERIC documents suggest various means for achieving a positive atmosphere. One means is through nonverbal skills like making eye contact, smiling, warm handshakes, leaning forward, nodding, and touching the parent's arm (EJ 320 214). General semantic strategies such as wording things in a positive manner (e.g., “Johnny can pass the class if . . .” rather than “Johnny will fail the class unless . . .”) are also suggested (EJ 320 214). Teachers are advised not to sit behind the desk during the conference, not to argue with the parent, not to give direct advice, and to recognize problems that are beyond their capacity so that referrals can be made (ED 223 542). These are but a few examples of the plethora of advice given teachers. The teacher is left to sift through the disjointed recommendations to devise a comprehensive scheme for effective intervention. Fortunately, Rotter and Robinson (ED 222 487) provide a most comprehensive method for incorporating the above conditions into a systematic interpersonal communication model for intervention in parent-teacher conferences. Rotter and Robinson (ED 222 487) suggest that successful parent-teacher conferences essentially depend upon two ingredients, interpersonal communication skills and a shared goal of the continued growth and development of the child. The interpersonal skills called for are the same as in any human relations development exercise and can be categorized into five basic skill areas: listening, attending, perceiving, responding, and initiating (ED 222 487). Rotter and Robinson (ED 222 48) outline specific skills in each of these areas and pitfalls in implementing these skills. They also discuss how these skills reflect three

basic conditions of effective interpersonal communication: warmth, empathy, and respect.

Some problems facing teachers in parent-teacher conferences include the occasional tendency of teachers to preach or pass judgment on parents. Sometimes teachers explicitly or implicitly give parents the message that the teacher is the expert and the parent's input is really somehow secondary (EJ 268 236, ED 222 487). Another potential problem is the teacher's own discomfort due to feelings of inadequacy or lack of training in a given problem area (ED 222 487). The sheer preparation time involved for each conference can also create problems. Teachers are advised to take time to thoroughly review each student's records and have specific performance goals for each student that can be discussed with the parent (EJ 268 236, EJ 287 553). But a teacher may see more than 100 different pupils daily (EJ 268 236). As an aid to coping with this, McDaniel (EJ 268 236) has offered some advice to parents on how they can help the teacher in the conference through their own preparation and cooperation. Also, Mata (ED 222 298) has developed a handbook for parents which focuses upon strategies they can use to collect accurate information about a problem their child is having so as to promote the exchange of information with the teacher. The burden is still upon the teacher, however, to somehow communicate to the parent what preparation the parent could engage in that would enhance the conference. And most experts still agree that the ultimate success or failure of the conference rests upon the teacher's shoulders (ED 223 542).

ALTERNATIVE MODES OF HOME-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION

Home-school communication refers to both the school transmitting information to the home and the home transmitting information to the school (ED 245 842). Several ERIC documents call for school personnel to reanalyze ways to facilitate home-school communication (e.g., ED 245 842, ED 234 366, ED 226 863, ED 223 542, EJ 268 236, EJ 264 292). Purnell and Gotts (ED 245 842) outline two types of information the school needs to share with the parent. The first is labeled "individual" communication and concerns the individual child's "academic progress, attendance, homework assignments, classroom conduct, special needs, progress toward graduation, career and other post secondary planning, interest and motivation" (p. 3 ED 245 842). The other type of communication involves information about the schools' overall program, such as PTA meetings, curriculum, policies, extracurricular programs, and events. Obviously, the once a year traditional parent-teacher conference cannot serve all of these communication needs. Hence, more and more educators are calling for additional and alternative means of home-school communication, including an increased use of the telephone and newsletter.

Two ERIC documents report on parental preferences for the schools' transmittal of information (EJ 264 292, ED 245 842). Both found parents reacted quite positively to receiving newsletters from the schools for basic information about school and classroom events. Variations of the newsletter are frequently recommended as a way to keep the parent up to date on school and classroom activities. These variations include monthly class booklets containing examples of the students' work, monthly calendars informing the parent of planned activities (EJ 328 572, EJ 268 236, ED 223 542, EJ 287 533), or school columns in the local or neighborhood newspapers, (ED 234 366, EJ 264 292). The premise is that if parents are knowledgeable about

events that occur during a child's day at school, they can engage in informed discussions with the child and reinforce the school and at the same time gain confidence that they know what their child is doing during the school day.

Information about individual students, however, is not well suited to such methods. Increased reliance is placed upon the telephone for individualized information (e.g., ED 211 215, ED 245 842). Almost every document proposing alternative methods encourages the use of the telephone for initial contact early in the school year, for continued occasional talks reporting progress and good news (EJ 287 533), and for early notification of problems (EJ 211 215, ED 234 366). Indeed, Henniger (ED 211 215) advocates use of the telephone as an alternative to face-to-face conferences due to the time saved and the hidden benefit of ease of communication which is not always present in the ominous parent-teacher conference. Another individualized communication strategy is the negotiation of parent, teacher, and student contracts (EJ 268 236). Such contracts are initiated by the teacher to enlist the assistance of parents. Learning contracts clarify roles and responsibilities of all involved and may set specific individualized goals for each student or be more global in nature.

Other means of school-home communication suggested include group parent-teacher meetings or workshops (EJ 287 533, ED 234 366), home visits by teachers (EJ 287 533), policies for allowing parents to observe the classroom (EJ 287 533, ED 234 366), audio and video presentations about the school (EJ 264 292), class parties or activities such as a play or science fair that involve parents (EJ 287 533, ED 234 266), and individualized letters to parents with suggestions of how they can help reinforce skills covered in class or reports of special things done by the child (ED 234 366). Another alternative is to have students write letters to their parents telling them about school as a class assignment (ED 234 366).

RECONCEPTUALIZING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Teachers' attitudes are changing from a premise several years ago that parents should stay out of the way (the teacher is the expert) to actively seeking increased parental involvement (ED 234 366). An appeal has been made for changes in home-school communication so that those interactions best utilize parental involvement and are also responsive to the changing needs of the family (EJ 282 089, EJ 264 292, ED 245 842). Seefeldt (EJ 328 572) states that the benefits of parental involvement have centered upon the welfare of the child. She raises the question of whether the parents themselves could benefit from the involvement. Calling for a reconceptualization of the goals of parental involvement she argues that today's parent, especially the mother employed outside of the home or the single parent, experiences a great deal of stress. Asking an "overworked, overburdened, time-short family" to make cupcakes and come to the school play may simply be inappropriate and unrealistic. Parental involvement, she believes, should be redesigned so that it is sensitive to the needs of the family, offer supports for the family, and works toward true cooperation between school and home. She discusses ways teachers and school systems can do each of these things.

In order to be sensitive, the teacher must know the family structure of each child and affirm respect for all family types. And the teacher must treat each parent with support, acceptance, and respect. Being sensitive to parents' time constraints means developing ways of including them which involve minimal additional time (e.g., the newsletters or class booklets discussed earlier) (ED 328 572).

Seefeldt further calls for "true support" of the families. She admonishes workshops designed to train parents in "proper" techniques and argues that teachers cannot support parents by "trying to change their values or methods of child-rearing" (p. 101). Instead real support comes by, for example, providing baby-sitting services at the school for PTA meetings, providing transportation for parents to conferences and meetings if necessary, preparing booklets on family resources for the parents, providing extended-day programs for the working parents, and facilitating foster grandparent programs which benefit the "grandparent," parent, and child.

Finally she calls for "true collaboration." This true collaboration comes from increased involvement in decision making. She advises the implementation of Policy Advisory Boards as well as a simple commitment by teachers to actively question parents about their goals for their children and how they can work together to meet the goals within the schools' curriculum.

Parents are becoming more vocal in educational decision-making (EJ 268 236) and teachers are moving to welcome this involvement. The passage of P.L. 94-142, which guarantees the rights of parents to be involved in decision-making, reflects this increased involvement (EJ 268 236, EJ 328 572). Other indications of increased parental involvement is the move of the national PTA to redefine the parents' role in decision making (EJ 268 236).

Thus, there has been an overall call for a change in parent-teacher communication to reflect and respond to changing family structures and adapt to changing family needs (EJ 282 089, EJ 264 292, ED 245 248). Improving the traditional parent-teacher conference and exploring alternative means for sharing information with the parent are certainly necessary but not sufficient in today's society. Purnell and Gotts (ED 245 842) suggest that there has been a necessary shift in perception from communicating information *to* the parents to communicating *with* the parents.

Unfortunately, all of this places an overwhelming burden on the individual teacher and the school system. Teachers are in a delicate position. They have the responsibility for sharing their knowledge and expertise, yet they must not dictate; they must recognize problems, but not diagnose (ED 226 863); and they must be familiar with as many as 100 different students' family structures, individual needs, goals, and problems. Add to this the development of such things as newsletters, telephone contacts, and community support activities and you are left with the situation Seefeldt (EJ 328 572) described for the parents (i.e., stressed, overworked, overburdened, and time short). The solution to the dilemma of parent-teacher cooperation must be through parent-teacher communication and community support. Purnell and Gotts (ED 245 842) notes that educators must understand the never ending difficulties and struggles of parenthood, and that parents must understand that teachers are allies, not surrogates. Parents must actively support the teacher as well as vice-versa (ED 245 842). Seefeldt notes that involving parents in the manners discussed above leads to parental commitment to the school and will benefit the child and school as well. Ultimately, however, the burden lies with the teachers (ED 223 542).

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