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ABSTRACT

In an effort to describe parent-teacher conferences and assess their influence on the curriculum, three researchers interviewed children, parents, teachers, and the principal of a midwestern elementary school and observed various school and Parent Teacher Association functions. High school and elementary school parents were mailed a survey. Research focused on how to describe parent-teacher conferences, parents' beliefs about conferences and what they learned, and children's views of conferences. Parent-teacher conferences were described as discussions of the students' attitudes and academic and social performance in school. Parents believed that they were to work in a partnership with teachers to help students and received information on their children's problem areas. Children reported that they were helped by the conferences, most often by their parents' advice and assistance with schoolwork. The evidence suggests that the major purpose and function of the conference is to help students conform to standardized school requirements. Communication flows from teacher to parent to student, but parents' comments to the teachers have little influence on the curriculum. Conferences are trivialized by class size and time limitations. Parents willingly attend conferences in the early school years but stop attending conferences as children advance in school. Because the effectiveness of parent-teacher conferences is limited by the parents' understanding of the discussion and communication of it to their children, teacher-student conferences might also be warranted. (MJL)

HOW DO PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES INFLUENCE THE CURRICULUM?

by

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HOW DO PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES INFLUENCE THE CURRICULUM?

Although much has been written about parent-teacher conferences, the tone of the work in the field tends to promote the use of conferences and to tell teachers how to conduct conferences. It has not been a popular topic of research (Wallbrown and Prichard, 1978). Little information about the nature of parent-teacher conferences and their influence upon the curriculum exists. This report explores the character and use of parent-teacher conferences in a midwestern school system.

QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY

Several questions guided the search for evidence in this study. Paired with the method of investigation, they are:

Questions	Methods
I. How can a parent-teacher conference be described?	
How is a conference initiated? Who initiates it? How often do conferences take place? Where do they take place? Who is present at the conferences? How long do conferences last? What topics are discussed? What kinds of recommendations and agreements are made? Are there follow-up conferences? Do parents or teachers report changes in children based on the conference?	teacher's records, cohort teacher's journal, observations of conferences, parent surveys, teacher surveys

Questions	Methods
II. What do parents learn and believe about conferences?	
Are they held at convenient times and places? Is the information that is shared useful? Do they believe that they have learned more about school and their child? Do they believe that it helps the child? Would they attend future conferences? Why did they attend or not attend conferences? What are their attitudes about conferences?	parent surveys, parent interviews, child interviews
III. How do children view conferences?	
Do they know when the parents attend conferences? Do they attend? Do their parents discuss what has happened in conferences? Do they use the information from conferences? If so, how?	parent survey, child interviews

METHODS

Evidence was obtained by interviewing children, parents, teachers, and the principal of the elementary school. Observations were made at Parent-Teacher Association functions and during school functions involving classroom instruction, a school play dress rehearsal, lunch time, and recess. A survey was mailed to a sample of high school parents and the parent population of the elementary school. Records of parent-teacher conferences were reported by the teacher who collaborated. In addition, related school documents were examined.

Interviews were recorded by taking field notes and making audio-tapes. Observations were recorded by taking field notes.

Three researchers collaborated on the study to complete the process of obtaining evidence. A teacher and parent volunteer assigned by the school system and a university researcher conducted the study.

CONFERENCES DESCRIBED

Parent-teacher conferences in this study may be described as discussions concerning the academic and social performance and attitudes of students with respect to school. Over 83 percent of the time these discussions took place in the school. Conferences at school were scheduled and occurred as a part of a school-wide conference day. Conferences involving parents and teachers in discussions about students also happened on an informal basis. Usually, these were conducted during telephone calls or at chance meetings during school events.

As reported by others (Scanlon, Arick, and Phelps, 1981) teachers in this study met with the mother of the student most frequently. By survey, parents reported that mothers attended 54 percent of the conferences alone, both parents attended 39 percent of the conferences, and the father, a guardian, or another relative attended the remaining seven percent of the conferences.

Scheduling of and attendance at conferences was more frequent for parents of elementary school age children with parents reporting they attended conferences at least once and often twice a year. Parents of older children reported attending conferences less frequently. They tended to participate in conferences about older children when "there was a need."

During the conferences the topics of discussion centered about the student's academic progress in school, the student's behavior in school, and the parents' knowledge of the student's attitudes in general. The conferences recorded during this study addressed these issues through a formal report of progress in academic subjects and social skills. The report was prepared by the teacher prior to the scheduled conference and it served as the primary focus of the discussion. In addition, parents added to the discussion by informing the teacher about their child's behavior at home and their child's expressed attitudes and feelings about school.

Teachers' reports and comments about conferences revealed a pattern of using the conference to expand upon the grade card as a means of explaining the student's progress in school. In fact, the conference reports of the teacher who served as a team member in this study included statements which can be compared to signs or symptoms of the academic and social progress of the student. For example, the teacher noted the tendency of a child to rush completing her schoolwork, the inconsistent weakness of another child on spelling tests, and the lack of concern for incorrect mathematics answers on the part of a third child. These comments together with the reports of satisfactory performance served to explain the grades given. The explanations, though, were only given for problem areas. Adequate or good performance by the student yielded vague comments like "satisfactory" or "working above grade level."

Parents, by survey, reported they wished to discuss progress in academic areas and suggestions from the teacher to help the child with schoolwork as the two most and equally important topics of the conference. In addition, they ranked the child's behavior in school, teacher's requirements, teacher's methods, and grading procedures as important topics of discussion. In the reports of the conferences held, the teacher and parents did discuss academic and social progress most frequently. However, not reported by survey, but observed during conferences, parents volunteered information about the child's life at home, attitudes and feelings about school, and their own concerns about the child's ability to cope and perform at school. Their comments suggest an attempt to explain and explore the reasons for the child's performance. This belief was explored in greater detail during interviews of parents. Parents believed the teacher and parents were to work in a partnership to help the student. One parent expressed this belief by saying, "I expect that between the two of us that we will try to come up with something. Like I said before, I don't think it is 100 percent of the teacher's responsibility and I am not willing to give 100 percent of that responsibility to him or her, even if she wanted to take it . . . I want to know that I've got a voice in it . . . Between the two of us we can come up with some kind of solution . . . I know my child the best." During conferences teachers not only dispensed information, but also received valuable information from parents about the characteristics of each student.

The purpose of the conference appears to be a desire on the part of the school and the parents to help the student. Children who were interviewed reported they did receive help as a result of the conferences. The help came, most frequently, from their parents. Although an equal exchange of information between parents and teachers occurred, students reported more changes and discussions at home as a result of the conferences. By survey, nearly all of the parents reported they discussed the content of the conferences with their children and during the interviews children corroborated this evidence. The children reported that their parents helped them with spelling and math drill, discussed the kinds of things they could do at school in order to improve, and urged them to talk to their teachers about what they could do in order to improve. One child summed the results of a discussion at home with the following resolve, "I say to myself I'm going to get better grades. I'm going to try harder. I check my math problems." Absent from the childrens' comments, though, was discussion or perception of a change on the part of the teacher after a conference was held. Even when directly asked what the teacher said or did about the conference, children were unable to formulate a response. The tone of the childrens' comments placed the parents as the intermediaries who helped the student to meet the teacher's objectives. Although the standardized curriculum of the classroom may have changed due to parents' comments about their children, it appeared as though individual allowances for childrens' varying characteristics were not incorporated. The help each child

received, as a direct result of the conferences, appeared to be the interpretation of the teacher's diagnosis made by the parents and given to the student.

Additional evidence gathered during the study pointed to the use of the parent-teacher conference as a means of helping the child to conform to the standardized requirements of school. During interviews parents spoke of the need to attend conferences for elementary school age children in order to help them "get a good start in school." As their children advanced to the upper grades they felt that conferences were needed only when there was a problem. Teachers echoed this sentiment in their treatment of conference requests. High school students' parents received teacher initiated requests for attendance at conferences on a selective basis. If a student was doing well in school, the parents received no invitation. Elementary teachers scheduled at least one conference for each student during the year. They scheduled additional conferences, wrote notes home, or called the home when they perceived a problem at school. If a student, at any grade level was performing satisfactorily, little communication about the student existed between parents and teachers. One exception appeared; teachers would note an exceptionally good event by sending home a note or a "Happy-gram."

Essentially, parent-teacher conferences involved the exchange of a great deal of information about the child. The teacher possessed and relayed information about the quality and the quantity of a student's work to parents. Parents relayed information about the characteristics of their child to the teacher.

Children received an interpretation of the conference and, often, help with schoolwork from their parents. The communication appeared to flow in one direction, from the teacher to the student via the parents. Parents' comments about the student appeared to have little influence upon the curriculum decisions of the teachers.

IMPLICATIONS

Several ideas, questions, and interpretations based upon the evidence may have implications for practice. These thoughts revolve around the function of the conference and the standardization of the curriculum. The ideas involve the contribution of conferences to the pursuit of grades, the trivialization of conferences by time and class size, the changing of the role of conferences as the student advances in grade level, and the "rich get richer syndrome" which relies upon knowledgeable parents to inform students with problems. Each will be discussed in turn.

Making the Grade

A major purpose and function of the conference appears to be to help the student to perform to an acceptable academic and social level in school. This, in the end, translates to "making the grade." Parents, teachers, and students all focus their primary efforts on clarifying how to do this best. Like it or not, this is the perceived business of schooling and hence, the major topic of the conference.

Teachers' competent advice about a diagnosis of weakness and a prescription of a remedy for the weakness is sought by parents so that a student can be cured of an inability to conform to some part of the standardized curriculum. Conferences are held about

problems. Learning about the characteristic of a student in order to aid in education takes a back seat. This is understandable, though. Parents want their children to succeed in school. High school teachers, responsible for five to six classes of 25 to 30 students each, have time for little else during conferences. The elementary school teacher, responsible for fewer students, but more subject areas, is hard pressed to do more within the confines of a busy school year and a limited conference schedule. Conferences, by default, are approached with a deficit view. They are used as an expanded grade card to help the student to conform to the curriculum.

Trivialization

Class size, conference schedules, and the primary act of explaining problems force teachers into a position of having to deal efficiently with time and to explain students' problems to their parents. A 15 to 30 minute conference scheduled once a year leaves little extra time for a detailed discussion of each student's progress and personality.

Two days were set aside by the school district to schedule conferences during the school year. Holding conferences throughout the day and into the evening allows an elementary teacher to speak to each student's parents for thirty minutes about one and one half times a year. A high school teacher can see only a little over ten percent of their students' parents on one conference day. With this schedule, elementary school teachers cannot afford lengthy conversations about the characteristics of their students

with parents and high school teachers cannot begin to see all their students' parents. They must make choices. Who is important to see for a conference? What is important to discuss at a conference? If everyone tacitly agrees that making the grade is paramount, it prevails as the guide to the choices and discussions. Efficiency and standardization of conference discussions trivializes conferences to becoming another type of grade card.

The Changing Nature of the Conference

As the school system forces the teacher into a pattern of conducting conferences, parents develop their own patterns. Eager to help their children get off to a good start in the enterprise of schooling, they willingly attend conferences during their child's early years of school. They discuss their children; carry the information home; and try to help their children to become better students. When this is achieved or as their children advance in school, their monitoring of progress falls off. Only a few parents continue to schedule conferences or respond to school requests for conference day visits.

Parents may believe when their children have a good start in school, consistent monitoring can subside until there is a need forced by a problem. Or, if the major purpose of the conference appears to be to help the student with school, the schoolwork and the environment of the secondary school may render the parent incapable of providing support. Parent attendance at conferences has been positively correlated with educational attainment of the

parents (Wimpelberg, 1981). The parents may not be able to help their child with algebra, chemistry, and English literature. Student-teacher conferences may serve older students better.

The Rich Get Richer

The effectiveness of a good conference appears to rest upon how well parents understand and interpret their discussion to their children. What happens to the effectiveness of conferences when there is a weakness in the communication chain? A faulty explanation from the teacher to parents can result in a worthless message to the student. A garbled interpretation by a parent can confuse the student. If the purpose of the conference is to remain as a diagnosis and prescription treatment, efficiency would be served by eliminating the intermediary. Perhaps, the two scheduled conference days should be devoted to teachers and students. A teacher-student conference day could be added to parent-teacher conference days. The member of the research team suggested and wanted scheduled student-teacher conference days for her high school age children.

SUMMARY

The evidence points to parent-teacher conferences being an extension of the standardized curriculum. The conferences serve as a means of maintaining standardization and student conformance to the curriculum by helping them to understand how to upgrade their performance. The conference also has been standardized by the forces of the school system with class size and school scheduling of time playing major roles. Conferences appear to uphold

the processes of schooling and have a minimal influence on teachers' curriculum plans.

In an effort to promote parent-teacher conferences Becker and Epstein (1981) state, "It is questionable whether the familiar rituals of open school night and parent conferences accomplish more than a polite exchange between parents and teachers." (p. 38) This is true when speaking about influencing curriculum change, but evidence here indicates that conferences help to standardize the child.

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