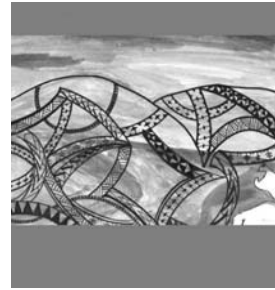


Trialling Student-led Conferences in a New Zealand Secondary School

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ABSTRACT

Research shows that when parents and caregivers are involved in their child's education, children do better at school. Traditionally, the parent/teacher interview has been one way of facilitating such involvement. However, as students progress through the school system, parent and caregiver involvement in conventional parent/teacher interviews reduces. This paper outlines the trialling of student-led conferences as a means to increase parent and caregiver involvement. Parents and caregivers in the study reported that student-led conferences were invaluable and that they contributed to a better understanding of their child's learning. Students reported that, as a result of student-led conferences, they felt more confident about their learning, more accountable for their own learning, and that there were more conversations at home about their learning.

Research paper

Keywords: *Parent reporting, student-led conferences*

INTRODUCTION

Overall, parental involvement in education declines as students grow older, so there is a distinct lessening of parent involvement in their child's learning from primary school to secondary school (Stouffer, 1992). One specific area where parent involvement declines is the traditional secondary school parent/teacher interview. The secondary school in which I work had a parent attendance rate of 20 percent at the Term One interviews and the majority of attendees were parents/caregivers of students who were achieving well academically.

So how do we change the process of parent/teacher interviews to increase parental attendance? Researchers argue that the answer lies in running student-led conferences rather than traditional interviews, which "... frequently exclude the student, an otherwise critical link in the home-school communication network" (Conderman, Ikan & Hatcher, 2000, p. 23).

Traditional parent/teacher interviews therefore do not seem to attract whānau of those students who would benefit most from a strong partnership between student, whānau and school i.e. students who are not achieving to their potential in their learning or whose behaviour interferes with their learning. For the purposes of this article the term whānau relates to a wider group of people than a student's parents. It could include other caregivers, brothers or sisters, grandparents, family friends who support the student or other extended family.

LIMITATIONS OF TRADITIONAL PARENT/TEACHER INTERVIEWS

Bishop and Berryman (2006) identify that when both Māori students and their whānau felt that relationships with teachers were not strong, their cultural knowledge, and therefore their children, were unwelcome at school. Narratives from whānau in Bishop and Berryman's empirical research undertaken in New Zealand secondary schools included statements from whānau such as "The letters you get about parent meetings ... it doesn't seem like they really want to see you ... it's something teachers have to do" (p. 151). This is also supported by DePlanty, Coulter-Kern & Duchane (2007) who found that parents' involvement in parent/teacher interviews was directly affected by "parental/involvement attitudes" (p. 367). An Ontario study of 20 school leaders found that many principals spoke about parents' lack of participation in schools and saw relationships with parents as something they had little control over (Kugler & Flessa, 2007). These findings, coupled with my own experiences in teaching, have identified a need to find ways of connecting with whānau in order to assist student learning. As Bishop, O'Sullivan and Berryman (2010) argue "parents ought to be engaged in their children's learning as agents of their children" (p. 121).

STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES

There is overwhelming evidence that validates the use of student-led, teacher-supported conferences (Borba & Olvera, 2001; Flannery, 2004; Juniewicz,

2003). While much of the evidence relates to primary schooling, there is growing support for the same practice to occur in secondary schools. Flannery (2004) observed that there were many positives to student-led conferences such as students learning to set goals, being able to self-reflect, and involving the three parties in a child's education. Perhaps the most important of these for my learning context was that more parents actually attended when the interview was led by the students. This increase in parental participation is supported by Borba and Olvera (2001), who note that there was a much higher attendance at student-led conferences than at traditional parent/teacher interviews in their study of a middle school in California.

The encouragement and motivation for students to be actively involved in the evaluation of their learning and goal setting through student-led conferences is huge; often students take a lot more ownership of their learning and achievement (Borba & Olvera, 2001). Similarly, Flannery (2004) found that there is a lot more achieved and students tend to be more honest. In Juniewicz's (2003) research in a middle school in California, there were positive comments from students about using their portfolios in the conference. They made statements such as "If you can explain something to someone else, you really understand it. This is the only part of school where we think about our work and learner expectations" (p. 75).

WHAT DO STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES INVOLVE?

The way student-led conferences are set up is extremely important and, as the above studies identify, it is an evolving process. During student-led conferences the student discusses their work with their whānau while the teacher provides support where needed (Gismondi, 2009).

When implementing this trial, I looked at various studies which were mainly in middle schools, as there was not much literature evidence of this practice in secondary schools. The three studies that informed my process of setting up student-led conferences were Conderman, Ikan, and Hatcher (2000) who reported on Prairie Middle School in Iowa, Goodman's 2008 study of Anchorage Middle Schools, and Borba and Olvera (2001) who documented the experience of student-led conferences in Gustine Middle School, California. Aspects of each of these studies such as the running order of the conference, questions for whānau, and compiling portfolios were applicable to my educational context.

SETTING UP THE STUDENT-LED CONFERENCES

I approached my principal about the possibility of running a trial of student-led conferences. The senior leadership team was very positive about the trial and was interested in both the response and the process of running the conference. As a school, one of our areas for improvement is connections with whānau and the community, so the student-led conference fitted well with the aspired goal of the school.

Ten students in Year 12 were asked if they were willing to participate in this process. I phoned the parents of those who agreed to introduce the idea of the student-led conference to whānau, and explained how it differed from traditional parent/teacher interviews. Due to time constraints only six families were able to take part in the student-led conference.

Over the next few days the six participating students collected work samples from their classes: they then chose three samples to practise their conference with a peer. This was an essential step in the process as students were extremely nervous and unsure of what they would say to their whānau. They were made aware of terminologies they were using which may not be understood by their whānau members e.g. 'wide reading'. In the week that followed, student-led conferences were held in the staffroom. Each conference lasted an average of 45 minutes, which was no longer than a traditional parent/teacher interview. Following each conference both the student and their whānau were asked to give feedback on the process.

OUTCOMES OF THE CONFERENCE AS TOLD BY STUDENTS AND THEIR WHĀNAU

During the interviews parents asked their son/daughter questions such as "What do you do with that next?" and "What do you enjoy about this subject?" which led to some very rich discussions between the students and their whānau. One mother, when reading her son's creative writing assessment, remarked "You're blowing me away, son"! In their discussion with whānau, I found students to be very open and honest especially about what they did and didn't like in their subjects and whānau heard comments like "Man, I really need to just focus in that class 'cause I'm with all the bros and so sometimes I end up just talking to them and not doing anything and I'm getting behind", and "I think maybe I need to move because my friends and I always end up talking heaps and so Miss has to keep telling us to be quiet and do our work". The honesty in the students' evaluations of each subject created a lot of valuable self-reflection.

To evaluate the project, I voice-recorded the conferences while they were happening and asked students and parents/whānau to complete separate surveys about their experiences. The evaluation information gathered from both students and whānau indicated that this process was a success. All six students commented that their conference went well because they got to talk to their whānau about what they had been doing at school. Each of them had their own highlights during the conference. For one, it was showing his whānau his video of a cha-cha assessment for dance, while another said setting their goals was the best part; for another, it was getting asked questions by their whānau.

All students found explaining the different topics of their work the most difficult part of the conference as most of their whānau had no prior knowledge of the content. They felt that the most positive outcome was in their whānau knowing that they worked well in class, and also finding out about the subjects that they enjoyed the most. They were also looking forward to what they would do differently next time. The main change they wanted was to gather more of their work to show.

Most of the whānau responses spoke of expecting “a formal meeting without much input from us”. When asked what they had learnt from the conference, responses varied from “Where he thinks he needs to improve and which subjects he enjoys” to “that she has become so much more confident within herself”. All whānau had learned something about what their son/daughter was doing at school and had enjoyed the interaction and engagement with their learning.

When asked how the student-led conference compared with traditional parent/teacher interviews the whānau responses were very positive. Comments such as “Far better - more personal, less rushed, fantastic” and “A lot better and more relaxed so could comment more” were articulated frequently. Whānau also suggested that conferences could be run in conjunction with reports so there was feedback from specific teachers at the conference. All whānau thought that the student-led conference was invaluable and stated that they had a better understanding of their child’s learning. In light of these comments, it is not surprising that Juniewicz’s 2003 study also found that almost all parents, teachers and students found the student-led conferences to be “effective in promoting the real world skills of responsibility, reflection, self-assessment, and goal-setting” (p. 75). All of the whānau involved in the student-led conference had attended a traditional parent/teacher interview at the beginning of their son’s/daughter’s high school career and had not found

them to be worthwhile, therefore not attending any more. In light of this, the feedback from parents was very encouraging.

When revisiting the students’ goals with them a term later, all six students said that there were more conversations at home about their learning. This gave students the confidence to ask for help at school if they needed it and also to let their whānau know what they needed to achieve at a higher standard - for example, some quiet time at home to do assignments. I have also had more telephone and email contact with the whānau involved in the trial since the student-led conferences. The increase of contact with whānau after the introduction of student-led conferences is supported by Borba and Olvera (2001) and Goodman (2008) who believe that “... change on a large scale can take place and that parent communication can be improved through student-led, teacher-supported conferences” (p. 54).

LOOKING FORWARD

The data gathered from this trial provides evidence about the success of the student-led conferences. To have students’ whānau enjoying their school experience and showing pride in what their son/daughter had accomplished shows a breaking down of the traditional barriers between home and school in secondary school settings.

While the process is more complex in secondary schools due to each subject having a different teacher, it is nevertheless possible to use student-led conferences. The process I used is a work-in-progress and there are areas that need to be further modified; for example, there needs to be more time spent on teaching students how to talk about their learning so that the conference does not become a ‘show and tell’ exercise but remains focused on learning and achievement. It is important for students to be able to confidently explain their learning to their whānau. This comes with practise and coaching about the types of things students can speak about during the conference. However, this small study has shown that it is possible to use student-led conferences school-wide.

CONCLUSION

From a parent perspective, the implementation of student-led conferences would ensure that there are more personal interactions between school staff and whānau. This would mean that whānau are entering school grounds to build and strengthen a positive relationship between them and the school, which is an important aspect of overcoming the identified barriers of low parental involvement at secondary level.

From a student perspective, such conferences teach them to be responsible and accountable for their own learning, as well as to set and evaluate goals for academic and social aspects of their schooling. It is an exciting thought that in the future students will be able to give whānau their report on progress with evidence from their class work, rather than a report coming solely from the teacher.

Student-led conferences are a means to increase whānau involvement and student achievement. There is certainly room for improvement before student-led conferences become a school-wide intervention. However, this trial has certainly given a solid base from which to begin.

REFLECTIONS

On reflection, I believe the fundamental step was making personal contact with parents. The whānau I spoke to on the phone were extremely positive about being personally asked to come into school to hear about their child's progress. While most of the whānau did not understand the process until they were in the conference, all of them commented that they do not usually have these kinds of conversations with their children.

I think it would be beneficial for students to have set some goals in conjunction with their subject teachers before the conference to show their whānau; then they could also set goals collaboratively with their whānau and mentor teacher from the information in the conference. Practising the conference is important for students as I found they were unsure of what they could speak about and practising with another student helped this immensely.

One area that would need to be looked at is the duration of the conferences. I found that each conference took 45 minutes to an hour, which may not be logistically possible with larger numbers of students. If this was to become a school-wide practice, I believe that our reporting structure would also need to be looked at so that subject reports were made available at the conference. As some of the parents at these conferences said, this would enable both students and whānau to receive specific feedback from their subject teachers.

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